



the **GEM**
programme



**NORTHERN
HOUSING
CONSORTIUM**
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CAREER PROGRESSION AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT IN THE CHANGING WORK ENVIRONMENT

Introduction

Routes to career progression for young housing professionals can differ from organisation to organisation. It is important to identify what this – as well as staff retention – looks like in an ever-changing world in order for housing organisations to create a culture that nurtures and develops talent.

The Graduate Employment Mentoring (GEM) Programme, in conjunction with the Northern Housing Consortium (NHC), launched the Business Unusual: The Future of Work research programme to undertake a series of bite sized research pieces providing an insight into how the future of work has changed to inform the thinking of senior leaders and people of influence across the housing sector. The research is led by current and former GEM students who are working across housing sectors in the United Kingdom (UK), Canada and Australia. As the next generation of housing sector leaders, our aim was to provide a first-hand view of the future of work in the context of the drastic changes experienced over the last two years.

This second research project focused on ‘Career progression and professional development in the changing work environment’. The aim of the research project is to:

1. Ascertain what career progression there is for new and current housing professionals
2. Identify the values and behaviours that drive these individuals towards career development
3. Provide an understanding of how housing organisations attract and retain staff
4. Critically evaluate where the onus lies in driving one’s career

This report allows us to compare the wide range of perspectives shared by housing professionals working across different areas of the housing sector. The research participants include individuals at different stages of their career, from those in a lower-managerial role to new graduates.

Group members

Matthew Wilson (Project lead)	Northern Housing Consortium
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Executive summary

Our investigation found a cohort of values-driven staff with a strong sense of purpose who welcome the aligned values of staff and organisations found in the sector, but who are acutely aware of the increased financial opportunities found elsewhere and who are highly reluctant to lose the increased flexibility and working patterns afforded to them by the COVID homeworking arrangements. They recognise the shared nature of the onus of staff development and expect housing providers to ensure they are offering opportunities while maintaining a culture that encourages the aspiration to progress.

We surveyed 39 current and graduate GEMs via online focus groups, 79% of which have had been in the housing sector for less than 5 years. Only 5% were currently working in an office, 49% were working remotely (from home) and the remaining 44% were a mix of both and fell under the category of hybrid worker.

Aligned values between the staff and the organization being focused on having a positive impact result in pride for the work. This pride promotes retention and growth among staff.

Flexibility for working models was a clear priority for upcoming professionals, with every employee viewed as an individual with different ideas of what flexibility means to them and how it best fits within their wider life, ultimately benefiting employers on their quest to attract and retain staff. Housing organisations can retain and promote staff progression if colleagues feel valued in their role and have purpose knowing their work is having a positive impact.

Organisations vary on their methods and practices regarding career progression, but participants were vocal in their view that employers must be willing and able to facilitate career progression for the organisation to be successful. Of course, regardless of how enthusiastic an organisation may be for their workforce to progress, the initial onus must be on the individual to instigate the progression.

Research Perspectives

Focus group methodology

To explore the research perspectives, we ran 6 focus groups in March 2022. The sessions were run on web conferencing services facilitated by the NHC. In total 27 people participated in the focus groups.

We sought to recruit early career housing professionals working in entry-level or non-managerial/first tier management roles to participate in our research. We also welcomed some more experienced housing sector professionals. We circulated an invitation to participate in the focus groups via current GEM students and former GEM alumni as well as through promotion via the NHC. In Canada, participants were invited in a similar manner across the networks formed by our group, they were invited to return a brief expression of interest to participate in the research. Participants who took part in the focus groups represented a variety of housing associations across the UK and Canada, including representation from Scotland and Northern Ireland. Prior to the pandemic, participants worked predominantly in office-based roles, and several were partly or entirely site-based. The participants had worked from home and in agile work environments since lockdown measures were relaxed during the Covid-19 pandemic. Their perspectives represented a different view to working remotely prior to the pandemic than the UK participants. While the cohort of participants reflected the diversity of young professionals in the social housing sector, we are aware of the limitations of this approach, including potential impacts of self-selection and non-response bias.

