

Mass Career Customization

*By Cathleen Benko & Anne Weisberg
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Introduction

This book by two Deloitte Consultants provides new insights on how we can deal with work life balance. Indeed, work life balance may not be the best term according to the authors. Rather they emphasize that people should be allowed to get the most out of their personal and professional lives. That why the individual employee and the organization will benefit. Mass Career Customization (MCC) is to careers what Mass Product Customization (MPC) is to the consumer products industry. MPC results in high profits, lower costs and greater customer satisfaction. MCC fosters long term relationships with higher performing employees. This improves productivity and results in lower costs.

From Ladder to Lattice

Career progression needs to be viewed in terms of lattices that permit movement in various directions as opposed to ladders where only one kind of movement, i.e., upwards, is possible. This is the basic tenet of MCC.

The lattice approach is becoming more appropriate because of changing family structures, increasing number of women and changing expectations of the new workforce. Aiding the trend towards MCC is technology. Many employees are becoming increasingly dissatisfied with jobs that are very rigid in terms of time and place of execution. They want more flexibility to lead the kind of life they want to.

The MCC Advantage

Underlying the MCC philosophy are the following principles:

- ❖ Giving more choices to employees for shaping the career paths that fit the various stages of their personal lives.
- ❖ Making career building an explicitly shared responsibility between the enterprises and the individual.
- ❖ Emphasizing adaptability over time
- ❖ Creating transparency regarding trade offs and choices for better planning, better decisions and greater satisfaction.
- ❖ Retaining talent by cultivating a new sense of loyalty.

Coping with a new business environment

Lower birthrates, increased competition for skilled workers and inadequate supply of skilled workers are all contributing to a serious talent shortage. The knowledge economy is short of employees with the requisite communication and analytical skills. To attract and retain talent, a flexible approach is necessary.

Dual income families are also creating pressure for new workplace arrangements that promote work life balance. Fewer and fewer employees can focus completely on their professional lives because they do not have someone at home to take care of personal and family matters.

More and more women are entering the work force. Many of them are serious about their careers but they are also looking for more flexibility in the workplace. Some of these women like to take a break when they have children and come back to their jobs later. But they do not spend enough time in upgrading their knowledge and renewing their networks. So they have a harder time making a comeback after a break.

Men too are having different expectations today. Many men look for flexibility but are hesitant to articulate their demands because flexi options are often identified with women. According to the authors, in the US, only 5-15% of men eligible for paternity leave actually take advantage of this facility. They do not do so, because they worry they will be viewed as less committed to their work.

The new generation of workers is less willing to make sacrifices regarding their family life, compared to the earlier generation. Many among the new generation are also choosy about the kind of work they want to do. They are particular that they spend their time in the way they choose to, not what the employer decides.

Technology meanwhile is offering various creative virtual workplace options. Virtual private networks enable employees working from home to access various corporate applications. In short, technology is making it possible to think about work processes in exciting new ways. Technology is also giving bargaining power to the high performers when they negotiate workplace conditions and work schedules, especially at the time of recruitment.

Problems with FWA

Flexible work arrangements (FWAs) are not the same as MCC. FWAs have significant limitations:

- ❖ They address the problem only at a specific point in an employee's work life.
- ❖ They are often limited to lower level staff positions.
- ❖ They do not anticipate changing family and personal commitments.

- ❖ They do not include longer term planning.
- ❖ They are not scalable.

FWA focus on relatively short term personal situations but ignore longer term career implications. Benko and Weisberg mention that FWAs are point solutions often expressed as one-off accommodations or exceptions. They are not adequately integrated with the organization's ongoing talent management processes. They also do not address the larger question of how an individual's career unfolds over time.

Life needs must be viewed as a continuum rather than as a static set of circumstances. Work and life are intertwined and must always be considered in tandem. Most FWAs do not address the structural conflict between the corporate ladder's rigid approach to building careers and the fluid needs of employees to create career paths that reflect the changing priorities in their lives. By being positioned as compromises, FWAs may actually reinforce the traditional structure of the linear, continuous career path. Indeed FWAs are often not perceived as realistic options for serious, career minded employees. Such work arrangements clearly are not seen as a way to get to the top.

