

Talent and Career Conversation Guide

HR People and Organisational Development

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1. Welcome

Talent and career conversations are a valuable opportunity to talk about strengths, achievements, career aspirations, and development. They help people understand their current performance, career aspirations, and behaviours (in line with our University values and behaviours), explore future opportunities, and identify appropriate next steps for their development and career progression. By having these conversations regularly, we can support individual growth while building the skills and talent our University needs now and in the future. Our ambition is to make talent and career conversations a natural part of how we support, develop, and retain our people, helping to deliver the Global Talent ambitions within the 2030 University Strategy.

2. Who is this Guide For?

Our approach is built on a simple belief:

Everyone has strengths. Everyone has potential. Everyone should have opportunities to learn, develop, and contribute to the University's success.

This guide applies to all colleagues across the University, including those in academic, professional, and technical services roles, regardless of whether they work full-time, part-time, on a permanent contract or a fixed-term contract. Talent and career conversations are for everyone. They are not just for a select group of high performers. They provide an inclusive way to support development, encourage meaningful career discussions, and help colleagues understand how they can grow, contribute, and succeed within the University.

3. What are the Benefits?

Benefits for Individuals

These conversations give colleagues the opportunity to talk openly about their strengths, skills, interests, and career aspirations. They can help people explore new opportunities, identify development needs, and take ownership of their future career direction. Regular career conversations can boost confidence, motivation and engagement by helping colleagues feel valued, recognised, and supported.

Benefits for Managers

Talent and career conversations help managers gain a deeper understanding of the strengths, aspirations, and development needs within their teams. They provide a valuable opportunity to listen, offer support, and help colleagues plan their development. By understanding the talent in their teams, managers can better support career growth, identify future talent and address potential gaps. These conversations also strengthen relationships, improve engagement, and help create high-performing teams.

Benefits for the University

Through Talent Mapping (see Section 11), the University gains valuable insight into current capabilities, future skills need, talent risks and opportunities for growth across Schools and Services. This helps identify potential gaps, support succession planning, reduce workforce risks, and inform targeted development and workforce planning decisions.

4. Building Talent for the Future: Our Talent, Career and Succession Process



1. Strategic Workforce Planning: Aligned to the 2030 University Strategy and the priorities of Schools, Professional and Technical Services, we identify the future skills, capabilities, leadership requirements, and critical roles needed to achieve our strategic objectives.

2. Understanding Talent Needs: We assess current and future talent requirements, considering workforce risks, capability gaps, succession priorities, and areas where additional skills or expertise may be needed.

3. Talent and Career Conversations (PDPRs): Managers and colleagues use this Talent and Career Conversation Guide, typically as part of the PDPR process. However, talent and career conversations should take place regularly throughout the year and are not restricted to the formal PDPR cycle.

4. Development and Career Growth: As part of the PDPR process, agreed development actions are put into place through, for example, learning opportunities, coaching, mentoring, projects, and career pathways.

5. Talent Mapping: Talent assessments are recorded using the 9-Box Talent Grid within the iTrent PDPR system, providing a consistent and evidence-based view of talent across Schools, Professional and Technical Services and the University.

6. Succession Planning: Using the Talent Mapping outcomes data, potential successors for key roles are identified and developed, helping build internal talent pipelines while informing future recruitment and workforce planning requirements.

7. Talent Review, Inclusion and Quality Assurance: Calibration and talent review discussions help ensure decisions are fair, consistent and evidence based. These reviews challenge assumptions, identify potential bias, promote equality of opportunity and support equitable access to development, progression, and succession opportunities across the University.

8. Insights, Evaluation and Continuous Improvement: Talent, diversity, retention, promotion, and development data are reviewed regularly to evaluate impact, measure progress, and inform future workforce planning.

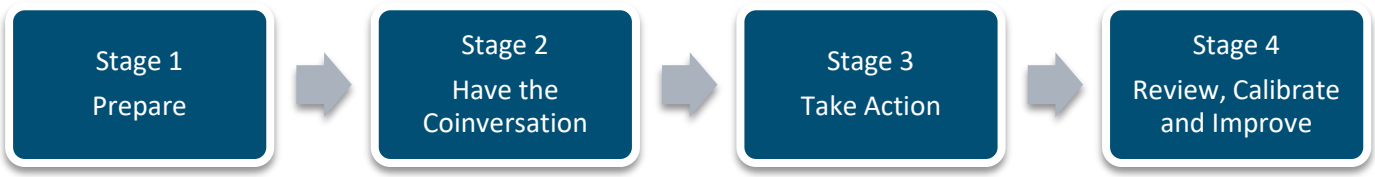
5. What is a Talent and Career Conversation?

