

Moving Work-Life Forward: Increasing our Relevance and Impact

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INTRODUCTION

Over the past 25 years, the concept of work-life has become fully established as a challenge facing virtually all employees and employers. The goal of organizational work-life efforts is to attract, retain and engage employees throughout their career continuum by providing an environment where individuals can be successful in both their professional and personal lives. Beginning with its roots in child care and corporate employee assistance programs, many functions have been established under a wide variety of titles (e.g. work-family, work-life, workforce effectiveness, workplace solutions, employee health and wellness, etc.) reporting to an equally broad range of HR functions including: diversity and inclusion, total rewards, health and wellness, talent management and organizational development. The breadth of these programs and the variety of reporting functions are indicative of the incredibly diverse range of issues that are addressed under the umbrella of work-life. This extensive focus and range of perspectives was discussed in detail in the Center's [Work-Life Evolution Study](#) (2007), a research study that engaged thought leaders in creating a vision for the evolving future of work-life.

There is no doubt that the work of our field over the past generation has significantly and positively impacted the lives of many working people and their families. In spite of this, however, we have recently seen a significant number of organizations de-emphasize or even eliminate their work-life function for one of two reasons. One is the “belt-tightening” that many companies are undertaking as a result of our continued global economic struggles. Two, is the sense that we have perhaps adequately addressed the work-life concerns of most employees. We, at the Boston College Center for Work & Family, believe it would be a grave mistake to, as change guru and Harvard Business School Professor John Kotter states, declare victory too early. Our work has without doubt led to significant strides to address child care, increase workplace flexibility, facilitate women’s advancement, and make our workplaces more inclusive and we should be rightly proud of that progress. But two tremendous problems / opportunities continue to exist.

The first problem is that of access to work-life initiatives and programs. There are far too many employees who are still forced to make difficult choices between work demands and caring for their family members. While we have made strides, we know that access for all continues to be a problem. Is flexibility, for example, really part of the culture of the organization or still seen as a modest program espoused in corporate literature and publications but limited in terms of real access because people are reluctant to utilize such programs without fear of damaging their careers? Do flexibility programs extend to all employees, including hourly workers, or are they only offered to staff members who are most highly valued, work at corporate headquarters, or those in “professional” positions?

The second problem / opportunity is that though we have made progress on the cornerstone issues, new problems and opportunities have emerged which may be far more complex to address, requiring even more sophisticated and multifaceted solutions and which may make our past challenges seem manageable. It is this new set of emerging issues that may sound a clarion call for the next generation of work-life professionals. While we often view these issues through a work-life lens, any organization (or individual) charged with addressing strategic workforce management issues will need to be in tune with these concerns. As change agents, those of us in the field (whether we be work-life, diversity, wellness, or organization development practitioners) need to position ourselves to partner with professionals in different parts of our organizations (Diversity/Inclusion, IT, Leadership Development, Total Rewards, etc.) and articulate how we can present effective solutions to these impending workforce challenges.

THE NEW CHALLENGES OF WORK-LIFE

As we (those involved in moving the work-life field forward) look back at the challenges of the past two decades, we may ironically find ourselves thinking nostalgically of days gone by. While the challenges we have faced to implement work-life initiatives within our organizations have been significant, as we look to the future we will likely find the challenges that lie ahead of us are even more daunting.

Following is a chart that highlights some of the major trends in the workplace that will have a significant bearing on the focus of our efforts.

Expanding Workforce Challenges		
Women's issue	→ → →	Men's issue
Child care	→ → →	Elder care
Conflict	→ → →	Meaning and Enrichment
Diversity	→ → →	Inclusion
Health Maintenance	→ → →	Well-being
National Initiatives	→ → →	Global Initiatives
Flexibility	→ → →	The Virtual Workplace
Work-life	→ → →	Workload
HR Programs	→ → →	Workplace Culture

We are not presenting these as a “from-to” model (i.e. we’re not saying work-life is no longer a woman’s issue, we’re simply saying it is every bit as much a man’s issue. And we are not suggesting child care is not a work-life issue; we’re suggesting that the challenges of elder care may very soon surpass child care as a problem we need to address.) While many of us may have discussed one or more of these trends at some point, grasping the totality of these challenges will require that we ambitiously move our efforts in new directions to embrace and address these new realities.