Focus Groups

Participants of focus groups were advised that their results would be anonymous and would not be attributed to them or their organisation, and that no audio or video recordings would be taken from the sessions. Members of the research group chaired the focus groups and took notes. Chairpersons were issued a briefing in advance which outlined key questions and prompts to direct the conversation. Chairs introduced the sessions, briefly explained the purpose of the research, discussed the research questions and explained how the focus groups would be run. The Chairperson introduced the questions and prompted the conversation with the focus group sessions taking a relatively freeform, discursive approach. Notes from the sessions were written up,

anonymised and fed back to the research group for the reporting of results. We are grateful to all participants who contributed to the research and to the NHC for facilitating the sessions.

Surveys and Data

In October 2021, we surveyed current GEM graduates and current GEM talent in house, of those surveyed, a total of thirty-nine participants responded. The figures showed that 79% had been in the housing sector for less than 5 years in total. The remaining 21% of respondents had been in housing for between 7 to 20 years. The results also showed that the current working arrangements for those surveyed varied, only 5% were currently working in an office, 49% were working remotely (from home) and the remaining 44% were a mix of both and fell under the category of hybrid worker. The mix of those working remotely, in the office or a hybrid of both, warranted further exploration as part of a focus group discussion as to whether this had any impact on career development.

As part of the survey, we asked respondents if they had a career progression discussion with their manager. Encouragingly, a majority had, with 67% of respondents responding to say that they had. However considering those surveyed were in the GEM programme, which is a development programme, it was surprising that there were still 28% who had not had those conversations with their manager. There were also participants who failed to answer this question.

The survey asked the question “in what ways do you feel COVID-19 has impacted your career progression (both positively and negatively)?” responses to this question were varied. The question was qualitative and was not as easy to come to firm conclusions, however, there were themes running through the answers: Working from home had resulted in participants being less visible and responses noted that working in this way had impacted their chances of being recognised for the effort they put into their role, others felt that the pandemic had reduced opportunities to shadow and train which prevented development in the role. In contrast, others saw it as a positive, seeing more opportunities open in the job market and being able to apply for roles that they had previously not considered. Again, this question needed further exploration and it was agreed amongst the research group that this should be an area that we explored further as part of the focus groups.

UK Housing Sector Perspectives

To best understand what career progression looks like in the housing sector, we undertook a review of various articles published by housing organisations, housing experts, and the mainstream media. We found that a large number of young professionals did not see the housing sector as their next step post-graduation. Of these graduates, most individuals sought out career opportunities within other industries including Finance, Education, and Law. Interestingly, Hays UK's jobs and employment blog found that 'Nearly three quarters (71%) of social housing employers expect to encounter difficulties finding suitable applicants when recruiting over the coming year, with a third having experienced a shortage of project and change management skills, and half struggling to find candidates with managerial and leadership skills.'

However, to overcome these shortages of individuals pursuing a career in housing sector, housing organisations have sought to identify ways in which they can attract and retain talented individuals. For example, Michael Page Property & Construction suggests that individuals are more likely to pursue a career in housing if they believe that they will be valued within their role and are working towards a purpose. They found that value and purpose provide primary motivators for job satisfaction and increase employee retention. The Chartered Institute of Housing also supports this theory as they suggest that many people see working in housing as just maintaining properties. However, if more emphasis is put on the fact that housing professionals are constantly making a positive difference to peoples live, it will attract more candidates.

Inside Housing also provide some useful advice on how social housing organisations can better promote career development. They found that for organisations to retain their staff, more emphasis needs to be put on creating the time for colleagues to do coaching and mentoring sessions. These sessions not only instil further confidence in individual's abilities, but also shows that the organisation cares about seeing individuals progress. This helps to retain current staff, but also create recruitment campaigns with in-built career progression systems and strategies.

While housing is still not seen as one of the top areas for career development and progression, it is clear that housing organisations are taking major strides to attract candidates from a variety of educational backgrounds to provide a workforce of talented individuals that strive for career success.

