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MAKING THE PATH VISIBLE: CAREER DEVELOPMENT, PERFORMANCE CONVERSATIONS AND RETENTION

AN HR LEADERS WHITE PAPER FROM THE ONE GROUP, DRAWN FROM A CASE STUDY AND ROUND TABLE DISCUSSION HELD IN CAMBRIDGE ON 24TH FEBRUARY 2026.

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People leave when they cannot see a future for themselves where they are. This paper sets out how one of the UK's most established education and examination organisations rebuilt career development after a merger, what it cost them, and what HR leaders around the table took from it for organisations of very different sizes.

Executive Summary

After a merger of two organisations of roughly 3,500 people each, turnover climbed to nearly 20%. Exit data pointed to one cause above pay, management and flexibility: people could not see where their career could go.

The organisation did not answer this with a single programme. It built a connected system over several years, made up of five parts:

- A new leadership model and values, written as specific behaviours and built into every people process.
- Collaborative conversations in place of performance ratings, which had been absorbing 55,000 hours a year in calibration.
- A job architecture and skills framework, including six "power skills" that set the focus for development investment.
- Capability academies run by the business, with HR providing the design and expertise.
- Pay progression linked to demonstrated development, judged on what people could now do rather than what courses they had completed.

The results were substantial.

84%
of employees reported good development conversations.

50%
internal mobility reached

Engagement rose to
65% to 72%

The organisation reached its target of
100 million
learners a year early.

The lessons that travel are less about the specific tools and more about how they fit together. Removing a process without replacing it creates confusion. Development only matters when it shows up as competence. Executives back people initiatives when they are tied to a business problem, and most organisations will get further with a small, well-chosen pilot than with a full programme.

Why Development Became The Retention Problem

Career development rarely shows up as a single failure. It builds from several pressures at once, and in this case the merger brought them all to the surface t**ogether.**

Turnover with a specific cause. The jump to nearly 20% came after an unusually quiet period during the pandemic, so part of it was a rebound. But when the organisation looked at why people were going, the answer was consistent. They could not see a future inside the combined business.

No shared language for careers. Two organisations had come together with thousands of unique job descriptions between them. Skills valued in one area were invisible in another. Employees did not know what they needed to develop to move on, and often their managers did not either.

A culture that made change harder. Some staff described the merger as a takeover by one side or the other, and local hostility followed in places. There was also a strong pull towards starting everything from scratch rather than reusing what either legacy organisation had built. Decisions travelled up and down a long hierarchy, which slowed the business at a time when digital-first competitors were taking market share.

A mission people felt personally. The organisation's profits fund around 30% of its parent university's research and development. Staff cared deeply about that purpose and expected to be consulted on anything that affected it. That commitment was an asset, but it also meant change could not be imposed from the top.

Skills it could not easily buy. Recruiting in-demand digital talent was difficult. Competitors were paying steep premiums, and the employer brand was not seen as a natural home for technology careers. Growing those skills internally was a business necessity as well as a retention strategy.

The same pattern came up elsewhere in the room. One participant described mid-career employees, four to seven years in, with nowhere to go because senior colleagues were delaying retirement. Another described operational staff who had never had a meaningful development conversation at all. The scale and sector varied. The underlying issue was the same: when people cannot see a route forward, they find one somewhere else.

What The Organisation Built

The work was not planned in a neat sequence, and the presenter was open about that. In hindsight it settled into five connected parts, each one depending on the others.

Part	Problem it addressed	What changed
Leadership model and values	Slow decisions, merger tension, low appetite for experiment	Values written as behaviours and built into hiring, performance and development
Collaborative conversations	55,000 hours a year spent calibrating ratings	Monthly check-ins, two deeper reviews a year, shared ownership
Job architecture and skills	Thousands of inconsistent job descriptions, invisible career routes	Common job families, a shared skills language, six power skills
Capability academies	Development seen as an HR activity, not part of the work	Academies run by business leaders, built around communities of practice
Pay linked to development	Low uptake of learning, risk of box-ticking	Pay progression reflects applied development and support for others

1. The cultural foundation

Before any process changed, the organisation defined the environment people needed in order to grow. That meant room to experiment, faster decisions made closer to the work, and honest conversations. This was harder than it sounds in a regulated business where an exam answer is either right or wrong.

A culture review using surveys, workshops, interviews and metaphor exercises showed what was helping and what was getting in the way. It started with external consultants. Later, internal colleagues were trained to carry on the work themselves.