Work-life is a woman’s issue – Work-life is a man’s issue

There has been much talk in recent years about how the US is becoming [a woman’s nation](#). Women have made great strides and today far exceed men in their achievements in higher education with 60% of bachelor’s and master’s degree being awarded to young women. While just under half of mothers with children under 18 were working in 1975, now roughly 71% of mothers participate in the labor force (Families and Work Institute, 2011). Furthermore, women are beginning to play a more dominant role in some industries and are now the primary breadwinners in 39.3% of US households (Boushey, 2009). Almost half (47.5%) of all married couple families in 2011 were comprised of dual-earners, and evidence would suggest that this trend is going to continue (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2012). In April 2012, The Pew Research Center released the results of a study showing that women, for the first time in this poll, had a stronger career orientation (i.e. a desire for high earning and career advancement) than their male counterparts and the rate of increase for women desiring greater advancement was particularly noteworthy (Pew Research Center, 2012).

It is time to acknowledge that it's men who now need to more fully internalize what it means to be a working professional and a full-time parent and to better understand the role employers play in helping them do so. Fathers are spending significantly more hours caregiving for their children on workdays than they did three decades ago, and their reported level of conflict has increased as a result. Sixty percent of fathers in dual-earner couples report experiencing conflict between home and work, while just 35% reported the same in 1977 (Families and Work Institute, 2011). Given that men's work-life conflict has increased more dramatically than women's and that conflict is linked to turnover intentions (Boyar et.al., 2003), it is crucial to pay attention to the experiences of both genders in the workplace. The Center has made significant strides in better understanding what work-family challenges represent for men through our research on today's working fathers including [The New Dad: Exploring Fatherhood in a Career Context](#) (2010) and [The New Dad: Caring, Committed and Conflicted](#) (2011). Judging from the response we received to those studies, this is clearly an emerging issue which would benefit from further research and corporate action.

Action Plan Ideas:

- *Survey all employees to determine which work-life initiatives or programming would be most meaningful to them.*
- *Develop and communicate all work-life offerings as gender-neutral.*
- *Resist making assumptions about employees work-life needs based on gender, marital or parental status or other demographic factors.*
- *Offer Employee Resource Groups that appeal to the needs and interests of your diverse workforce, including parenting groups that are available to both men and women.*

Work-life is about child care – Work-life is about elder care

It is well known that the birth rate in the world's developed countries is extremely low. At the same time, the population in these same countries is aging dramatically, thanks to the large group of baby boomers who are now reaching or passing age 65, and medical and nutritional progress in these parts of the world that has led to the extension of life spans. In the U.S. alone, the population of Americans aged 65 or older increased elevenfold in the last century, with this age group comprising 13% of the population in 2010, and expected to reach 20% in 2030 (Bookman and Kimbrel, 2011). The problem we are facing, today and in the future, is how those of us that have lived in a mobile society will provide care to our aging parents and other loved ones. As expensive and complex as the child care system is (especially in the USA), it can't begin to compare with the complexity, cost, and toll that elder care will exact in the coming years. Some of the additional complexities that come with elder care include:

- Unlike child care, which has a well-established delivery system in many developed countries, elder care delivery systems are often informal or non-existent for those who do not need the 24-hour care that a nursing facility would provide.
- Unlike child care, older adults who need care are far less likely to "live under our roof" and may in fact, live great distances away. An estimated 5 million Americans live an hour or further away from the person(s) they care for, yet are assisting with daily tasks such as transportation and shopping (Bookman and Kimbrel, 2011).
- Unlike child care, where one set of parents can make all the critical decisions involved in caregiving, meeting the needs of elderly parents often must be determined and negotiated by siblings (and others) who may have differing views of the most appropriate solutions.