A Talent and Career Conversation is a discussion between a manager and colleague that helps create a shared understanding of current strengths, career aspirations, and future development opportunities. The conversation focuses on where the colleague is now in relation to their performance and expected behaviours, where they would like to go, and the support needed to help them succeed. These conversations should be open, honest, and future-focused. While they are often held as part of the PDPR process, they can take place at any time throughout the year. Integrating talent and career conversations into PDPR can be particularly valuable, providing an opportunity to reflect on achievements, performance and development while also exploring future ambitions, career aspirations, and potential opportunities for growth. As part of the preparation process, colleagues should reflect on their strengths, achievements, career aspirations, and development needs. They should also consider where they believe they sit within the 9-Box Talent Grid and gather evidence to support their reflections. A successful conversation should result in a shared understanding of strengths, performance, career aspirations, and development goals, along with clear and practical development actions. Wherever possible, managers and colleagues should agree on the most appropriate position within the 9-Box Talent Grid. While every effort should be made to reach a shared view, the final decision on grid placement sits with the manager. **Remember:** There is no "best" category. Each reflects a valuable contribution and helps identify the most appropriate development and career opportunities for the individual.

5.1. Quick Guide For Managers

Effective Talent Conversations	**Avoid**
✅ Evidence based	❌ Making assumptions
✅ Future focused	❌ Focusing only on performance ratings
✅ Two-way discussion	❌ Making promises about promotion
✅ Focused on strengths and opportunities	❌ Labelling individuals
✅ Leads to clear development actions	❌ Completing the grid without meaningful discussion

6. The Talent and Career Conversation Process



6.1. Stage 1: Prepare

Managers and colleagues should prepare for a meaningful and evidence-based discussion. Before the conversation:

- Review the Talent and Career Conversation guide and 9-Box Talent Grid.
- Reflect on achievements, strengths, performance, and development since the last review.
- Consider career aspirations, future opportunities, and development needs.

Both the manager and colleague should reflect on and discuss where they believe the colleague currently sits within the 9-Box Talent Grid, and the evidence and rationale behind this assessment.

6.2. Stage 2: Have the Conversation

The conversation should be open, supportive, and future-focused, using a coaching approach to explore four key areas.

Stage 2.1: Current Contribution

Discuss strengths, achievements, expertise, behaviours and contributions to the team, School, Service and, where appropriate, the wider University. Example questions:

- What achievements are you most proud of since our last discussion?
- What aspects of your role do you enjoy most?
- Where do you feel you make your greatest contribution?
- What strengths do others regularly seek your support or advice on?
- What have you learned or achieved over the last year?

Stage 2.2: Career Goals and Aspirations

Explore career goals, motivations, interests, and future opportunities. Example questions:

- Where would you like your career to be in the next two to five years?
- If there were no barriers, what would you like your career to look like in three years?
- Are there particular roles, projects, or opportunities you would like to explore?
- What motivates and energises you most at work?
- Are you interested in leadership, specialist expertise, project work, or something else?

Stage 2.3: Skills and Experience for the Future

Identify the skills, knowledge, experiences, and support needed for future growth. Example questions:

- What new skills or knowledge would you like to develop?
- What experiences would help prepare you for your future goals?
- What challenges would help you grow and stretch your capabilities?
- What support would help you be successful?
- How do you learn most effectively?

Stage 2.4: Career Opportunities and Next Steps

Consider how the colleague's strengths, skills and aspirations align with future opportunities across the University.

Example questions:

- What additional responsibilities or opportunities would you like to take on?
- Where do you see yourself making an even greater contribution in the future?
- What strengths, skills or experience do you feel are currently underused?
- Are there projects, networks or experiences that would help you achieve your ambitions?
- What opportunities are you not currently getting that would help you grow?
- How can we best support your career development?

Using evidence and examples, agree the most appropriate position on the 9-Box Talent Grid and identify key development priorities, career opportunities and any relevant succession planning considerations.