The values that came out of it were written with two lists of behaviours: what you would see when someone was living the value, and what you would see when they were working against it. Those behaviours were then built into recruitment, performance and development, so the values had a practical job to do.

Small signals mattered too. A detailed dress code was replaced with a single line asking people to dress appropriately. Leaders were encouraged to talk about times they had failed and what they learned. Both were deliberate moves away from a parent and child relationship towards one built on trust.

2. Collaborative conversations

The move away from ratings is covered in our earlier piece, The 55,000-Hour Warning. The detail worth adding here is what the conversations actually contained and how the organisation knew they were happening.

Each conversation could draw on six areas: wellbeing, clarity on priorities, engagement, recognition, purpose, and development. Technology supported scheduling and note-taking but was never used to police completion. Instead, the organisation measured quality through its regular engagement survey, which is where the 84% figure comes from.

The clearest sign of adoption was language. People stopped talking about their one-to-one and started talking about their collaborative conversation. When a framework's name becomes part of everyday speech, it has usually stuck.

3. Job architecture and skills

The organisation grouped roles into job families and gave them a shared skills language in three layers. Values and leadership behaviours sat at the top. Core skills such as commercial awareness and communication applied across every family. Six power skills were named as critical to the organisation's future and became the focus for development spending.

AI features in the HR system then made the framework usable. Employees could see the skills their role required, which nearby roles were a close match, and the specific gaps between the two. AI was also used to produce first drafts of skill requirements from existing job descriptions, which saved a great deal of manual work.

The part most organisations underestimate is upkeep. Each job family was given a named owner, and committees watched for market changes that should trigger an update. The external framework the organisation adopted was itself refreshed every six months. Without that governance, a skills framework goes out of date quickly, particularly in fast-moving areas like technology.

4. Capability academies

The academies were co-owned with the business but run by it. The data academy, for example, was led by the chief data officer. HR provided the model, the expertise and the learning platforms.

Each academy began as a community of practice, often a simple online group where people shared what was and was not working. Curated learning, events, guest speakers, mentoring and stretch projects were added around it. The design followed the 70-20-10 principle, with most learning expected to happen on the job.

Academies were built for everyone, not only specialists. A data academy might serve analysts building deep technical skill, project managers who need to work with data, and senior leaders learning to make decisions from it. They also gave apprentices who had retrained into data roles a community to belong to once their formal programme ended.

5. Linking pay to development

This was the decision that drew most debate. Pay progression took account of two things: whether someone had invested in their own development, and whether they had supported their team's development too.

The organisation was careful to stress that learning alone earned nothing. What counted was what people did with it and how that showed up in their competence. Interest in the academies rose sharply as soon as the link was announced.

The results

The people measures moved in the right direction across the board, and the business measures followed.

Measure	Before	After
Employees reporting good development conversations	Not measured	84%
Roles filled internally	Not reported	50%
Annual staff turnover	Nearly 20%	Around 10%
Engagement score	65%	72% (target 75% by 2026)
Users of its largest online learning platform	3 million	6 million, within one year
Progress to 100 million learners a year	Target set for 2026	Reached in 2024

Two points of context are worth keeping in mind. Part of the fall in turnover reflects the post-pandemic rebound settling down, so not all of it can be credited to this work. And no single initiative produced these numbers on its own. The presenter was clear that the parts worked because they reinforced each other.

The less measurable outcome may matter most. Employees started using new digital skills to improve how their own work was done, and some moved into entirely new roles. For an organisation that struggled to hire digital talent, growing it from within changed what was possible.

The Debates In The Room

The delivery story, including the abandoned in-house skills taxonomy and the difficulty of sequencing so much change at once, is covered in our piece What Nobody Tells You About Building This Stuff. The round table discussion also raised five questions that deserve a fuller answer.

Can you drive performance without paying for it?

One participant challenged the decision directly. If pay is no longer tied to performance, what drives performance? The presenter's answer drew on research suggesting that for complex, thinking-based work, financial incentives can lower performance rather than raise it. Investing in capability and creating the right conditions, in their view, was the more reliable route to results.

Fairness also played a part. Rigid outcome-based schemes were judged risky during a pandemic and a merger, and potentially unfair to carers and neurodivergent colleagues whose output could look different without being worse. Others in the room were less convinced. One pointed out that working hard and delivering results are not the same thing. Another noted that many organisations have almost no pay flexibility to work with in the first place. The honest conclusion was that performance and development cannot be fully separated. Development counts when it produces visible competence, and competence shows up in performance.



What happens to trust when ratings disappear?