- Unlike child care, which can be planned in a predictable sequence, the care of elders can be highly unpredictable. In addition, the duration of the time frame for child care is also predictable, whereas older adults can need care for widely varying lengths of time.
- Nearly all elderly at some point, and especially for those with chronic conditions, need **exceptional caregiving** which requires the coordination of not just standard care provision, but also complex medical treatments, insurers, and providers.
- The cost of child care, while high, can pale in comparison to elder care. Providing care for elders full-time at a nursing home facility in the US can range from \$78,000-100,000 per year.
- Other issues include the emotional difficulties involved in caring for a loved one whose health is ultimately diminishing over time.
- A recent MetLife study estimated that compared to those without elder care responsibilities, those caring for elders increase healthcare costs an additional 8% to employers, costing the business sector \$13.4 billion per year. Not only were employees providing eldercare more likely to report their health as fair or poor, they also more likely to report risky health behaviors such as smoking and alcohol use and suffer from conditions such as diabetes and depression (MetLife, 2010).

Research indicates that employees recognize and value dependent care offerings, with a third of respondents in a 2009 survey indicating that elder care benefits influence their job choices, and over half (58%) reporting the same about child care benefits (WorldatWork & AWLP, 2011). In addition, organizations must be aware of the growing number of lawsuits related to family caregiver discrimination (see Center for Work Life Law for additional information). Blatant bias against caregivers cannot be tolerated as it increases the likelihood for liability in this area.

Action Plan Ideas:

- *Offer support for caregivers in your organization keeping in mind the entire spectrum of caregiving, from prenatal, to special needs individuals, to caring for the elderly. Services can include EAP, resource and referral, backup care, on site care, assessments, and care management.*
- *Increase awareness regarding the issue of family caregiver discrimination. Ensure that leaders and managers understand that both women and men can be caregivers.*

Work-life is about reducing conflict – Work-life is about meaning and enrichment

With its roots in child care and employee assistance programs (EAP), the initial focus of work-life initiatives was not surprising – reducing conflicts and the stress inherent for working mothers when they tried to balance primary family obligations with their professional working lives. As a result of this focus, the field embraced paradigms and programs that strove to eliminate conflicts in employees' schedules to help them achieve "balance." One of the primary ways that organizations sought to help their employees cope was through workplace flexibility, which has been well received and has addressed some of the pressing problems working people face on a day-to-day basis. But reducing conflict is not the only issue we need to help people address. Workplace flexibility is a great tool, but it is insufficient as a stand-alone approach to work-life integration.

When people reflect on their professional and personal lives, it is unlikely that simply eliminating scheduling conflicts will be the thing that most mattered to them. When we consider the larger questions in our lives, we are more likely to ask ourselves "Did my life and my work have purpose and

meaning?” If the answer is yes, which it hopefully will be for most people, then our work-life efforts will be seen as a great success. If the answer is no, then we will have somehow missed the big picture. What does it mean to have a meaningful career? For many people, this might be understood by the answers to the following questions:

- Did I work in an organization whose mission I believe in?
- Did the work my firm was engaged in serve an important purpose and meet an important societal need?
- Did I feel I was an important contributor to my organization?
- Did I find meaning in the work I did?
- Did my career help me grow and develop as a person?
- Did my work allow me to provide for those people who were most important to me?
- Did my role allow me to find professional fulfillment as well as meet my personal and family obligations?

For a number of years, we have been writing, speaking, and teaching about the *Protean career* (Hall, 2001; Harrington and Hall, 2007). It is evident to all that the career model that existed as recently as 25 years ago has been unalterably changed. In the more traditional career model of days past, many individuals would go to work for an organization with the expectation of a long-term relationship. The career goal of many new graduates was to find a good employer where they could grow and advance up the “career ladder.” Often doing so meant making personal sacrifices, but the challenges were often supported by an at-home spouse and the promise of long-term employment and increasing financial rewards.

Today, a new model has emerged that is increasingly independent of the organization. This “free-agent” model has been fueled by an increasingly educated workforce, lower levels of organizational commitment to long-term employment, and the greater complexity of managing and coordinating professional commitment for dual-career couples.

