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## *Conversations with the Experts*

### **Mass Career Customization**



**Anne Weisberg**

**Bio:** Anne Weisberg is a director specializing in talent diversity for the Deloitte U.S. Firms. She is a specialist in the field of gender and work/life integration.

Prior to joining Deloitte, Anne was a senior director in the advisory services practice at Catalyst, where she advised clients on diversity strategies. She directed a large-scale study of careers in the legal profession, *Women in Law: Making the Case* (Catalyst, 2001). Anne is also co-author of *Everything a Working Mother Needs to Know* (Doubleday, 1994). Previously, she practiced law in New York and clerked for a federal judge in Chicago.

Anne received her J.D. cum laude from Harvard Law School and her Bachelor of Science degree Phi Beta Kappa from the University of California, Berkeley. She and her husband live in Manhattan and have five children between them.

#### **An Interview with Anne Weisberg**

*By Judi Casey and Karen Corday*

**Casey:** Please explain the term “mass customization.” How does it apply to careers?

**Weisberg:** Mass customization comes from the consumer products industry. It refers to giving consumers a limited set of options and allowing them to customize their product using these options. A good example are M & M's, which can now be customized in many different colors and with personalized messages. This product used to be one color—brown—and was stamped with an “m.” Now there are 2,000 color options! We think that the benefits that mass product customization brought to consumer products will translate very well to career customization. Mass product customization increased brand loyalty by creating a strong connection between the consumer and the producer. In terms of careers, we think this will result in greater employee loyalty; the employee and the employer are working together to customize a career path.

On the product side, mass customization lowers costs, which may be counterintuitive, but customization reduces the amount of inventory. It increases profits because you can charge more for a customized product. On the people side, this will translate to lower costs because of lower turnover rates and increased productivity, because workers will experience greater satisfaction and less work-life conflict.

**Casey:** What is the impetus for a more fluid model of career development and advancement?

**Weisberg:** The key message here is that customization is already occurring. People are currently customizing their career paths on their own without the support of their organizations. Mass career customization gives a framework, structure, and lexicon to what's already happening. We've identified six trends that indicate the presence of customization in the knowledge economy, in which most workers have at least an undergraduate degree. Firstly, we have the shrinking pool of skilled labor. As the labor market gets tighter, demand keeps growing, and supply keeps shrinking, so there are more options for workers.

The second and least obvious trend is the change in family structures. Two generations ago, sixty-three percent of U.S. households were “traditional” in the sense that the husband went to work full-time and the wife stayed home. That number today is seventeen percent; eighty-three percent of families’ structures are “nontraditional.” Despite this, we have a workplace where the model of career progression assumes that workers live in a traditional household. The corporate ladder depends on someone who can devote him or herself completely to work with a partner who is completely devoted to the home.

The third trend is the increasing number of well-educated, experienced women in the workforce. The majority of women do not continuously work full-time throughout their careers. The corporate ladder doesn’t fit the reality of the majority of women’s lives.

The fourth trend is the changing expectations of men. We’re starting to hear men say “We don’t want to work this way anymore either. We are willing to turn down promotions if accepting one means less personal time.” This is especially true of the men in Generations X and Y.

Trend number five focuses on the emerging expectations of both men and women in Generations X and Y. These workers are more than willing to work hard, but they want to work differently. They don’t have the same aspirations as their parents; they won’t sacrifice personal time for the sake of their careers. Sixty percent of Deloitte’s employees are under the age of thirty-five. The majority of our workforce is Generation X and Y; this is true of many large companies in the United States. A huge segment of the workforce wants to make their own paths and have a consumer approach to employment. They get mass product customization intuitively; many aspects of their lives have always been customized, and they don’t want to get to work and be told that they must do anything in a particular, rigid way at work.

The sixth trend is the changes in technology that have enabled a whole different way of working.

When you put the six together, you see that fewer segments of the workforce are either willing or able to work continuously full time up the corporate ladder. This is already true; nontraditional is the new traditional. We need a model of career progression that meets this reality. We call this model the “corporate lattice.” The basic features are variable paths through an organization with upward momentum. We don’t want to get rid of upward momentum; most people want to keep learning, growing, and advancing. Rather, we want to allow this to happen in multiple ways.

