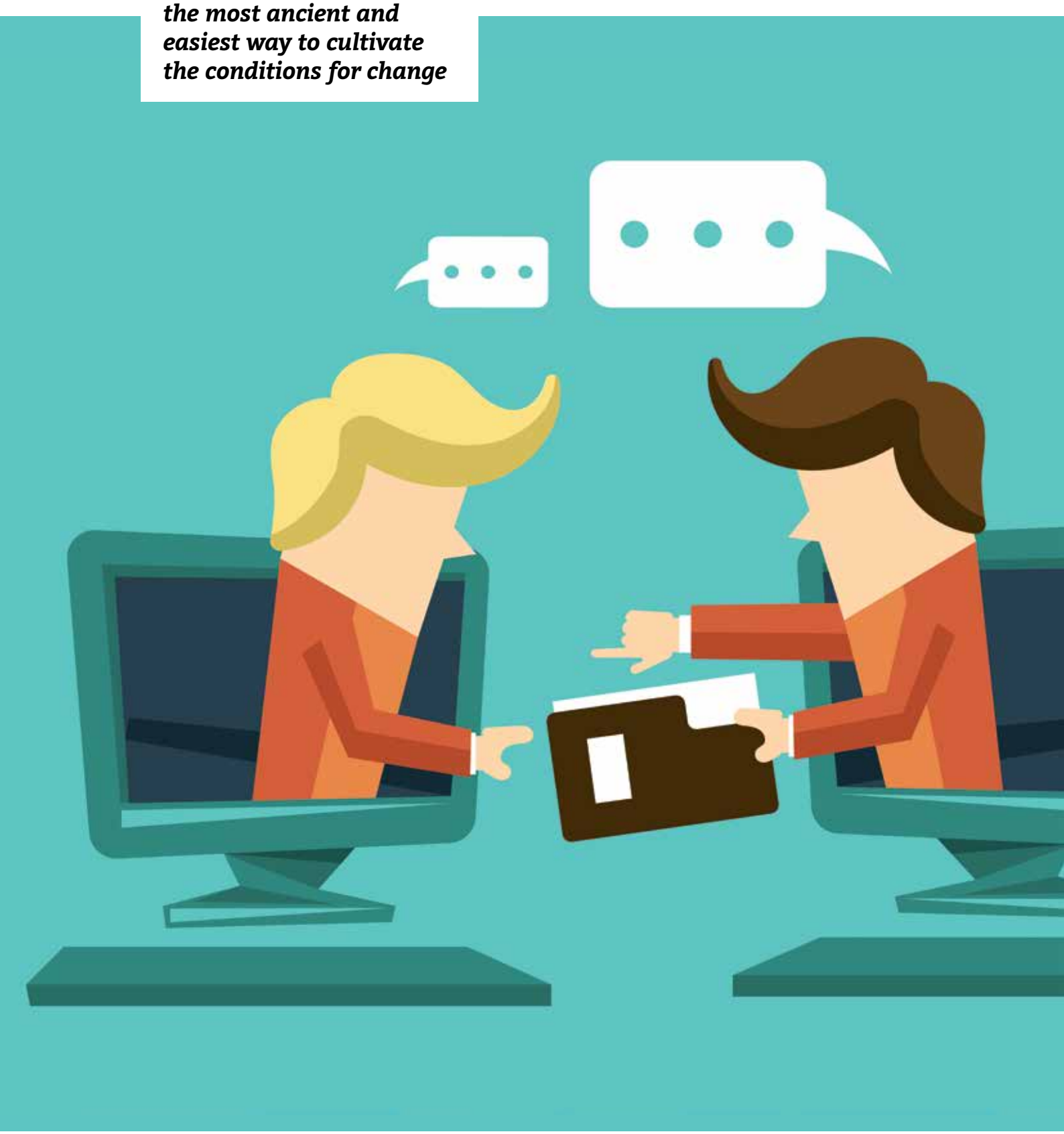
Human conversation is the most ancient and easiest way to cultivate the conditions for change



IT'S TIME TO TALK

Emily Cosgrove, **Sara Hope** and **Abbie Jackson** on
five steps to engaging career conversations

"Brilliant, timely, original, well written and utterly terrifying." These words by historian and political commentator Niall Ferguson drew us to the front cover of Lynda Gratton and Andrew Scott's latest book, *The 100-Year Life: Living and Working in an Age of Longevity*.

If you haven't read it, grab a copy. It provides an engaging and thought-provoking analysis of how our working lives are changing – not 10 years ahead, but now, in 2018.

Many of us have been brought up understanding the traditional three-stage approach of education, work, retirement. But as the authors brilliantly highlight, this well-established model is being shattered.

