

# Workforce<sup>®</sup>

January 2010

Reprinted with permission from—

## MANAGEMENT

crain

# the perfect fit

STORIES BY JESSICA  
TOONKEL MARQUEZ  
PHOTOS BY PAT MAZZERA

Just another name for work/life?  
Not so, says Deloitte of its Mass  
Career Customization program,  
which lets employees tailor their  
jobs to suit their lifestyles.



Cathy Benko, chief  
talent officer, Deloitte

## Cathy Benko

She doesn't think that flexible work arrangements are effective. And she is skeptical of many corporate programs that seek to retain women while making room for their child-rearing and family commitments.

However, Benko, the chief talent officer at Deloitte, does like the term "career/life fit." And she believes there is a way to serve the needs of all employees, not just women.

The Publisher's sale of this reprint does not constitute or imply any endorsement or sponsorship of any product, service or organization.  
Crain Communications 732.723.0569. DO NOT EDIT OR ALTER REPRINTS. REPRODUCTIONS ARE NOT PERMITTED. #WF465

© Entire Contents copyright by Crain Communications Inc. All rights reserved.

## tailor-made careers

This might all seem like a matter of semantics, but Benko's outright dismissal of the effectiveness of flexible work arrangements has led to the creation of Mass Career Customization, a program that some say could replace flexible work schedules. Today, it's not just Deloitte's workforce that is using the program. The consulting company is also pitching it to clients.

Deloitte's Mass Career Customization program, which is Benko's brainchild, has been rolled out to 80 percent of the employees at Deloitte's U.S. businesses. Employees periodically fill out a profile detailing whether they want to stay on their current course, "dial up" by taking on more projects and responsibility, or "dial down," reducing their hours or amount of travel, for example. Deloitte's U.S. operations comprise 46,000 employees, including those working in the India-based subsidiary of Deloitte & Touche USA.

By encouraging managers to have these periodic conversations with their employees, experts say that Mass Career Customization takes the notion of flexibility outside the traditional sphere of mothers and makes it part of every employee's career track.

"If properly implemented, Mass Career Customization could be the first thing that allows for a database and the management of work/life throughout the careers of its employees," says Kathie Lingle, director of the Scottsdale, Arizona-based Alliance for Work-Life Progress, a division of WorldatWork. "It could be very efficient, economical and smart."

Mass Career Customization is more effective than just offering flexible work arrangements because it's transparent and institutionalized, Benko says. "Flexible work arrangements are just a point solution, but they don't address careers over the course of time and they tend to be one-offs," she says. "Mass Career Customization is about recognizing that an employee's career is a lattice, not a ladder."

With a still-fragile economy, the program might be an easier sell at companies that recognize that some new form of career management is necessary, but where managers are wary of ordinary flexible work programs, and where many workers feel pressure to put in more face time at work, experts say.

Deloitte's Mass Career Customization program, which allows employees to 'dial up' or 'dial down' their responsibilities to fit their personal and professional goals, has resonated with its workforce. Now the company is trying to make believers of its clients.

So far, the notion seems to be resonating with Deloitte employees. In the first 12 months after Mass Career Customization was implemented, employee satisfaction with "overall career/life fit" has increased by 25 percent. The number of high performers staying with Deloitte has also improved. First-year results for initial rollouts of the program showed a decrease in voluntary turnover of top performers that was twice that of the decrease seen in areas of Deloitte that had not yet been introduced to the program. Deloitte declined to release the specific figures.

And to affirm Benko's belief that gender doesn't matter when designing initiatives to keep talent, the breakdown of women to men

**"What we realized was that there was probably more rock-star talent out there that we didn't notice because maybe they weren't on the big accounts. The opportunity to self-nominate as a dial-up has actually been a very healthy thing for the individual and the organization."**

—Cathy Benko

who have chosen to dial up or dial down is even.

Despite many Deloitte partners' concerns that Mass Career Customization was going to result in a majority of employees applying to dial down, the opposite has been true. Dial-up requests have outnumbered dial-down requests by a 3-to-2 ratio. And today many of Deloitte's sister firms abroad are implementing or planning to implement Mass Career Customization. So far the program is live in the Netherlands and is being piloted or is under consideration in France, Australia, Canada, Ireland, Germany, Jordan, New Zealand, South Africa and South Korea.