6.3. Stage 3: Take Action

The value of the conversation comes from the actions that follow.

- Agree clear development priorities and practical next steps.
- Record the agreed Talent Grid position within iTrent where appropriate.
- Incorporate agreed actions into PDPR objectives and development plans.
- Review progress regularly through one-to-ones, development discussions and future PDPR reviews.

Stage 3.1: Development can come from:

- 70% Experience - projects, secondments, stretch assignments.
- 20% Exposure - coaching, mentoring, networking
- 10% Formal Learning - programmes, qualifications, and training

6.4. Stage 4: Review, Calibrate and Improve

To ensure talent decisions are fair, consistent, and evidence-based, School and Service Senior Leadership Teams should:

- Participate in talent review and calibration discussions to challenge assumptions, promote consistency, and ensure talent decisions are evidence-based. Consider equality, diversity and inclusion when reviewing talent assessments and development opportunities.
- Use talent and workforce insights to identify trends, risks, skills gaps, and future priorities.
- Inform workforce planning, succession planning, and future development investment.



7. Understanding the 9-Box Grid

The 9-Box Talent Grid (see Section 9) is a structured conversation tool used to support Talent and Career Conversations. It helps managers and colleagues discuss current contribution, future career aspirations, and development opportunities in a consistent and evidence-based way. The aim is not to label individuals or determine who is "better" than others. Instead, it supports meaningful career discussions, development planning, talent mapping, and workforce planning across the University.

7.1. Performance and Behaviours

This reflects how effectively a colleague performs in their current role, progresses against agreed PDPR objectives, and demonstrates the University's Values and Behaviours in their day-to-day work. Assessment should be based on evidence, achievements, outcomes, and observed behaviours over time.

7.2. Career Aspirations, Readiness and Future Opportunities

This reflects a colleague's career aspirations, motivation, and readiness for future opportunities. Future opportunities may include progression into a different role, expanding responsibilities, leadership opportunities, project-based work, increased organisational influence, or further development within a specialist area. Discussions should focus on the individual's career goals and aspirations rather than assumptions about what their career path should be.

Important: Career aspirations and readiness for future opportunities are not measures of a person's value, performance, or contribution. Many colleagues choose to remain in specialist, technical, professional, academic or leadership roles and make an exceptional contribution without seeking promotion or broader responsibilities. Career success can take many forms. For some colleagues this may involve progression into a different role. For others, it may involve developing deeper expertise, increasing their impact, contributing to strategic projects, mentoring colleagues, or continuing to excel in their current position. The purpose of the Talent Grid is to support development conversations and identify appropriate opportunities for growth, not to rank individuals.

8. Using the 9-Box Grid

The 9-Box Grid should be used as a conversation tool rather than a categorisation exercise. The most valuable outcome is not where someone is positioned on the grid, but the quality of the discussion, the shared understanding that is reached, and the development actions that follow. Every conversation should seek to:

- Recognise strengths and achievements.
- Explore career aspirations and motivations.
- Identify development priorities.
- Consider future opportunities.
- Support individual growth and success.
- Inform talent mapping, succession planning and workforce planning activity.

8.1. Assessing Performance and Behaviours

Exceeding Expectations: Consistently delivers high-quality results, regularly exceeds agreed expectations and acts as a positive role model through the University's Values and Behaviours.

Meeting Expectations: Performs effectively in their role, achieves agreed objectives, and consistently demonstrates the University's Values and Behaviours.

Building Capability: Is continuing to develop confidence, capability, experience, and consistency within aspects of their role, and the University's Values and Behaviours. Additional support, development, or experience may help further strengthen performance and impact.

Early in Role: The colleague is new to their role or to the University and there is currently insufficient evidence to make a fair and informed assessment. At this stage, the focus should be on learning, development, and successful integration into the role, demonstrating an understanding of the University's Values and Behaviours.

8.2. Assessing Career Aspirations, Readiness and Future Opportunities

Ready for New Opportunities Now: Has the desire, skills, and experience to take on a new role or broader responsibilities now or in the near future. Consistently performs strongly, makes a valuable contribution, and is well placed to expand their impact when the right opportunity arises.