Life expectancy is rising, final-salary pensions are vanishing, and the jobs our children are likely to end up doing probably don't yet exist.

Career development has never been simple, but there have been simpler times. Leaders are focused on ensuring that their people remain committed to the vision of the company; that productivity levels remain high or increase; and that talent is retained.

At the same time, Generation Y is taking hold of the majority of the workforce and requiring more flexibility, more communication, more frequent development opportunities and involvement in a wider range of programmes.

We are in violent agreement. Business leaders are looking to prioritise engagement of their people and employees are demanding it, yet there remains a disconnect. This exciting yet constantly shifting landscape provides significant challenges for career development within organisations and requires a serious shift in perspective and practice on both sides.

If we are to embrace and thrive in this rapidly evolving landscape we need to be rethinking how we approach careers in organisations – not just in terms of career models, and continuous learning, but how we have career conversations.

We are already living in an era of multiple careers where, more than ever before, people are likely to engage with the workplace in new and creative ways.

Research has repeatedly pointed to a relationship between how people are managed, their attitudes and behaviour, and business performance and their levels of discretionary effort. The ability to talk and think together authentically and skilfully across different levels of seniority within organisations, is proving to be a source of competitive advantage and organisational effectiveness.

Our own research[1] shows that there has never been a stronger imperative for leaders to grow greater flexibility to engage in conversations in different ways, particularly when it comes to careers.

Let's make it personal

"In 2001, as a manager joining KPMG, I didn't ever imagine I would have an 18-year relationship with the firm. Due to evolving circumstances and changes in my own career drivers, the relationship ebbed and flowed to encompass diverse arrangements; full-time employment, three rounds of maternity leave, a dual relationship of two-day employment →

alongside setting up my own business, and nine years with the firm being a client of The Conversation Space.

"When I talk about 'the firm', I am mindful that I don't mean a mass 'organisation' or 'system'. The key difference that has impacted on how my relationship has evolved with KPMG has been a consequence of the conversations I have had with different individuals during the different stages in my career." ***Sara Hope***

Organisation culture is often made up in meetings. Meetings are made up of conversations. If we want to enhance the culture of our organisations and enable people to experience engaging careers, we must focus on the quality and approach of our conversations in those meetings.

We've heard 'meetings' being called all sorts of things – see Figure 1. Ultimately it is the quality of the conversation that matters.

Despite technological developments in workplace systems and people-management tools, the conversational interactions we have, particularly in relation to careers, remain the most powerful connection between companies and their employees.

Margaret Wheatley[2] highlights the potential opportunity of conversations brilliantly, stating that: "Human conversation is the most ancient and easiest way to cultivate the conditions for change."

Yet in many cases, our conversational skills remain grossly underdeveloped and underused. If we can help leaders improve their workplace conversations, then they will be better able to find new values in technology and therefore have opportunities to make a tangible difference for their organisation.

And if we can help employees at all levels understand the power that better conversations hold, they can take more control of driving and owning their own career development, and ultimately engage more deeply in the work they do, wherever that may be.

Whatever the context – the better the conversation, the greater the depth of empathy, thus increasing levels of trust and generating loyalty and commitment to an organisation, as well as increasing the value of any technology or systems being used.

FIG 1. MEETINGS IN CAMOUFLAGE

- Group coaching
- Action learning
- Reverse mentoring
- Career development conversations
- Awkward chats
- Morning huddles
- Internal coaching
- Talent conversations
- Better conversations
- Honest conversations
- Performance management conversations
- Mentoring
- Difficult conversations
- Line manager as coach
- Appraisal conversations
- Powerful conversations
- Executive coaching
- Tricky negotiations
- Courageous conversations
- Essential conversations
- Peer wisdom
- Collaborative conversations
- Coffee chats
- Feedback conversations
- Engagement chats
- 'Re-recruitment' conversations
- Weekly catch-ups
- Better client chemistry conversations

Career conversations

Career conversations can often be complex and messy, just as careers are often complex and messy at times. The rational desire for structure and certainty often becomes intertwined with dialogue around passion, fulfilment, meaning and purpose.

The skill to navigate this

CASE STUDY: A CAREER DEVELOPMENT STORY

Our client is a leading interactive entertainment company with approximately 2,000 employees globally. It has grown at an incredible pace since being founded in 2003.

'Fast and fluid' is one of the company's values, and it is evident on a daily basis as employees strive to lead the social gaming industry with top quality entertainment for its 40 million users.

The organisation prides itself on putting players at the heart of what it does. So when it comes to the company's internal players, it is little surprise that the HR, talent and learning teams are putting people at the heart of what they do. They identified a need in the business both to support managers to reconnect with their team members to ensure that productivity within all the areas of the business remained high, but also to empower their individual contributors to take control of and drive their own career development.

