

Customizing Career-Life Fit

A Q&A with Deloitte's chief talent officer, Cathy Benko

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What is your role in Deloitte's move toward Mass Career Customization™ (MCC)?

As Deloitte's Chief Talent Officer and co-author of *Mass Career Customization: Aligning the Workplace with Today's Nontraditional Workforce* (Harvard Business School Press, 2007), I am responsible for driving Deloitte's strategy to attract, develop, and advance a highly skilled and increasingly diverse workforce. This includes our pioneering approach to employee engagement and career-life integration called mass career customization, which is a signature initiative of Deloitte's Talent agenda. We started by crafting a conceptual response to the misalignment between today's workplace and today's workforce, and have subsequently spent several years piloting the program in various ways. Currently, MCC rollouts, comprising approximately 20 percent of Deloitte's U.S. organization, are underway across various businesses this fiscal year, with the remainder to follow in FY2009.

What are some of the highlights of Mass Career Customization, particularly as it relates to the issue of work-life balance? Who participates in this initiative?

MCC is less about another program, and more about simply rethinking and building an environment that supports how careers are being built.

Mass career customization provides a framework in which every employee, in conjunction with his or her management, can tailor his or her respective career path within the organization over time. MCC acknowledges that careers ebb and flow, in large part due to people's changing life circumstances. So the framework allows people to fit their work into their life, and their life into their work, over the long term. And the framework is applicable to ALL audiences — since "career-life fit" (we prefer the term "career-life" since careers are part of our lives, rather than opposing forces) is not just a challenge that is facing women, everyone participates in mass career customization.

A common concern on the part of employers is that MCC will open the floodgates of people who want to "dial down" their careers. Interestingly, we now have over two years of data indicating that although this seems to be a legitimate concern, the data simply doesn't support this. In fact, Deloitte has witnessed just the opposite—most people do not want to change their level of contributions within the organization at all, but for those who do, the vast majority have inquired about dialing up — essentially accelerating their careers — rather than dialing down.

In a press release you are quoted as saying, "Never before has the collective face of the employee changed so much in so little time. Men and women, Gen Y and Baby Boomers are all looking for alternatives to the one-size-fits all approach of the proverbial corporate ladder." What are these employees looking for in regards to work-life balance? How is the Mass Career Customization program meeting their needs?

What today's workers are looking for is a way to better fit their work

into their lives, and their lives into their work. Is this any different than in previous generations? In a word: Yes. Today, workforce trends are converging in a way that requires an extraordinary response from employers. These trends include the first wave of baby boomer retirees with an inadequate supply of workers to replace them, as well as a fundamental change in family structures — today only 17% of households have a spouse at home full-time, down from 63% in past generations. In short, today's workplace norms are predicated on a workforce composition that no longer exists.

Today's workers — both men and women, and across generations — are looking for options that allow them to tailor their career paths over time to better align with various life stages. This is not "new" behavior — rather, it's been going on for some time, with individuals making decisions to move in and out of organizations (or, in the case of many women, out of the workplace altogether), oftentimes without the support or structure from their employers. On average, today's boomers held over 10 different jobs when they were between the ages of 18 and 40, and this trend only increases when looking at today's younger generations. The increasing mobility is evident in US Department of Labor national tenure figures — as of 2006, the median tenure for workers ages 55-64 in the United States was 9.3 years. For workers in the 25-34 age group, the median tenure was 2.9 years.

About one in three employees has recently been approached by another firm hoping to lure them away, and 77 percent of workers aged 36 to 40 — right in the pipeline for leadership — last less than five years in new jobs.

When you step back, what's really happening is that the corporate ladder — the gold standard of corporate success since the advent of the industrial revolution — is giving way to a more adaptive mental model which we dub the "corporate lattice."TM A lattice organization allows for multiple paths upward through the organization, taking into account the changing needs of both the individual and the organization across various intervals of time. With MCC, we've created a framework that enables a lattice organization by allowing employees to make choices along the core dimensions of their career: Pace, Workload, Location/Schedule and Role.