Canadian Housing Perspective/Context

In Canada, many housing organisations have been experiencing great difficulties in terms of funding. Housing providers face an ever-growing demand for the services but the housing stock available is limited and ageing, whilst maintenance has been deferred due to budgetary constraints. Over the years there have been many cutbacks in funding, more recently however, the Canadian Government has increased funding for social housing. Despite this there is still uncertainty as to what this funding means for social housing providers. Housing providers have been forced to focus on resiliency and sustainability to ensure they are able to continue to provide the vital services they provide. The communities throughout Canada have been greatly affected by the increasing cost of living resulting in a growing demand for the services provided by low-income housing providers. These housing providers have had to change and adapt to maintain their services. An example of this is Cividia, the largest provider of long-term, low-income housing and rental support in Edmonton, the capital city of the province of Alberta. Over the years it has become more and more difficult to attain funding to increase the supply of social housing units needed to support the growing needs of the community. Cividia noted this difficulty and moved towards a more sustainable mixed income model of low-income housing and was successful in attaining funding for some new builds with this approach. Buildings following the mixed income model have rent that is affordable based on income but is filled with families and individuals at different income levels which results in a building that when filled generates enough income to financially sustain itself. These mixed income buildings do not have to rely on continuous Government funding which can be unpredictable in the changing political environment.

Changing Canadian Work Environment

The changes caused by Covid-19 has had a similar effect on employees in Canada. Many offices transitioned successfully to remote working and now employees can work remotely with employers that were previously out of reach. Housing providers have had difficulty in retaining staff, particularly if forced to return to in-person work with little or no flexibility. We've seen directly how important it is for employers to be in tune with the needs of staff - giving them a voice when it comes to change, investing in their development and being flexible given the new realities of the ever-changing work environment.



Preparation for progression

Training and Pathways

When looking at what training is offered by housing associations, it is notable that many have substantial training academies or skills development pathways, offering dedicated routes coupled with measurable benchmarks. Others, however, described less proactive approaches. One participant outlined their experience with their organisation's leadership academy. They explained that the values of the business are promoted, leadership skills taught, with people from all levels having the opportunity to sign up and networking is encouraged.

Some participants explained that the training pathways offered by their respective organisations can often feel siloed to one department, meaning that development paths are not symmetrical across the business and each department having different routes for progression. This offers little opportunity to learn skills and qualifications that are more closely associated with other careers and trades, leaving those seeking to diversify their strengths disappointed. Participants on fixed-term contracts explained that the path to attaining a permanent contract is not always well defined, with individuals not having a clear understanding of how to secure permanency. It should be noted that the participants advised that within their respective organisations, GEMs do tend to attain a permanent contract. One participant explained that as part of a restructure in their organisation, mentoring and coaching opportunities have now been provided and an appraisal system has been adapted to a personal learning plan. They felt that this better addressed skills gaps and resulted in better routes to formal qualifications such as those offered by CIH (Chartered Institute of Housing).

Role of the manager vs the role of the mentor

Mentioned earlier in this section was the importance of having a supportive working team around an individual, especially a supportive and communicative manager. It was noted that due to managers seeing potential in their staff, progression was able to take place earlier, beginning with training and followed by coaching for specific job roles. On the other hand, several individuals in the focus groups advised that they found their manager either too unapproachable or busy with their own workload to invest in their potential. This is where the role of a workplace mentor became crucial in aiding with career progression. Through these discussions, a pattern seemed to emerge where the

individual reaches out to their manager or mentor and then the manager or mentor acts upon this. Without that initial want or drive for progression, a manager or mentor has no obligation or indication to push the individual towards some specific training, course, experiences or advertised roles.

Stagnation

Another barrier to an individual's career progression takes the form of staff bodies remaining stagnant. It was discussed that in several organisations, progressing to middle-management level was almost impossible due to members of staff remaining in these positions for years and opportunities for promotion only arising when a manager retired. At this point in our focus group discussions, we were able to gain some good practice examples of how housing organisations have dealt with this issue. One participant explained that they had encountered this problem and it resulted in younger, entry-level staff leaving due to the lack of available promotions. Approximately a decade ago, the organisation restructured and along with it came a traffic light system for promotion and learning. Here, green signals that an individual is ready to make a step up; amber signifying that they are on the right track but need to strengthen certain skills; and red to show that an individual isn't progressing to the next level. Aside from this, the housing organisation also adopted a 'Rising Star' Scheme aimed at young professionals who were passionate about housing.