**Casey:** What are the principles of mass career customization?

**Weisberg:** There are several. One is fluidity or adaptability; there are several levels at which this concept operates. Firstly, a worker doesn’t have the same mass career customization profile throughout his or her entire career. The career journey in the knowledge economy will have rising and falling levels of engagement over time, and that is okay. On a macro level, the organization itself may have different definitions and options within the MCC framework, depending on the business. The four core dimensions of the framework are pace, workload, location/schedule and role. So, it’s fluid in that sense, too. Another key principle is that it takes the long view. We’re thinking about careers not at a point in time, but over time. A limitation in the mindset of many people today is that they’re only considering the issue at one point in time. Finally, mass career customization applies to everyone. It must be fully integrated into the talent management processes and systems of an organization. It’s not by exception; it becomes how part of business gets done. In the same way that everyone has a performance review or a compensation discussion, everyone must also have a customization discussion.

**Casey:** Can you talk a little more about the core elements of pace, workload, location/schedule and role?

**Weisberg:** The four core elements of the framework are the dimensions of a career that can be disaggregated. Any organization should be able to articulate options among each dimension as well as the trade-offs across options, as the dimensions are interrelated. For example, if a worker chooses to work less than a full workload, this may have impact in terms of pace, location/schedule or role as well. We’re not talking about an infinite set of options; MCC doesn’t mean that everyone gets whatever they want. It means workers may make choices along a defined set of options. So, along with these dimensions you also have the options that are articulated along the dimensions as well as the conversation itself. These programs are not built in a vacuum; they’re built in a structured conversation between the employee and his or her supervisor. The conversation is an absolutely key element. What we’re found in our pilots is that having this structure and language in place really enhances the conversation that needs to take place by fostering an honesty and transparency that are really

very powerful.

**Casey:** How is mass career customization different from flexible work arrangements?

**Weisberg:** It's a completely different paradigm. Flexible work arrangements are very much a point-in-time solution; they are exceptions to the norm, which is the primary problem with them. They reinforce the norm of continuous full-time work. There is no norm and exception in MCC, so everyone can participate and it becomes the way that business gets done. Some people have expressed concerns that flexible work arrangements are going to be eliminated at Deloitte, but that's not the way we've rolled out MCC. Flexible work arrangements are a part of mass career customization; they didn't go far enough, so we've folded them into this framework.

**Casey:** I would think that people with flexible work arrangements would embrace mass career customization, as it normalizes their work schedules.

**Weisberg:** I agree. Right now people are concerned because mass career customization is new and they don't know if it's just going to be a flavor-of-the-month policy. They need time to get used to it.

**Casey:** Have you received any push-back from proponents of flexible work arrangements? Do they feel threatened by mass career customization?

**Weisberg:** No, not at all. I was concerned about that happening, frankly. I see myself as part of the work-life community, and there are other people in that community who have devoted their lives working for a more flexible workplace, and now we're coming along and saying that flexible work arrangements alone are not the answer! I thought some people would be angry. Instead, the reaction has been overwhelmingly positive. I think the work-life community is frustrated with their lack of progress, and I think people are excited to see a framework that allows so many people to fit their lives into their work and their work into their lives over their entire lifespan.

**Casey:** What can organizations do to move forward and implement mass career customization?

**Weisberg:** I think you always need to have a strong business case; it's a big change, and management will want a very strong reason to consider implementation. The business case needs to resonate with not just senior management, but line management as well. Senior leaderships' overview of the organization and the world is pretty high level; they see these macro-trends in the economy and the global workforce. Line management doesn't operate at that level; they're trying to figure out how to get their work done! Always remember that you have to convince the line management and address the reality of their responsibilities. What is their pain and how can you get them to commit to the bigger issue?

Just as we did, start small with a pilot. We learned so much from our first few pilots, which started in 2005; we discuss all that we learned in the book. Since then, we've gone from 400 people in the pilot using MCC to 7,000 people throughout the company. By this time next year, the entire firm of 40,000 will be using the framework!