Current Role or Future Opportunities: Makes a valuable contribution and continues to build their skills, knowledge, and experience. They may choose to keep growing and developing in their current role, or be ready for future opportunities as their confidence, experience and career aspirations develop. Both career paths are equally valued and make an important contribution to the success of the team and University.

9. The 9-Box Talent Grid

Performance and Behaviours	Career Aspirations, Readiness and Future Opportunities Reflects a colleague's career aspirations, motivation, and readiness for future opportunities, including progression or continued development in a current role.		
	Current Role or Future Opportunities (No People Management Responsibilities)	**Current Role or Future Opportunities** (People Management Responsibilities)	**Ready for New Opportunities Now** (All Staff)
Exceeding Expectations Consistently delivers outstanding results and acts as a role model for the University's Values and Behaviours.	**High Performing Professional** Makes an exceptional contribution through their expertise, initiative and impact. Consistently performs at a high level and may choose to continue developing within their current role or pursue future opportunities aligned to their aspirations.	**High Performing People Manager** Makes an exceptional contribution through effective leadership, people management and team performance. Consistently performs at a high level and may choose to continue developing within their current role or pursue future opportunities aligned to their aspirations.	**High Performer** Makes an exceptional contribution and demonstrates the aspiration, capability and readiness to take on broader responsibilities or a new role now or in the near future.
Meeting Expectations Performs effectively, delivers agreed objectives and consistently demonstrates the University's Values and Behaviours.	**Key Professional** Makes a strong contribution and continues to build skills, knowledge and experience. Performing well in their current role and may choose to pursue future opportunities as their aspirations and experience develop.	**Key People Manager** Makes a strong contribution as a manager and leader and continues to build their leadership capability. Performing well in their current role and may choose to pursue future opportunities as their aspirations and experience develop.	**Key Performer** Makes a strong contribution and demonstrates the aspiration and potential to take on broader responsibilities or a new role in the future. Further development, experience or exposure may help prepare them for progression.
Building Capability Is developing confidence, skills and experience, with support and development helping to strengthen performance and impact over time.	**Developing Professional** Continues to build skills, confidence and experience and is making positive progress in their role. May continue developing within their current role or work towards future opportunities over time.	**Developing People Manager** Continues to build management skills, confidence and experience and is developing their effectiveness as a people manager. May continue developing within their current role or work towards future opportunities over time.	**New Colleague** *New to the role or University and building knowledge, confidence and experience. There may not yet be sufficient evidence to make a meaningful assessment within the Talent Grid.

10. Conversation Guidance by Talent Category

Working through the process and guidance described in Section 6, the focus of the conversation should reflect the colleague's current position on the Talent Grid. The aim is not to place people into boxes, but to have meaningful conversations.

High Contribution

High Performing Professional: These colleagues consistently deliver a high level of performance and often bring valuable specialist knowledge, skills, and experience to the University. Conversations should focus on maintaining engagement, recognising their contribution, and identifying opportunities to further develop their expertise. Discussion may include how they can broaden their impact, contribute to wider University priorities, share knowledge with colleagues, mentor others or undertake stretch assignments that build their experience and influence.

High Performing People Manager: These colleagues demonstrate strong leadership and make a significant contribution through the success and development of their team(s). Conversations should focus on enhancing leadership capability, increasing strategic influence, and preparing for future opportunities where appropriate. This may include exploring how they can lead larger or more complex initiatives, support the development of future leaders, and contribute more broadly across the University.
NB: There will naturally be overlap between this category and the other High Contribution categories. The focus should always be on the individual's aspirations, strengths, and development needs rather than their job role alone.

High Performer (Ready for New Opportunities): These colleagues are performing strongly and have the aspiration and readiness to progress now or in the near future. Conversations should explore longer-term career goals, readiness for the next step and what support may be needed to achieve their ambitions. Where appropriate, managers and colleagues should identify targeted development opportunities, experiences and exposure that will help prepare them for progression opportunities over the next 12 months.

Established Contributor

Key Professional: These colleagues make a good and reliable contribution and are often highly valued members of their team. Conversations should focus on maintaining performance while broadening skills, experience, and impact. Managers should explore career aspirations, professional development opportunities, and ways to increase contribution, either through their current role or through new experiences and projects.