Different organisations approaches to progression

Organisations within the research had varying approaches to progression. One participant, explaining that their organisation uses the aforementioned traffic light development indicator, said that although he had been categorised as 'amber' (therefore would require additional training) he did not feel that there was sufficient opportunity to develop the skills outlined to allow him to attain green status. Similarly, others echoed cases in their organisations with roles advertised requiring specific criteria, proving difficult for junior staff to apply for and attain. Grand Union Housing Association have an in-house programme on leadership and multiple focus group participants have attended this leadership course, allowing them to gain experience of working at a managerial level. Those who had participated spoke highly of the ability to cultivate the skills needed for an upcoming


professional to step to management level through this programme, with one individual explaining that they attributed their confidence in being able to apply for a management role to this course.

Cross-departmental movement was another area which saw the groups split in their experiences, without the consensus seen on training schemes. While cross-group movement and collaboration is encouraged within some organisations, in larger organisations, particularly those with all in-house teams, it was found that there are plenty of opportunities for individuals to experience working as part of different teams and directorates. This is something that participants eagerly described as allowing them to expand their horizons in terms of career path. One individual described a situation where they were moving to a different department imminently, explaining that they felt supported to go for whichever role they wanted across the business due to a work culture which encourages horizontal movement. Another participant explained that they were previously encouraged to work in different departments, rotating to new roles on a 6-monthly basis, however this is no longer standard practice. They felt that this decision contributed to them feeling their training pathway doesn't provide an explicit route to future roles, it merely promotes skills and values.

Speaking from the point of view of a smaller organisation, one participant said that people tend to move across roles rather than up and that this happened regularly. They explained that due to the size of their organisation, there are rarely opportunities to progress and although jobs are advertised internally first, they didn't feel that there are many opportunities to build up the skills required by the job.

Participants agreed that a priority for them is to have a clear route to progression which is fully communicated to an organisation's internal staff. The group was markedly split on line-manager and mentor one-on-ones. Some explained that they had regular, meaningful conversations where the participants often discussed career goals and the routes to achieving these. Others in the groups explained that they rarely had these conversations and didn't feel that their progression was being prioritised by their managers or mentors.

Alongside this came the issue of what training for progression should look like. The consensus was that the culmination of mentoring and coaching, as well as the opportunity to earn qualifications were required. Most importantly, having a robust training and progression system will see less-experienced professionals develop more efficiently. Some participants were visibly shocked to hear




of the disparity between different organisations. All participants agreed that it was essential that they feel that the organisation is invested in them and their wishes to progress. When all is considered, a thorough training and progression system will encourage many who are currently less inclined to consider their career progression, not just those who are actively seeking the next step, allowing stronger candidates to progress more consistently.

The focus groups discussed timing in relation to driving one's career. It became apparent during discussions that career progression became more of a priority at certain life stages. These life stages corresponded with financial requirements such as dependants or home commitments. Another aspect of this concerned age. Some of the older individuals in the focus groups had already advanced to middle-management level or had even progressed in other sectors before moving to housing. It was felt that a general shift in mindfulness had taken place where work life and home life met. Organisations would be required to consider an individual's home life in relation to their work life and this follows on to a point already highlighted; A number of individuals in the focus groups spoke out about how career progression was tied in with various stages in their lives such as becoming a home-owner, getting married or moving in with a long-term partner or becoming a parent. It was discussed that each of these life stages created a drive for an individual to seek a way to move to a position with more seniority and a financial increase. Similarly, these life stages also bring about a drive for achieving a fixed or permanent contract, allowing the individual to feel secure in their role. Although the discussions around career progression and the correlation with life stages proved interesting, it must be brought back to the core: the mindset of the individual.

Question:

How can organisations work with upcoming professionals and their wider staff to ensure that training pathways meet staff expectations and improve staff retention?



Case Study – Stonewater

In November 2021, Stonewater launched their Step-up to Management Programme, open to all staff including aspiring managers, team leaders, and graduates. The aim of this programme is to develop a pool of future management talent who are equipped with the skills and knowledge required to accede into a management role when the opportunities arise. This structured programme consists of one virtual session each month which includes:

- **Guest speakers:** internal and external speakers who give a personalised account of their route to career progression. They offer advice, knowledge and guidance. As an example, in Session Three, Stonewater's Head of Homes Operations gave an account of how she came into housing and the route she took to get into a management position.
- **Practical sessions and group discussions:** in some sessions, participants are given a scenario or question to discuss with their table of peers. This allows for different ideas and views to come together which will enable individuals to not only become a thought leader but also an excellent people manager. This creates a culture of openness where individuals at different stages of their career can discuss their perspective on a particular topic.
- **Networking opportunities:** these sessions give all participants the opportunity to get to know their colleagues in different departments and find out what career progressions looks like to them.