But while work/life experts applaud the program for its sophistication, many worry that it is too complex for most companies.

"I am a big fan of the program, but I think there are a lot of less sophisticated companies out there that need to be set up on simpler tools," says Sylvia Ann Hewlett, founder and president of the Center for Work-Life Policy. "I think this is very evolved, whereas many companies still need to just take baby steps."

A number of people familiar with the program are concerned that

In 2005, lack of flexibility was the No. 1 reason women were leaving Deloitte, and the No. 2 reason for men. “We had 69 different [flexible work arrangements] and people were still leaving because of lack of flexibility. Clearly it was a problem.”

—Cathy Benko

by banishing flexible work arrangements, Deloitte is ignoring the needs of many employees and employers.

“The average company isn’t there yet,” says one person familiar with the program. “Most companies haven’t gotten to the stage where they are good at offering flexible work arrangements.”

And given the economy, Deloitte may have a hard time selling this program to other companies. “The economy is definitely hindering those conversations,” says another person familiar with the program. “This is seen as a ‘nice to have,’ not a ‘need to have.’”

But Benko says more than 100 clients have called to learn more about the program. “I haven’t come across one organization who thinks they have this down right,” she says.

### PROGRAM’S ORIGIN

Mass Career Customization was born out of Deloitte’s own need to address attrition. As a company that provides an array of professional services ranging from accounting to HR consulting and financial advice, Deloitte knows it’s important to keep high performers. In 2005, Benko and her team were studying exit-survey data that showed that lack of flexibility was the No. 1 reason women were leaving the company—and the No. 2 reason for men.

At the same time, Benko realized that Deloitte had 69 iterations of flexible work arrangements—FWAs, in Deloitte’s parlance—ranging from telecommuting to compressed workweeks.

“We had 69 different FWAs and people were still leaving because of lack of flexibility,” she says. “Clearly it was a problem.”

The issue led Benko and her team to think about how Deloitte could establish a conversation about flexibility that takes into account the course of an employee’s career, rather than just addressing a current situation.

Around that time, Benko recalls, she took her 7-year-old son, Brendan, to FAO Schwarz and watched him marvel at a kiosk where kids could design their own cars. They would press certain buttons indicating what color and make they wanted, and out came a toy car. “He believed he had designed the car,” Benko says. “It made me think that maybe we should be looking at careers with customization in mind.”

With Mass Career Customization, each employee is given a default profile that can be changed. The profile is segmented into four categories in which employees can define how dialed up or dialed down they want to be. These categories are pace of career, workload, location/schedule and role.

“When we did this we were looking at the issue of flexibility and we built in dialing up because symmetry is a good thing—if you can dial down, you can dial up,” Benko says.

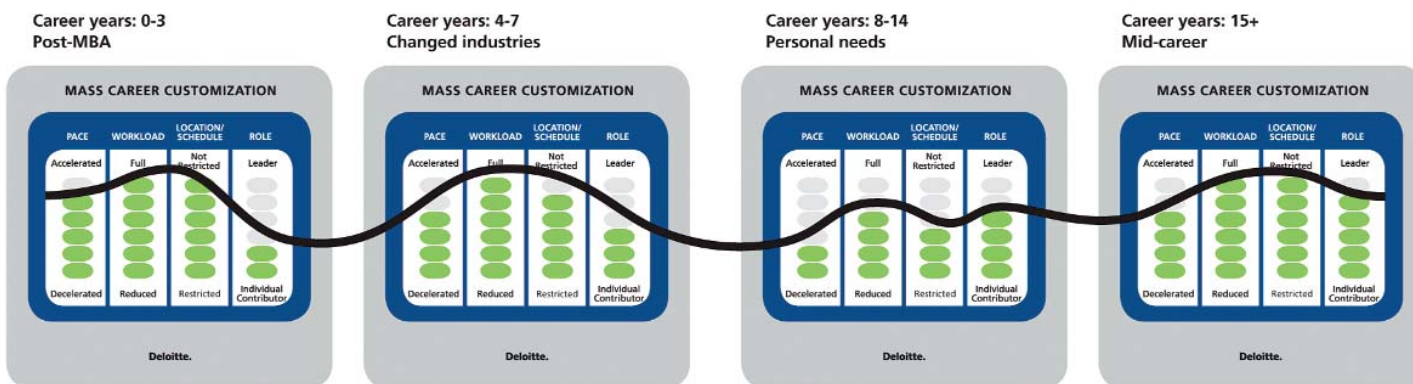
Dialing down is pretty clear-cut—it can mean scaling back hours, cutting down workload or working from home. It’s the dial-up component of Mass Career Customization that differentiates this program from other workplace flexibility initiatives, experts say.