Despite pockets of success, very few organizations have been able to scale their FWA programs into a company wide retention strategy. FWAs also seem to work best for individual contributors rather than managers and leaders. Making an FWA work at senior levels is quite challenging. FWAs also involve compromises. Managers may move individuals into a job with poor fit, just to be accommodating. When FWA is done solely driven by the employee needs for flexibility without regard to their strengths, skills and training, the employee may not succeed in that role.

In other cases, managers may become reluctant to approve FWAs as supervision of employees opting for such arrangements takes effort. Also, managers who stick their neck out and champion FWA do not receive much credit. Managers may also hesitate to agree to FWA, fearing other employees may make similar demands. At the same time, employees may not be very enthusiastic about FWA for fear of being perceived as being less committed to the organization.

How MCC scores over FWA

MCC supports a customized approach to career development that engages individuals as partners in their development. MCC signals the organization's commitment to each individual's growth. MCC is fluid. It eliminates the linear, binary characteristics of the corporate ladder. MCC encourages longer view thinking and adaptability on the part of both managers and employees. MCC aims at creating a more transparent workplace with multiple career path options.

MCC identifies four career dimensions – pace, workload, location/schedule and role. Pace addresses how quickly an employee wants to progress to higher levels of

responsibility and authority. Workload is concerned with the number of hours worked per day or no. of days worked per week, etc. Location/schedule is concerned with how and where work gets done. Role means the category of an employee's position, job description & responsibilities. It could be an individual worker, individual expert, supervisor, manager, etc.

MCC promotes a better understanding of employees' strengths and weaknesses, needs and aspirations and life plans. This will give employers the ability to structure and manage their companies to greater potential. This can facilitate talent forecasting, succession planning, greater job satisfaction, higher employee loyalty, better exploitation of growth opportunities and cost reduction.

Implementing MCC

Implementation of MCC, calls for strong leadership and an enabling culture that lays great emphasis on employee retention and development. MCC is like most other innovations. It will take years of exploration and experimentation to truly understand and realize the potential. Early wins are important. To implement MCC, managers must try to build the business case for how MCC can improve the efficiency of operations. MCC may be going on informally. In that case, we must highlight success stories. Leaders whose careers have followed an MCC like path can be projected as role models.

MCC should not be positioned as an entitlement program. People should not view MCC as a license to set their own rules without consultation or consideration of the job requirements and business needs. MCC is not about flexibility alone. It is about options, choices, adaptability and elasticity and about career life fit rather than work life balance.

While implementing MCC, some amount of standardization is desirable. But we must try to strike a balance between conformity across business lines that simplifies operations and facilitates talent movement across organizational boundaries and tailoring the framework to meet the specific needs of various organizational units.

MCC calls for a significant effort on the part of managers to know their employees, engage in meaningful conversations and come up with options that work for the business and the employee. MCC must be viewed as an integral part of the talent management architecture. It must not be isolated from other career management activities like goal setting, performance management, compensation and benefits, succession planning, workforce planning, scheduling and deployment and training & development.

MCC will have an impact across functions. MCC has the potential to shift the focus away from compensation to development. MCC will build loyalty by creating an awareness

that personal issues may take precedence over careers in certain periods and vice versa in other periods. By increasing loyalty, commitment and breadth of experience, MCC can deepen the ranks of aspiring, motivated leaders in organizations that take leadership development seriously. MCC will promote diversity by accommodating people with different life choices.

Conclusion

The talents, career aspirations and evolving personal circumstances of employees must be aligned with the organization's shifting market place strategies and resulting need for talent. In the past, scaling the corporate ladder used to be the definition of professional success. But organizational hierarchy is not what it used to be. A shift is already under way. The corporate ladder is giving way to the corporate lattice. Mass Career Customisation will come in handy for companies serious about understanding the needs and aspirations of talented people and providing them with the appropriate career track.