

# Globe Careers



**The pain  
of feeling  
shunned  
at work**

**THE WAY WE ARE,  
C3**

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### ||| CAREER CLIMBING

## Rising stars get a chance to shine

 A growing number of companies are tagging talented employees, and grooming them for leadership, **WALLACE IMMEN** reports

**W**hen Greta Cusworth was hired by Sun Life Financial Inc., she was told there would be "all kinds of opportunity for advancement." What an understatement that turned out to be.

Identified by management as a rising star, Ms. Cusworth has, over the past 10 years, been continually offered new assignments, moving up from underwriting, where she started, through roles in sales, marketing and operations to become the vice-president of international initiatives, reporting directly to the chief executive officer.

The tip-off that she was on track to aspire to even higher levels came last year, when Sun Life sent her to a customized leadership development program at the Harvard Business School.

"There has been a huge vote of confidence in me," says Ms. Cusworth, now 47 and based in Toronto.

Ms. Cusworth is not the only employee marked and mentored as a rising star by her employer. Sun Life Financial is one of a growing number of Canadian companies that have set up formal programs to identify employees with the potential to become senior executives and groom them for leadership.

That's because leadership development has become the top priority for Canadian companies for at least the next five years, according to a survey of managers of 422 com-

panies done this summer by consulting firm Watson Wyatt Canada.

This is a recent trend. Until the late 1990s, employers tended to look outside their organizations for fresh executive talent, and it was common for those looking to advance from middle management to jump to a job with a new company that could offer an executive position, explains Vince Molinaro, principal and leadership-development specialist at consulting firm Knightsbridge in Toronto.

That all has been turned on its head by shifts in corporate priorities. Many companies that froze hiring or downsized in the post-2000 economic slump have realized they have to cultivate leadership candidates internally, he says.

Employers are also realizing that half of senior leaders are now within a decade of retirement and they need to start finding and shaping the executive timber to replace them, Mr. Molinaro adds.

"The competition for talented people has really become the defining feature of business life today," agrees Sun Life chief executive officer Don Stewart.

"There are huge advantages if we can develop our own people. They know the business so they can be up and running quickly in a new role, and they have a record of success."

It's the pool of talent in mid-career, between the ages of 30 and 45,



TIBOR KOLLEY/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

Sun Life Financial's Greta Cusworth, identified by management as a rising star: "There has been a huge vote of confidence in me."

that has become the focus of the search for future leaders, says Katharine Klassen, vice-president of leadership and talent development for Sun Life in Toronto. People in that age range have enough experience to demonstrate potential and are open to trying on new roles, she explains.

The leadership-development programs that companies set up vary in scope; the biggest have even dedicated an executive like Ms. Klassen to take charge of co-ordinating them.

Sun Life's program for management development is among the most highly structured. The company has arranged a long-term contract with the Harvard Business School to run custom training programs for its high-potential employees.

Mr. Stewart says Sun Life continually reviews recommendations

**'The competition for talented people has really become the defining feature of business life today. There are huge advantages if we can develop our own people.'**

from managers asked to nominate employees in their 30s and 40s with executive potential.

Once a year, a committee of senior executives meets to review the progress of these leadership candidates, which include 100 "top-tier" performers and another 100 in a second tier. Worldwide, the company has nearly 12,000 employees.

During the meeting, each candidate's progress is reviewed, and recommendations are made for goals

for the following year. They're followed up through regular informal meetings with senior executives in their divisions, who can also recommend training or moves to different areas of the operation to broaden their experiences.

The ranks of high potential talent change with every review, Mr. Stewart says. Sometimes apparent potential doesn't pan out and, other times, employees who don't show early promise can be late bloomers.

Those in the top 100 demonstrating consistent progress are given the opportunity to attend the Harvard leadership courses.

Each course runs eight weeks and includes about 40 Sun Life employees. Courses are now being run two or three times a year and high performers may attend more than one.

"The people who go to Harvard know that they are well regarded by

the corporation and are all candidates for executive roles some day," Mr. Stewart says.

But just being in the top tier doesn't ensure a promotion. The company has 700 management positions worldwide. About 150 are in the executive ranks and most got there after being identified and coached for leadership by their supervisors, Mr. Stewart says.

"What we say is we will work with you to help you achieve your promise. If you work hard, there may come a time when you will be anointed" to senior positions, he says.

Another highly structured approach is used by MDS Inc., in Toronto, which formalized an informal program about four years ago, says Mary Federau, senior vice-president of talent development.

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