“It takes it beyond being a women’s issue,” Lingle says.

It was also the dial-up component that made the program more complicated to design and implement, Benko says.

### SURFING A CAREER WAVE

Workers’ careers usually don’t move in straight trajectories. Instead, their personal lives and career choices determine their pace, workload, mobility, schedule and role. Dial-up/dial-down choices appear as a career-long sine wave.



---

Deloitte first had to define what dialing up meant and make sure that managers understood it well enough to explain it to employees. "Dialing up is not a promotion," Benko says. "It means taking on added responsibilities so that employees have a richer, broader experience base, which can make them more marketable."

Just because employees ask to dial up or dial down doesn't mean that they will be approved by their managers.

In the first year of the program, 39 percent of participating employees had initial discussions with managers about dialing up or dialing down. Eighteen percent applied to do so, and 10 percent were approved.

"In some respects the dial-up requests have posed more of a challenge than the dial-down requests," says David Rosenblum, a Los Angeles-based partner at Deloitte's consulting practice. "You can't accelerate someone's experience where we need people to do certain things before they move to the next level."

However, just being able to have that conversation with employees is helpful, he says.

"This is a mechanism for forcing a conversation around what people's objectives are and if we can figure out ways to accommodate people for periods of time so that they stay with the firm," Rosenblum says.

By enabling employees to request dialing up, Deloitte is better able to identify talent it may have missed, Benko says.

Typically, Deloitte has an idea of who its high performers are, but the system isn't perfect, she says.

"What we realized was that there was probably more rock-star talent out there that we didn't notice because maybe they weren't on the big accounts," Benko says. "The opportunity to self-nominate as a dial-up has actually been a very healthy thing for the individual and the organization."

It has also helped some Deloitte managers be more proactive in creating new roles and responsibilities within their divisions.

For example, when Deloitte's industry PR team, a part of Deloitte that provides public relations support to consultants specializing in certain industries, rolled out Mass Career Customization



"Some companies may look at what they did during these tough economic times and realize there is no reason to go back from offering these programs."

—Laura Sabattini, Catalyst

## Future of flex

EMPLOYEES WHO opt for flexible work arrangements have traditionally coped with the stereotype that they are not as committed to their jobs as their counterparts who go to the office every day.

This became eminently clear once again in June when Jack Welch, the former CEO of General Electric, told attendees at the annual Society for Human Resource Management



conference that "there's no such thing as work/life balance."

"There are work/life choices, and you make them, and they have consequences," he told attendees.

While this kind of thinking has dominated many workplaces, that has changed during the recession, work/life experts say.

In an effort to reduce costs, a number of companies and public-sector employers have either mandated or allowed reduced workweeks, telecommuting and other flexible work schedules, experts say.

As a result, these experts predict that employers may realize the business case behind offering flexible work arrangements and keep these programs in place after the economic recovery.

In a recent survey by the Families and Work Institute, 81 percent of employers said they were maintaining their flexible work programs during the recession, while 12 percent had increased these programs and 6 percent were cutting back.

"This says to me that employers are increasingly seeing flexibility as something that can help the organization," says Ellen Galinsky, president and co-founder of the Families and Work Institute.

In researching her recent book, *Top Talent: Keeping Performance When Business Is Down*, Sylvia Ann Hewlett, an economist and president of the Center for Work-Life Policy, found that at many organizations, flexible work programs are being repositioned as a cost saver rather than as an accommodation for their staffs.

