

## Guest Column

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Each month, WFC Resources invites a nationally renowned work-life professional or researcher to share opinions, perspectives and progress with our readers. Our guest columnist for January, 2007, is **Brad Harrington**, Executive Director of the **Boston College Center for Work & Family** and an associate professor in the **Carroll School of Management**.

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### The Evolution of Work-Life

Over the past year our Center has been engaged in a number of interesting research studies and initiatives. We began a Global Workforce Roundtable for organizations faced with the challenge of managing a workforce spread across many countries and cultures. We have undertaken interesting studies that look at how to organizations can engage and be responsive to the needs of older and low-income workers. We have completed two books. One is a comprehensive look at the issue of aging, co-edited by our research director Dr. Jackie James. The other is a work that ties together career management and work-life integration, illustrating how critical self-assessment and a clear sense identity are to navigating contemporary careers. I was fortunate to co-author this book with Professor Douglas T. Hall of **Boston University**, one of the country's preeminent scholars on career development.

One of the most interesting initiatives at the Center over the past year was a project we termed the *Work-Life Evolution Study*, which was funded through the generosity of our Center's members. We are all aware that the work/life field has evolved in many new directions over the past 15 years. These new directions encompass virtually every aspect of an employee's working life – recruitment, retention, development, rewards, and evolving corporate cultures. The comprehensive nature of the field is illustrated by the fact that work-life initiatives can be housed and led from virtually any HR function whether talent management, total rewards, diversity, organization development, or employee health and wellness. The fact that work-life has so many different homes speaks to the tremendous breadth of the field.

What we were attempting to do with the Evolution Study was to review how the field had grown and changed in recent years with an eye toward making some predictions about the future (never an easy undertaking.) We used a variety of approaches to gather our data and develop our findings including reviewing literature, interviewing experts, and reviewing transcripts of interviews with leaders in the field who in recent years had received the **Conference Board's Work-Life Legacy Award**. Perhaps the most innovative approach was to gather 25 thought leaders at Boston College last summer for a future search conference, exploring through conversation where they thought the field was heading in the future.

The study is not yet complete but let me share with you two sets of tentative findings that you might find interesting. First, what are the trends that leaders in the field (mainly from the world of practice but also researchers) feel will have the greatest impact on corporate work-life efforts?

The experts felt they were:

The increasing importance of diversity that has driven the need for creating more inclusive workplaces.

Changing workforce demographics, most notably the aging of the workforce. This has raised important challenges for older workers, but perhaps more importantly for workers from different generations in terms of how they interact and work with one another.

Increased workload and stress levels among employees that may well be contributing to rapidly increasing healthcare costs (another important trend.) This workload issue seems in many ways to be aggravated by technological tools that are supposed to be helping us be more productive, yet seem to be having a deleterious effect.

The impact of globalization which creates enormous challenges for working across cultures, countries in a virtual fashion. None of these trends is probably too surprising. We have certainly discussed these issues many times at our Center's **Work & Family Roundtable**. More surprising however is the call to action. What do our experts feel we need to do about this?

The focus of the work-life professional has mainly been on HR policies and programs. But when given a list of potential ways that we could have a positive impact on the challenges we face as employers, developing and implementing HR policies scored a distant 3rd in terms of what we should be doing. What were the top vote getters?

By far the highest priority was influencing organizational leaders. This means working in a consultative manner with leaders at all levels of the organization to ensure effective work-life practices are ingrained in the fabric of the organization.

The second most important priority is helping individuals make and negotiate good career choices. This means providing individual employees with the education, consulting, and support to make good choices (for them and their employer) and proactively manage their own career and work-life options.

Addressing these challenges will require new skills for tomorrow's work-life practitioner. It will involve us more directly in employee development, leadership development, and cultural change initiatives as well as with the work of the organization. I will be presenting further on the results of this study at the **AWLP** conference next month and our Center will publish a report on the Work-Life Evolution Study in the spring of 2007.

I wish you all a happy New Year! It looks like an exciting year ahead for all of us.

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Brad Harrington is co-author of the upcoming book *Career Management and Work-Life Integration: Using Self Assessment to Navigate Contemporary Careers* which will be published by Sage in 2007. He can be reached at [Brad.Harrington@BC.edu](mailto:Brad.Harrington@BC.edu).

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