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Tailored careers can be just the job

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Flexible work arrangements have been used by organisations for more than a decade as they try to retain valued employees and respond to demographic and social changes. These efforts, argue the authors of this new book, turn out to have been no more than sticking-plaster solutions to fundamental cracks in the traditional career model.

Just as Gary Hamel, in his new book, *The Future of Management*, says we need innovation in how we organise work in the 21st century, so Cathleen Benko and Anne Weisberg, two Deloitte executives specialising in talent management, argue that we need a radical overhaul of how we organise careers.

They cite seismic forces affecting the workplace: an ageing workforce, more women in employment, changing family structures, more men experiencing work/life conflicts and a new generation of workers intent on career variety and achieving personal goals.

Retaining good people has become a priority for employers. Flexible work arrangements, however, are short-term fixes rather than long-term solutions to employees' changing priorities throughout their careers.

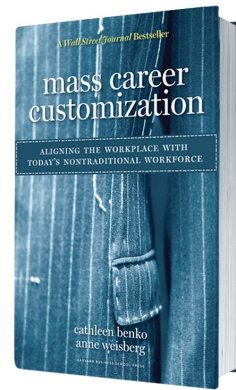
The book charts how Deloitte in the US came up with the idea of "[mass career customisation](#)" as an alternative model - one in which all employees tailor their work and careers to their own and their company's needs over time.

The firm borrowed from mass product customisation. "If you can customise jeans or sneakers, then why couldn't you customise careers?" it asked. The benefits ought to be similar. For "increased profit margins, customer satisfaction and long-term brand affinity", read "greater employee retention, satisfaction and loyalty".

Thus the new model encourages employees to choose from a menu of graduated options in four areas: pace of career progress (ranging from "accelerated" to "decelerated"); workload (from "full" to "reduced"); location and schedule (from "not restricted" to "restricted"); and role (from "leader" to "individual contributor").

It sounds complicated. But the authors say it formalises what some organisations already do informally. At Ogilvy & Mather, the advertising agency, employees have continuing career conversations with supervisors and team members, and many executives accelerate or decelerate their careers over time.

There is bound to be scepticism. Some will doubt whether companies or employees have the commitment to maintain this kind of dialogue, or whether there is still any mileage left in the notion of loyalty and lifetime contracts.



Mass Career Customization Aligning The Workplace with Today's Nontraditional Workforce

By Cathleen Benko and
Anne Weisberg
Harvard Business School Press,
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Deloitte can fairly claim to have a track record in this. In the early 1990s it embarked on a drive to retain and promote women, whose high turnover was costing the firm millions of dollars a year. As Douglas McCracken, then chairman, chronicled in *Harvard Business Review* in 2000, analysis of the causes showed that women were mainly leaving for jobs that offered them better options - not just quitting to raise families - and that younger men were less willing than older ones to sacrifice their personal lives for higher pay.

Since then, the percentage of women in senior jobs has increased. But problems still plagued the firm's flexible work offerings. Few partners or principals were prepared to use employees who worked flexibly on client engagements. Talented employees were leaving, uncertain about their future "career-life fit" with the firm.

Will the new model work better? It is too soon to be sure. But pilot results have been encouraging. Many managers fear that offering so much choice will open the floodgates for reductions in workload and travel restrictions. In fact, many Deloitte employees, especially those under 30, turned out to want to step up the pace of their careers.

The authors say there was no negative impact on careers, and no decline in client service standards. Career conversations improved, people were more comfortable knowing what options were open to them, and productivity increased.

There is much to commend this book, despite its unattractive title and overuse of acronyms. Mass career customisation is referred to throughout as "MCC", which to many British readers is shorthand for the Marylebone Cricket Club.

What the book lacks is an international perspective. This would have allowed a useful comparison with innovative ideas from other countries. There are similarities, for example, with new models of work that emerged from the Equal Opportunities Commission's recent Transformation of Work investigation in the UK.