In such a creative industry, the need for engaged employees who are more likely to know how to search out new methods, techniques and innovation is critical to stay competitive and cutting edge.

A general lack of conversational experience and skill is one of the top barriers businesses face in the UK. Our client acknowledged this and decided to invest in the capabilities of its managers to drive impactful conversations through the business to get to the heart of the challenges of engagement.

In partnership, the company developed two distinct offerings to support these two sides of the engagement puzzle. One to support managers: a module named Re-Recruit (part of a suite of management modules available to all managers). And a second to support all employees: Career Development Conversations.

Re-Recruit is designed to help managers understand their responsibility to be the conduit between an employee and the wider business, and to use their conversational skills to continually 're-recruit' them into the business by ensuring they feel connected to the opportunities that it can provide. The idea being that, in turn, this will enable all employees to more effectively and efficiently realise their potential at work through active engagement.

The main objectives are to:

- Provide clear understanding of why

FIVE TOP TIPS FOR ROBUST CAREER CONVERSATIONS

Fire up the oxytocin: the hormone that binds us.
Openness, trust and engagement increase alongside our levels of oxytocin. The best way to do this for your people is to speak to them, get to know what matters to them and demonstrate interest and a capacity to support. A conversation that shows you are interested, care and is productive and focused can go a long way to re-recruiting someone.

Technology can maintain relationships, but it won't build them
Make the most of technology by all accounts, but not at the expense of human connection. To maximise your digital communication capabilities, ensure you are connecting with people on a human level as well. Regular conversations with a wider focus than the task at hand are the lifeblood of true engagement.

Conversations are a two-way street
Internal communications should be top-down and bottom-up if you are truly going to get to the nub of the issues facing the business. Ask more questions of more people and really listen to what you are hearing.

Creative, innovative industries attract employees who are inspired by these things
So, think outside the box when it comes to corporate communications – fast-paced businesses require fast, but thorough, communication channels.

Be curious, be collaborative and be consistent
The value employees place on regular development conversations with their managers is great. Genuine interest in career goals and aspirations, alongside a desire to help move these forward, is of huge benefit to the levels of trust and satisfaction an employee feels.

complexity is becoming ever more important with the impact of longevity on our sense of self.

As a performance manager, having the confidence to balance the delicate line between being 'expert' in understanding career paths, and maintaining curiosity requires self-assurance and can often feel risky. As an individual, exploring questions such as, "Do I want to be a high earner all my life? How much risk am I prepared to take? What sort of work will be meaningful to me?" requires deeper thinking, reflection and a degree of self-awareness.

Holding impactful and insightful career conversations demands skill, empathy and an ability to connect at a human level. Being able to navigate and help others to fully engage in carving a successful career takes a willingness to be creative and work with the heart and the head.

Reading *The 100-Year Life* challenges our own relationship with what 'career' means. Letting go of certainty and engaging in conversations in a different way – with a degree of openness, sensitivity and support – can sometimes require us to be vulnerable, and that is not a bad thing.

It takes practice and, when done well, career conversations can be one of the most rewarding and impactful conversations we can have. **TJ**

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References
1 *Mastering Conversations – The Key Ingredient to Successful Leadership*, Research by Roffey Park, Sara Hope and Emily Cosgrove
2 https://amzn.to/2wJasWp

development conversations matter.
- Offer insight into the motivations of employees and how to interpret and understand these.
- Know how to build trust as a manager and the importance of genuine interest in the career of others.
- Appreciate the psychology of conversations and supporting a conversational mindset.
- Understand how to translate the outcomes of development conversations into clear development steps/actions.

Using a blend of theory and thinking stimulus, activities and pair/small group conversations, managers explore and practice conversational skills, along with a toolkit of techniques and a framework. These all help them start to grow the understanding, knowledge and skills they need to drive more human connection, build greater trust and demonstrate more care with their team members – all key ingredients of any good leader.

Career Development Conversations followed the launch of Re-Recruit and was designed to align with the Re-Recruit language, messaging and some of the techniques. The main drivers of the programme were to:
- Help employees understand how to take ownership and control of their careers.
- Grow an understanding that career development is broader than simply progressing up the ladder.
- Expand their view to encompass learning experiences as a rich and valuable part of career development.
- Become better skilled and prepared to have career development conversations with their managers.
- Understand how to structure and articulate their own individual development.

A blend of highly interactive sessions along with time to reflect and start to really consider what 'motivates and drives me at work' has proved a successful combination with some participants sharing significant lightbulb moments as takeaways from the course. It is still early days, however there are already indications that managers are implementing techniques from the Re-Recruit toolkit with successful results, and the building of a shared language on both sides of the engagement equation is actively enhancing better, more engaging conversations.