Key People Manager: These colleagues provide effective leadership and play an important role in supporting team performance and development. Conversations should focus on strengthening leadership capability, building confidence and broadening management experience. Discussion may include future career aspirations, opportunities to lead change, and ways to enhance their effectiveness and impact as a people manager.
NB: There will naturally be overlap between this category and the other Established Contributor categories. The conversation should focus on helping the colleague continue to grow, develop, and make an even greater contribution.

Key Performer (Ready for New Opportunities): These colleagues are performing well and show potential for future progression. Conversations should focus on building readiness for broader responsibilities or more complex roles. Managers should work with colleagues to identify development priorities, close capability gaps, and create opportunities to gain the experience needed to achieve their future career goals.

Building Capability

Developing Professional: These colleagues may be building experience in their role or require additional support to consistently meet expectations. Conversations should focus on understanding any barriers to success, building confidence, and identifying practical ways to strengthen capability. The discussion should be supportive and forward-looking, with clear development actions that help the colleague make progress.

Developing People Manager: These colleagues may benefit from additional support to strengthen their leadership and people management skills. Conversations should focus on identifying strengths, understanding development needs, and agreeing practical steps to build confidence and effectiveness. Coaching, mentoring, feedback, and targeted leadership development can all play an important role in supporting growth.
NB: There will naturally be overlap between this category and the other Developing Capability categories. The emphasis should always be on support, learning and improvement rather than judgement.

Early in Role

New Colleague: These colleagues are new to their role or to the University and are still developing their knowledge, confidence and understanding of expectations. Conversations should focus on how they are settling in, what support they need and how they are building relationships and experience. Managers should also begin to explore longer-term interests and career aspirations to help shape future development opportunities.

Important: For colleagues who are new to the University or new to role, there may not yet be enough evidence to make a meaningful assessment within the Talent Grid. In these situations, the priority should be helping the individual settle in, learn, develop, and succeed rather than making a formal talent assessment.

11. Talent Mapping and Succession Planning

Talent and Career Conversations do not end with the discussion itself. The insights gained from these conversations help us build a clearer picture of the skills, experience, aspirations and potential across our Schools and Services. This information supports workforce planning, talent development and succession planning at local and University-wide levels.

11.1. Talent Mapping

As part of the PDPR process, managers can record the agreed outcomes of Talent and Career Conversations, including a colleague's position on the 9-Box Talent Grid. Completion of this section is currently optional. When viewed collectively across Schools, Services and the University, these recorded outcomes create Talent Maps that provide a snapshot of workforce capability, reflecting colleagues' current performance, career aspirations, and readiness for future opportunities. The data helps identify organisational strengths, development needs, succession planning priorities, potential workforce risks, and future capability requirements. Talent profiles represent a point-in-time assessment and may change as colleagues develop new skills, gain experience and take on new responsibilities. As part of the annual PDPR reporting cycle, each School and Service will have access to its own Talent Map, alongside a University-wide Talent Map, providing insight into both local workforce capability and the wider organisational talent profile. Leadership teams are encouraged to review the findings collectively to identify development priorities, inform succession planning activity, support workforce planning, strengthen organisational resilience and enable the effective delivery of School, Service and University objectives.

11.2. Succession Planning

Succession Planning helps ensure the University has the people, skills and knowledge needed to maintain continuity and deliver future priorities. Using information from Talent and Career Conversations and Talent Mapping, Schools and Services should consider:

- Which roles, skills, or areas of expertise are critical to future success.
- Which positions would be difficult to replace.
- Where there may be succession risks or gaps in capability.
- Which colleagues may be ready now, or in the future, to take on broader responsibilities.
- What development, experience or support potential successors may need.
- Where future recruitment may be required.

These discussions should help identify practical actions to strengthen organisational resilience, reduce workforce risks, and prepare for future workforce needs. Effective succession planning is not about identifying a single replacement for a role. Instead, it focuses on building a diverse and sustainable pipeline of talent by developing colleagues, broadening experience, and creating clear pathways for progression.

11.3. Using Talent Insights

The information gathered through Talent Mapping and Succession Planning should be reviewed regularly to understand organisational strengths, risks, and future workforce needs. Talent insights can be used to inform development programmes, career pathways, workforce planning, recruitment strategies and future investment in learning and development. By bringing together Talent Conversations, Talent Mapping and Succession Planning, Schools and Services can better support colleagues to achieve their aspirations while ensuring the University has the talent, skills and leadership capability needed for future success.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