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Up the Ladder? How Dated, How Linear

By CATHY BENKO

DID you ever think that something was one way for the longest time, and then one day realize that it was no longer that way?

That is what is happening in corporate America.

When it comes to how careers are built, many of us still have a mental image of the corporate ladder. It has a series of rungs that employees climb as they gain more authority in an organization. The ladder model has been the gold standard of personal success since organizational hierarchy was invented.

But organizational hierarchy isn't what it used to be. That is because, in two short generations, the face of the corporate work force has been transformed, partly by the presence of more women and aging baby boomers in the work force, the arrival of Generation Y and workers' changing attitudes.

Want proof? Most of us can remember when a vast majority of American households were the traditional kind, where Dad brought home the bacon and Mom stayed home raising the children. Not anymore. Such households now hover around 15 percent of the total, leaving 85 percent without at least some of the infrastructure on which today's workplace norms — including the one-size-fits-all,

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PETER DASILVA FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Cathy Benko and a Deloitte colleague, Vincent Hayes. Ms. Benko says the desire to balance work and family is transforming the typical career path.

continuous full-time climb — were based.

The traditional norms of the workplace have their roots in the start of the Industrial Age, but the norms of the modern work force and its everyday challenges do not. Today's challenge is to "fit work into life and life into work" — an everyday test that doesn't lend itself to a single norm.

The convergence of these talent trends is producing a huge change in behavior that's sawing away at the corporate ladder, blurring the relationship between work and life and redefining what it means to build a career.

Examples of nonlinear careers are everywhere: women who step out of the work force and then step back in a few years later, Generation X-ers and Y-ers who show less loyalty to a single company, executive men who have climbed the ladder for decades and now insist on carving out more family time as they continue to work.

Still, we often walk to the future backward, viewing our direction through the lens of the past.

A dinner I had with a friend (who is also a colleague and mentor), along with his wife, exemplifies this tendency on the career front. Among the many topics we discussed that evening was a new model of career development, called the "Corporate Lattice," that was fashioned and put into effect at Deloitte L.L.P.

"Why a lattice metaphor?" he asked. I answered that it was a much more fitting visual. Lattices allow movement in many directions. Like the literal lattices you see in gardens, these are living platforms for growth with upward momentum visible along many paths — a much closer depiction than a ladder of how today's careers are built and talent is developed.

With a long and lustrous traditional ca-

reer under his belt, my friend had an unequivocal response: If people aren't continuously climbing the ladder, they won't be successful, he said. Hmm, I thought, perhaps he hadn't gotten the memo that today's careers aren't nearly as one-size-fits-all as they used to be.

Sometimes it's hard for managers to comprehend this notion of career building. For some, a career that isn't going steadily upward is a career going nowhere. How, they wonder, can one effectively evaluate, compensate and promote employees who aren't consumed with the idea of steady advancement?

While a so-called plateau or lateral move, or a move downward, was once viewed as the end of the line, today's employees are more apt to reach a comfortable level of responsibility and compensation and stay there for a while to balance work and life demands. Later, many resume their upward climb — or not.

My friend's wife, though, had gotten the memo. Her retort to her husband: You were successful because you worked really hard at one thing — your career — while my role was to carry out all the non-career elements of life, from child-rearing to household projects to community involvement and so on.

"Take a look at our kids," she said. (They have three, all grown and with young families.) "Their career journeys are very different." They don't work single-mindedly at their careers; they work as husband-and-wife teams, jointly traversing home and work responsibilities.

"Good point," he said.

THROUGH the rearview mirror of my own career, this is surely true. There were a lot of zigs and zags — from starting in the secretarial pool, taking time out to get an M.B.A., raising

two children (still a work in progress), and including such diversified posts as global e-business leader, women's initiative leader and now chief talent officer. There was nothing straight up in that path, though each stop added both depth and breadth of transferable skills, not to mention a more adaptive view of the notion of a career-life fit.

The boundary between home and work has become obscured. As workers, we know this — we live it. We balance the implications every day. If not, we wouldn't still be in the work force, would we?

It's about time for employers to adopt a model that is more in keeping with the reality that we're living in a lattice world. At Deloitte we've done this by offering a customized model for how careers are built and talent is developed. Taking a page from consumer products — an area where it is commonplace to personalize everyday goods and services from ring tones to billing cycles — we're using a tailored approach to career development called mass career customization.

This approach provides a framework for organizations and their people to know their options, make choices and agree on trade-offs in four career dimensions — pace, workload, location/schedule and role — ensuring that value is created for both employer and employee. It acknowledges that workers' priorities change over time. In essence, it replaces the corporate ladder with a lattice, encouraging adaptability and a longer view.

The focus on options has resonated with employees. Even if they don't make use of them, they feel comfort in knowing they are there. Our goal is to offer people options to keep their work and personal lives in sync, and to give employers the loyalty of their best and brightest people. It ends up being a perfect fit.