Alongside this, all staff on the programme are also given the opportunity to work towards an optional Level 2 Certificate in Team Leading. This means that programme participants not only acquire the skills and knowledge to make a good manager but are also able to gain a qualification which can help them with current and future management roles. The objectives of this qualification are to develop the participants' knowledge on the principles of team leading, their understanding of business, and equip them with the knowledge needed to communicate effectively with internal and external stakeholders.

"I've only been doing the apprenticeship since January but already I have learnt a lot of different techniques to help understand my team better and also I've learnt how to understand myself a lot more and what I could do differently to make be a better manager.'" **Study Participant**



Aligned values and behaviours

Aligned values and behaviours emerged as another major theme throughout the focus groups when asking what drives those towards career development in the housing sector. Several participants reported that they found a career in housing fulfilling as the work aligned with their own personal values aimed at having a positive impact in the communities they serve. Many of those in the focus groups reported that their personal values are paramount within their work, pairing well with the approach of the sector. One participant explained that values were one of the most important aspects of her career, and that they are encouraged to work harder as it has a positive impact on sustainability and climate change. There was a consensus within the group that aligned values and having a positive social impact resulted in feelings of pride encouraging professionals to remain and grow in the sector.

Values in the Changing Work Environment

The study found that respondents wanted to work in a role that aligns with their own personal values. One participant reported that the changes brought on by COVID-19 have been a wake-up call resulting in reevaluating their role and lifestyles. They reported that the rapidly changing work environment makes it easier now than ever for professionals to work remotely with different employers, thus finding a role that best suits their needs and values. Group members cited that personal circumstances influenced this, with those who were at the beginning of their career more likely to seek out employment that closely mirrors their own personal values. One participant who was further into their career reported that values are still very important, however they may seek out work in other sectors if the compensation or opportunities in the housing sector are limiting them financially. With the increasing concern over the cost of living, some reported that whilst they would like to remain in the housing sector, they may have to consider moving to different sectors, putting values aside for financial reasons if there are more lucrative opportunities elsewhere.

Role of Values in Staff Retention

Throughout the focus groups it became clear that aligned values between organisations and staff are key to staff retention. It was clear that the shared values between staff and organisations within the sector are an asset, however, the increasing financial pressure and quickly changing work

environment is pushing staff to consider other opportunities that they may not have otherwise. For some in the focus groups, it seems as if there is a trade-off when it comes to values and pay. Housing organisations play a major role in developing and perpetuating values amongst staff. This can be achieved by seeking out and working to retain staff that embody similar values to the organisation itself. Furthermore, demonstrating the positive impact of the services provided when compared to the challenges our communities face is a great way to promote the shared values in the sector. The values within the sector are also a great way to attract and retain vocational staff seeking out career paths for their skill sets. The changes seen in the current work environment has increased the competition among employers to find and retain quality staff. A focus on shared values, having a positive impact on the communities served and providing progressive career paths for staff is a great way for housing organisations to stay competitive in the current job market.

Questions:

What is the best way for housing organizations to promote shared values within their teams?

Given the recent changes seen in the work environment caused by COVID-19, how can employers reshape their values to attract and retain quality staff?

Attracting and retaining staff

Flexibility and Trust

Flexibility was a major theme running through all focus groups when participants were asked about housing organisations attracting and retaining staff. Most housing organisations were not working flexibly before the COVID-19 pandemic, forcing them to rapidly adapt to a working situation void of physical interaction with colleagues and customers. Although the term flexibility had different meanings to the various participants, they noted that the approach to flexibility was helped by the pandemic and national lockdowns with organisations allowing staff the flexibility to work from home. This gave individuals the autonomy to manage their working day to suit them and thus creating a better work-life balance. Others noted that the approach to flexibility in housing associations allowed them to take roles in organisations which were geographically situated in other parts of the country to where they lived. One participant noted that she had taken a housing role in another part of the country and the flexibility the organisation provided allowed her to work from home full-time. This degree of flexibility suited her needs and gave her the opportunity to attain a desirable role.