One participant had seen ratings removed elsewhere with nothing put in their place, and trust fell as a result. People did not know how pay or progression would be decided. The case study organisation had the same experience in its first attempt. The lesson is that removing a rating is only half a decision. People need to know what replaces it, and how it connects to the things they care about.

Who should be a manager?

The organisation had around 1,700 managers in a workforce of about 7,000. Rather than trying to fix every manager, it took three steps. It reviewed spans and layers. It clarified the manager's role as giving clarity, motivating, managing performance and coaching. And it built a genuine expert career path alongside the management one, so specialists could progress without taking on people they did not want to lead. Some specialists earned more than managers, which was accepted as a reflection of the market.

Participants added that leadership should not depend on job title. A principal scientist leads through influence even without direct reports, and the same standards of behaviour should apply.

What works for operational and frontline teams?

Several participants described teams where formal appraisals are treated as pointless paperwork. One leader replaced the annual form with an end-of-year checkout built on three questions: what has gone well, what has got in the way, and how are you feeling. It kept the human contact while removing the friction.

Another described a manufacturing site where small continuous improvement teams, visible targets and rewards people actually valued made a difference. If a team hit its target by two o'clock on a Friday, it could go home. Long-serving staff who had been cynical about change became some of its strongest advocates.

How do you handle fear of change?

Participants described high emotion in their organisations, particularly among long-serving staff worried about AI and job security. That fear spreads quickly through teams. The approaches that helped were to name the fear openly, frame development as a way to stay employable, and show practical examples where new skills made people's work easier rather than replacing them.

Applying This In Your Organisation

Most organisations do not have a large HR function, a dedicated change team or a business able to absorb years of transformation. The round table was clear that you should not try to copy the whole model. The aim is to find the smallest version that solves your real problem, test it, and build from there.

These seven steps reflect what the presenter and participants said they would do again.

1. Start with the business problem, not the people initiative. Executives rarely fund something because it feels right. Ask what is keeping them up at night, whether that is a skills gap, a key client at risk or turnover in a critical team, and connect your proposal to it with data.

2. Make careers visible before you invest in learning. People cannot develop towards a destination they cannot see. Even a simple set of job families, with the skills each one needs and the roles next to it, gives employees and managers something to work with. Buying and adapting an existing framework is usually faster and cheaper than building one.

3. Give conversations structure, and share ownership of them. If you simplify or remove appraisals, put something clear in their place. A few good questions, a suggested rhythm and short guidance available to everyone, not just managers, will do more than a long form.

4. Have senior leaders go first, then focus on managers who want to improve. People watch what leaders do. After that, put your effort into managers who are willing but have never been shown how, rather than the small number who will not change.

5. Use communities of practice before courses. Peer groups cost little and often teach more than formal training. Asking people to share back what they learned from an event or a course spreads it further at no extra cost.

6.Recognise application, not attendance. Whether or not you can link development to pay, make it clear that what counts is what people do differently. Certificates on their own change nothing.

7.Plan for upkeep from day one. Launches get attention. Keeping things going is harder. Short videos, one-page guides, clear intranet pages and a place in onboarding let the approach run without constant live training. Any skills framework also needs an owner and a review date.

A Quick Self-Assessment

Use these questions to test where your organisation stands today.

Area	Question to ask	Warning sign
Career visibility	Can an employee see which roles they could move into and what they would need to get there?	Development conversations stop when no promotion is available
Conversation quality	Do you measure whether conversations are useful, or only whether they took place?	Completion rates are high but engagement is flat
Manager capability	Do managers know what their role involves beyond operational oversight?	The same managers have struggled for years with no targeted support
Learning culture	Is learning part of the work, or something HR runs on the side?	Training attendance is high but behaviour does not change
Executive support	Is your people strategy tied to a business risk leaders already worry about?	Proposals are approved in principle but never resourced
Sustainability	Would your approach keep running if the person who launched it left?	Everything depends on live sessions and one champion

Final Thoughts

The organisation in this case study did not keep its people by adding a new platform or a bigger training budget. It made careers visible, gave people better conversations about them, and rewarded what they did with what they learned. The tools mattered less than the fact that each part supported the others.

Few organisations will replicate the full programme, and they do not need to. The principle holds at any size: if people cannot see a way forward inside your organisation, they will look for one outside it.

About The ONE Group HR Leaders Community

The ONE Group brings HR and people leaders together through regular round tables where peers share what is working, what is not, and what they would do differently. Sessions are practical, candid and held under shared confidence so that the conversation stays honest.

If you would like to join a future session, or talk through how these ideas apply in your own organisation, we would be glad to hear from you.

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