"Companies are seeing these programs as something central to the business strategy and fully endorsed for both men and women," she says.

In her book, she cites KPMG in the United

Kingdom as a case study of a company that reaped the benefits of offering flexibility. In January 2009, the company needed to reduce costs and decided to use flexible work options as a way of doing it, launching Flexible Futures. Hewlett interviewed Rachel Campbell, head of people for KPMG Europe and the architect of Flexible Futures.

The program gave employees four options to choose from in principle: Elect to go to a four-day workweek and take a 20 percent salary reduction; take a two- to 12-week sabbatical, depending on their role and needs, at 30 percent of pay; sign up for both of those options; or continue with their regular schedule.

Eighty-five percent of the 11,500 U.K. employees agreed to the reduced-work plan. Half of that group signed up for both the sabbatical and the four-day workweek.

"Professional staff were time-starved, and the same percentage of both men and women opted for that choice," Hewlett says.



Since so many people agreed in principle to the plans, KPMG was able to cap the salary cut at about 10 percent for the year in most cases, says Mark Hamilton, a spokesman in the London office of KPMG. So far, about 2,000 employees—20 percent of the firm—have gone onto the plan, Hamilton says. As a result of the plan, which gave the firm the capacity to cut staff costs by around 15 percent if fully implemented, KPMG didn't have to conduct large-scale layoffs.

KPMG plans to offer the program until September 2010, but hasn't decided whether it will be offered after that, Hamilton says.

"Companies have had success with reducing costs by offering flexibility, so this might be part of a reality going forward," Hewlett says.

It will be interesting to see whether employers look back at the recession to develop the business case behind flexible work arrangements, says Laura Sabattini, director in the research department of New York-based Catalyst.

"Some companies may look at what they did during these tough economic times and realize there is no reason to go back from offering these programs," she says. —J.T.M.



**“Yes, you want people to dial up, but you want them to go both ways. Is it culturally acceptable to be that flexible? ... If properly implemented, Mass Career Customization could be ... very efficient, economical and smart.”**

—Kathie Lingle,  
Alliance for Work-Life Progress



**“In some respects the dial-up requests have posed more of a challenge than the dial-down requests. You can't accelerate someone's experience where we need people to do certain things before they move to the next level.”**

—David Rosenblum,  
a Los Angeles-based partner at  
Deloitte's consulting practice



**“Partners didn't want to say no [to employees requesting to dial up or dial down]. But I explained to them, ‘It's your responsibility to make sure that this meets both the needs of the business and our people.’”**

—Cathy Gleason,  
COO, technology services, Deloitte

for its seven employees, three people wanted to dial up and two were accepted. But just having the conversations forced Vincent Hulbert, leader of the group, to think about how to create new assignments for the following year.

“I don't think I would have normally thought about that if we hadn't done MCC,” he says. “I am a better manager because of the conversations we have.”

But some experts wonder whether in a type-A culture like Deloitte's there might be an unspoken pressure on employees to apply to dial up, particularly during an economic period in which many are anxious to show their worth to the company.

Benko says she doesn't see that happening. “If you look at our workforce on average, it's all pretty dialed up already,” she says.

#### **PARTNER PUSHBACK**

When Benko and her colleagues began introducing the concept of Mass Career Customization to Deloitte's 4,500 partners, principals and directors, they knew they would face pushback.

Specifically, many of the partners were concerned that everyone would opt to dial down and that it would have implications on the firm's ability to serve clients, Benko says.

Cathy Gleason, COO of the technology services area at Deloitte, recalls holding a number of meetings with partners at the Los Angeles and San Francisco offices in 2006, right before the firm was about to pilot the program.

“People were concerned about disruption,” she says. “The concern was whether there would be enough ca-

capacity to staff projects where they needed people.”

Rosenblum was one partner who initially was unconvinced that Mass Career Customization could work.

“I was very skeptical that we could make it work, principally for operational reasons,” he says. “In the part of the business I am in, until you are a senior manager and often until you are a partner, you only have one client, so working three or four days a week might not be an option.”