Flexible working allows the individual to feel more empowered and trusted by their organisation as they are no longer expected to conform to rigid ways of working. The focus groups made it clear that if their organisations do not support their wish to work from home, they would be inclined to seek employment from other housing organisations who do support this model. This is evidenced within a comment that one participant made who felt that the churn of staff in his organisation had reduced due to a greater flexibility around working remotely and the greater autonomy of managing your own day.

Job Location

Location became a topic of discussion for the focus groups. At the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, workers in the housing sector were thrown in at the deep end of homeworking. Once the workers learned how to navigate the deep waters, they realised what opportunities now lay in front of them in the form of passing opportunities which would not have been feasible pre-pandemic. As mentioned in previous sections, a number of participants in the groups had attained positions in housing organisations which were based sometimes hundreds of miles away from their living

location. However, due to home-working these issues no longer affected them, allowing these young professionals to progress in the housing sector uninhibited. Where an individual may have felt that their only future progression took the form of remaining in one department or organisation due to locality issues, their options have opened up. Now they can choose from a wider range of options, allowing for more opportunity for progression and a healthy work-life balance. A small level of anxiety was discussed at the idea of these individuals having to return to the office as their roles would no longer be feasible, facing a five-hour commute on public transport or even commuting between countries (i.e., England-Scotland). Aside from this, the fact that young housing professionals have decided to progress their career in a role hundreds of miles away poses a problem for some housing organisations and that is retention. This raises questions on what housing organisations can do to ensure staff stay. The responsibility of this must lie with the housing organisation to make their organisation one which garners passion in the workforce, promoting career progression and encouraging their workforce to progress their career in internally.

Organisational support

Another participant from one of the focus groups mentioned that for flexibility to work it must go hand in hand with support from the organisation. She felt that the organisation she works for has changed culturally, now managers have a lot more trust in their employees to complete their workload in a flexible way and they have incorporated a flexible-working style by encouraging staff to take time out of their day. To support this time-out period within the day, this organisation provides mindfulness sessions for their staff to participate in during this time. She said that her organisation had also gifted staff two wellbeing days on top of their annual leave, signifying a culture shift within the working environment. The organisation's approach now reflected that the change was not just about staff being allowed to work flexibly, but that the managers also have complete trust in their staff to do their job and most importantly are supporting them when needed.

Development

Development opportunities within housing associations were viewed as a major attraction for participants within the focus groups. A participant who previously worked in another sector and recently moved into housing said that the learning, development, and overall training package on

offer was attractive and he could see opportunities to progress into a management position in the future very easily.

Another participant in the focus groups said that she oversees the recruitment process. In her respective organisation, eight managerial roles were filled by in-house staff last year. They purposely recruited internally, as they wanted people with a good working knowledge of the organisation and aligned values. They recognised that staff could be tempted by offers elsewhere, so offering opportunities to progress through training and development to staff internally helps them to achieve their potential as a strong employee for the organisation. There is a strong argument that these basic initiatives are needed for individuals to feel that they are valued, that their contribution matters, and that the organisation is invested in them and their progression.

Participants from Thirteen Group were complimentary about the processes in place to develop staff, with in-house programmes in place to identify talented staff. This includes the presence of a career development plan for staff wishing to progress through which an individual can identify training and development needs as well as being allocated a mentor and being given opportunities to gain experience in various teams across the organisation. All staff who wish to progress can discuss this at talent forums, where senior managers highlight potential opportunities for those who have attended. Overall, the process is incredibly open and transparent, and the outcome is extremely positive.

Case Study – Thirteen

The Thirteen Talent Strategy was introduced in May 2021. This new strategy aimed to implement a process to enable all staff to be measured on performance and consider their future potential, this would benchmark individuals against their peers with a whole organisational focus. It would allow for greater career mobility, with clear individualised career pathways. The process starts with a bi-annual performance review with their line manager, the outcomes from the performance review are discussed at a talent forum with senior management and then the individual is discussed in terms of whether they are ready for progression.