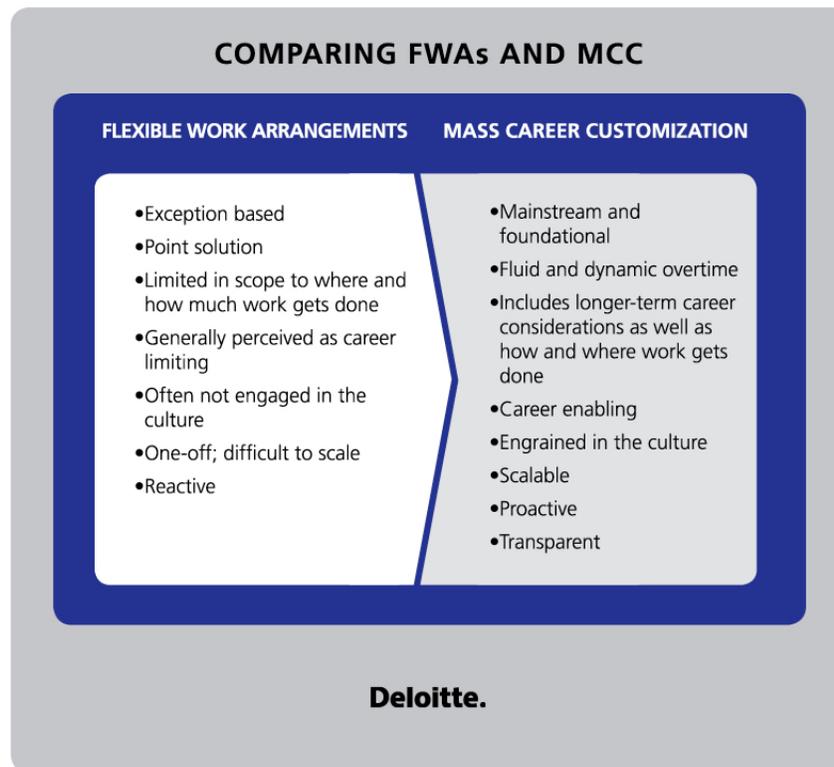
**Casey:** How might mass career customization be relevant to our user groups of researchers and teachers or state public policy makers?

**Weisberg:** Well, first of all, those users are all parts of organizations. If there's any sector more rigid than the corporate sector, it's the academic sector! The tenure track model really needs to meet the current reality of today's workers, or we will not be competitive in the future. These institutional structures are based on a lifestyle and family structure that doesn't exist anymore.

For the government, the federal government is facing a forty percent gap between senior workers with years of experience who are retiring and new workers to replace them; they don't have the leadership numbers that they need. How can they stay competitive with that kind of talent shortage? Mass career customization is relevant in this situation because it's all about how to engage, grow, and keep talented people in the workforce.

Learn more about mass career customization and order the book, *Mass Career Customization: Aligning the Workplace with Today's Nontraditional Workforce* by Cathleen Benko and Anne Weisberg : <http://www.masscareercustomization.com>

## Comparing Flexible Work Arrangements and Mass Career Customization



**Source:** Benko, C. & Weisberg, A. (2007). *Mass career customization: Aligning the workplace with today's nontraditional workforce*. Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press.

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### Additional Resources Related to Mass Career Customization

**AgeWave: Landmark Research and Consulting:** Age Wave is a research and consulting group that focuses primarily on the impact of America's aging population. Several of their studies are particularly useful for understanding the desire for customized career paths and the ways in which these options benefit many cohorts of workers as well as businesses.

- To access the site: <http://www.agewave.com/research/index.php>

**Career Flexibility: Off-Ramps and On Ramps Teleconference Transcript:** On May 18, 2006, the Women's Bureau Flex Options project hosted a national teleconference featuring Sylvia Ann Hewlett of the Center for Work-Life Policy, Kathy Kacher of Career/Life Alliance Services, and Sharon Klun and Dana Riegard of Accenture. This is a full transcript of the conference.

- To access the transcript: [http://www.we-inc.org/carrerflex\\_transcript.pdf](http://www.we-inc.org/carrerflex_transcript.pdf)

 **Global Perspectives – Flexible Working Law:** The United Kingdom's Flexible Working Law allows "enables parents with a child under 6 or a disabled child under 18 to make a request for flexible working, and places a duty on employers to consider such request seriously and only reject them for good business reasons." In April of 2007, the law was extended to workers caring for adults, and on November 6, 2007, the law was extended to parents of older children.

- To access the site: <http://www.berr.gov.uk/employment/workandfamilies/flexible-working/index.html>

**Harvard Business Review IdeaCast: Customize Your Career:** The 62nd episode of Harvard Business Review's [IdeaCast](#), "a free podcast featuring breakthrough ideas and commentary from leading thinkers in business and management," presents an interview with Cathleen Benko, co-author with Anne Weisberg of *Mass Career Customization*.

- To access the episode: [http://hbsp2.libsyn.com/index.php?post\\_id=260369](http://hbsp2.libsyn.com/index.php?post_id=260369)

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