What have been the results for employees as well as the organization? Can you provide specific examples?

The greatest benefit we are seeing with MCC is essentially its 'option value' — employees benefit from the comfort of knowing they have the choice to customize their careers as their priorities change over time (whether or not the options are ever exercised). The benefits to the organization are greater employee loyalty, reduced costs associated with talent acquisition, and reduced business disruption associated with employee turnover.

I'll give you an example of how MCC has benefited one of our Senior

Managers in the Northeast practice. Roger is a high performing consultant who has customized his career path by dialing down on the Location/Schedule dimension of the mass career customization framework. The tradeoff is that his Pace, or progression towards partnership, may be slowed down. The primary benefit to him is that he can continue to contribute and develop, while managing his personal life during a high demand period. The primary benefit to Deloitte is that we retain a highly talented consultant who not only contributes to client service, but also acts as a role model for others.

Over the past several years, we've seen many different MCC profiles that confirm time-and-again that this is already going on. Even our CEO, Barry Salzberg, and our Chairman, Sharon Allen, have had periods in their careers when they have dialed down. Clearly they're fully dialed up in their current roles, but their career paths have ebbed and flowed rather than being a straight path of career progression.

While this seems like a more natural approach to career progression for younger workers, we find that another group of workers — pre-retirees (or what we sometimes refer to as twilight workers) are also very much attracted to this notion of customizing careers. We're finding that more and more are interested in options beyond the all-or-nothing approach of the traditional corporate ladder model.

How do you measure the success of this program?

Similar to results companies derive from mass *product* customization, we are finding that costs (of talent acquisition) are decreasing and loyalty is increasing. More specifically, we are using metrics including retention and utilization measures, financial benefits, as well as satisfaction and intent to stay survey results. A powerful interim measure of success is the impact on internal referrals to Deloitte, which has increased significantly among those who are included in our 2008 mass career customization roll-outs.

What have been the obstacles in implementing this program?

Interestingly, the biggest obstacle is not at all the one we predicted. We thought that getting people to buy into the fact that the very nature of career progression was changing and therefore required an extraordinary response would be difficult, but this came rather easily. It seems that anecdotally, many already had observed this trend happening. Providing a cogent identification of these trends and the way they were converging really helped put it all into place.

The biggest implementation challenge, though relatively small compared to what we were expecting, is fully integrating it into existing talent management processes, including goal-setting, performance management, and rewards and recognition. It's here that you see some long-held beliefs come to the surface. One such belief is the ill-informed view that this is a women's issue. MCC is a response to the needs of the changing workforce — and not just the women in the workforce. As such, individual employees will not be viewed as "wanting special treatment" but rather will appreciate that individuals (including themselves) are at differing points in the ebb and flow of their careers. In fact, our research showed that a key reason that flexible work agreements (FWAs) have not met with greater success is that they are viewed as exceptions or individual accommodations to an outmoded workplace standard. The structure and needs of the workforce have fundamentally changed, and it's time for the

workplace to change in response.

How do your employees benefit? Can you provide any examples?

See example above.

Do you have any tips or ideas for how organizations can implement their own work-life program?

Starting to look at things through a 'career-life fit' lens certainly helps, as well as adopting a corporate lattice mental model. At the end of the day, mass career customization is not simply a work-life program, but rather a culture change effort that transforms the incumbent model of how careers are built.

While you need staunch leadership support to drive significant change, you can also start to build interest and early momentum by developing your company's specific business case. While we identify and discuss the broad trends in the book that are changing the workforce in a profound, irrevocable way, these trends can be further defined for your specific business and industry. In addition, leverage the power of the existing stories you already have — collect and call out stories of successful people within your organization whose career progressions have ebbed and flowed rather than being a straight climb up the corporate ladder. This is a powerful way to show that MCC is already going on — just not perhaps in a systemic, organized fashion. Ultimately, you may also want to pilot MCC within your own group — taking care to track key metrics before and after — so that you can build a track record for the broader organization, and lay the foundation for a successful implementation.