Potential opportunities are identified to support them in their career development, this may include learning and development opportunities to fill any gaps in their knowledge, skills or experience. A recent working example of the talent strategy is that of an individual who was exceeding their objectives and performing well in their role. They identified themselves as having career aspirations

during their performance review with their manager. This information was collated and discussed at one of the Thirteen Group talent forums. Opportunities for this colleague to progress were discussed, however, it was identified that an element of training was required before they could be seen as ready to adopt a management role. It was discussed that a secondment opportunity may be a way to support this person's development and would supply them with the knowledge and experience they required.

Following the talent forum, the person was encouraged by their manager to apply for a secondment opportunity. This temporary six-month role was advertised as a development opportunity. Open and honest conversations took place to manage expectations- that this was a fair recruitment process with the role being offered to the person who performs the best in the interview. Fortunately, the individual was successful in the recruitment process and was offered the development opportunity. The individual now had management responsibility of one member of staff and was expected to perform full management duties such as one-to-ones and performance reviews. Now in the 5th month of a successful secondment, the role has now been made permanent with added management duties added to the role as the team has grown. To support the individual in the role, they have been placed on training courses to continue learning and development. This has shown that the organisation is invested in them and that their development is ongoing.

Question:

How important is it to get people back into the office? Productivity: managers trust them to do job they're doing, could this change and people be forced back in?



Conclusions

It may seem that discussions around flexibility for working models have concluded in more questions, the takeaway for housing organisations should be that every employee is an individual. These individuals may be at different life stages, have different responsibilities or dependants outside of the workplace and will value flexibility, many will also thrive and prefer the office environment. Due to this, it can be concluded that housing organisations must consider the circumstance of the individual and respond to their working queries and requests in order to retain staff and instil a positive working environment.

Throughout the various questions posed to the focus groups, fragments of conversation drifted towards the onus for driving one's career. The overall opinion was that a combination of personal drive and organisational push must be delivered. Organisations generally vary on their methods and practices regarding career progression, but it was noted that employers must be willing and able to facilitate career progression. This could take the form of training schemes, graduate schemes, performance and development reviews, workplace mentors and/or frequent meetings with management staff. Whilst it was felt that workplace support for progression is valued, it was voiced that regardless of how enthusiastic an organisation may be for their workforce to progress, the initial onus must be on the individual to instigate the progression. Overall, the individual must instigate this drive for career progression and search for pathways and advice on how to get to where they want to go, and their organisation must act as a catalyst to further push this progression.

It was notable that the participants themselves were of a particular mindset of those who wish to move forward, who want to progress and have a real drive for the housing sector. Most of our participants were either involved with or previously involved with the GEM Programme or other programmes and felt there was a clear difference between how they viewed career progression and how their colleagues viewed career progression. Several made mention of other colleagues who they felt would not be interested in progressing and are content in their current role.

This underlines the necessary mixture of an organisation offering support for progression, but also respecting individual needs and aspirations. Even if an individual has the best resources to progress, if the individual does not have the initial drive to progress, then organisation culture and resource becomes void. Equally, if an individual would like to progress but finds that their organisation does not have an ample amount of training schemes or guidance in place, then these professionals will seek employment and progression elsewhere. Investing in staff where appropriate, and respecting

the individual makes the organisation more attractive as whole to professionals, even to those who haven't felt that progression is something they strive for.

Recommendations

1. Housing organisations can retain and promote staff progression if colleagues feel valued in their role and have purpose knowing their work is having a positive impact.
2. Aligned values between the staff and the organisation being focused on having a positive impact result in pride in work. This pride promotes retention and growth among staff.
3. The employers' flexibility is key to remaining competitive in retaining and attracting valuable staff in this new work environment. Flexibility must go hand in hand with support from the employers to work well for staff.
4. Employers must prioritise development opportunities as these are a major attraction for up-and-coming staff within the sector and see this expenditure on learning and development as investment, not a cost in the 'war for talent' attraction and retention.
5. Organisations must accept that values-driven staff with a strong sense of purpose must be paid competitive wages. Mobility across sectors has increased with remote working and salary competitiveness is therefore of greater importance.
6. Employers must recognise the shared onus of staff development and ensure they are offering opportunities while maintaining a culture that encourages progression aspiration but does not force it.



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