To address these concerns, Gleason spent a lot of time on the phone and visiting with partners.

“During the pilot I made it a point to go out and talk to the partners and see how it was working,” she says. “Just being there to listen to them made them know that their concerns weren't being discounted.”

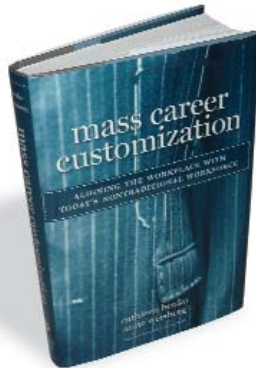
Many partners said their employees felt entitled to being approved to dial up or dial down, Gleason says.

“Partners didn't want to say no,” she says. “But I explained to them, ‘It's your responsibility to make sure that this meets both the needs of the business and our people.’”

Another concern is that Mass Career Customization is just another talent management initiative that won't stick, according to one person familiar with the rollout.

“I had one guy say to me, ‘I am not a fan of all of these programs that claim to be the bee's knees, but just seem to be more like jargon to me,’” the person says.

There were—and still are—some executives who are just resistant to change. “Some people don't like extra paperwork and they just don't like the topic of flexibility to start out



with," the person says.

While there are still skeptics, Benko and other senior executives are doing what they can to change minds. But it takes time.

"There is absolutely still skepticism," says Joe Echavarria, managing partner, operations, at Deloitte. "But I think we have worked our way through three-quarters of the skeptics. I think it takes a while to work our way through the organization."

## A REPLACEMENT FOR FLEX?

In 2007, Benko and Anne Weisberg, senior advisor to Deloitte's women's initiative, authored a book to spread the word. *Mass Career Customization: Aligning the Workplace With Today's Nontraditional Workforce*, published by Harvard Business Review, essentially acts as a guide for companies on implementation of the program.

Benko and other executives are pitching Mass Career Customization to clients as a replacement for flexible work arrangements, and some of the companies that have signed on for the program agree that it can work.



Thrivent Financial for Lutherans, a Minneapolis-based insurance and investment company with 5,000 employees, has adopted the program and believes it's more effective in retaining top talent than flexible work arrangements are, says Barbara Foote, vice president of enterprise talent.

"Flexible work arrangements don't address the whole career of our employees," Foote says. "And our whole organization depends on long-term relationships with clients, so it's important that our people believe they can build a career with Thrivent."

Since piloting the program with 200 of its employees in 2007, Thrivent saw employee satisfaction with career development jump nine percentage points. Ten percent of the pilot program's participants requested to dial up or dial down, with 70 percent of that group dialing up.

If many work/life experts think the program is far too evolved for most companies to implement, others wonder whether the program just boils down to semantics, with Mass Career Customization

**"This program requires conversations and collaboration. And because of it, everyone is getting a little bit better at having those honest discussions."**

—Cathy Benko

tomization being a fancy name for a workforce with some hard-chargers, some family-focused people who need time off, and a group in the middle that's fine with the organization's work demands.

Even Rosenblum, who is now a believer in the program, says there are certain roles where client-facing employees just can't dial down.

And for such reasons, many outsiders wonder whether dialing down is really as accepted as Deloitte's executives say it is.

"Yes, you want people to dial up, but you want them to go both ways," Lingle says. "Is it culturally acceptable to be that flexible?"

But Benko insists that just because some positions in Deloitte can't be dialed down, the program still is more effective in retaining talent than flexible work arrangements are.

"MCC allows for the conversation to happen that would enable that person who wants to dial down to be matched to a job that makes sense for that person," she says. "And the pressure-cooker jobs can go to the dial-ups."

It's the conversation that makes Mass Career Customization worth the investment, versus having 100 different flexible work arrangements, Benko says.

"MCC is just a framework on how to bring career/life into the conversation," she says. "This program requires conversations and collaboration. And because of it, everyone is getting a little bit better at having those honest discussions."

**wfm**

---

JESSICA TOONKEL MARQUEZ, formerly New York bureau chief for Workforce Management, is now a reporter for sister publication InvestmentNews. To comment, e-mail editors@workforce.com.