Issue	Traditional Career	Protean Career
Who’s in charge	Organization	Individual
Core Values	Advancement	Freedom, growth
Degree of mobility	Lower	High
Success criteria	Position, level, salary	Psychological success
Key attitudes	Organizational commitment	Work satisfaction Professional commitment

As a result, many employees are now following this “Protean” model which is characterized by much more individual responsibility in navigating careers, greater organizational mobility (in terms of moving from one employer to another), and a less prescribed career path that does not assume one size fits all. A recent survey of Millennials revealed that the most highly ranked measure of career success was “doing meaningful work.” Yet, despite the top ranking of meaningful work by Millennials, only 11% of the managers that were surveyed reported that meaningful work was the most important factor contributing to Millennial success (Levit & Licina, 2011). Organizations need to look for ways to help their people find meaning and relevance in the work they do. This can be done by helping employees better understand the connection of their work to the mission of the organization and by ensuring that the

employees' aspirations for professional growth and development, and their personal life goals, are aligned with the plans that the organization has for them.

Action Plan Ideas:

- *Career development is the top retention factor around the globe, above pay and benefits, and robust programs can help employees progress and contribute more to their organizations. Offer career-life education programs that include self-assessment, career planning, and coaching components. Encourage mentorship and sponsorship throughout the organization. Develop events to help connect potential mentors/sponsors with those who can benefit from their assistance.*
- *Encourage organizational leaders to create a work environment that supports employees to live rich, full lives and which conveys respect for their obligations outside of the office.*
- *Provide volunteer opportunities for employees so that they can give back to organizations in their community and in the world to increase their level of meaning and fulfillment.*

Work-life initiatives have a national focus – Work-life initiatives have a global focus

In the past, most of us in the field were concerned with launching work life initiatives within the US. While the US is a large, complex, and diverse country, most federal policies that shape our work-life initiatives are common and reflect the generally consistent nature of operating within one country, no matter how large. In spite of this consistency, implementing effective workplace policies on these issues requires a high level of sophistication in order to understand the legal framework, the needs of various employee audiences, and the critical business priorities that will ensure the programs have the desired, positive impact on organizational productivity and employee engagement.

Most large corporate organizations, however, are moving, or have perhaps years ago moved, to a global approach to managing their business and their people. This means developing human resource policies and initiatives that meet the needs of a global workforce. This can be extremely difficult given the widely varying cultural norms and employment practices that exist from country to country. The Center's work on the Global Workforce Roundtable and the series of Global Executive Briefings have effectively demonstrated the diverse approaches that must be employed to create effective people programs when operating globally (see for example the recent publications of [Brazil](#), [Russia](#), [Japan](#), [Germany](#), [Sweden](#), [China](#), and [India](#)). But nowhere is this more true than in the areas concerned with work-family and employee well-being.

The legal environment, including employment and family law, gender roles, family systems, and socio-economic differences, will all dictate the need for unique, country specific work-family programs that are "in-sync" with the local legal and cultural norms. In addition to providing work-life programs in multiple countries, organizations must also support employees who are working across time zones and traveling to other countries on short or long-term assignments. Their working hours and work locations during these assignments may adversely impact their time with their families and their commitments to their communities. Recent research has demonstrated the need to move away from "one size fits all" work-life policies and programs towards initiatives that take into account diverse cultural customs and contexts as well as employee's varying needs throughout the life course (Sabattini & Carter 2012; Hill, et.al., 2008).

Action Plan Ideas:

- *Provide training that facilitates more effective cross-cultural communications and understanding.*
- *Develop work-life policies, programs, and services that are culturally sensitive and meet the needs of individuals in each area of the world where your organization does business.*
- *Understand the special demands that come with working in global teams. Provide employees with the technology and flexibility to work more effectively across time zones and other challenges inherent in global operations.*

From Diversity to Inclusion

Organizations that value and appreciate each employee for their individual differences and experiences benefit from diverse perspectives. In its early days, diversity generally referred to the composition of the workforce in terms of the numbers of women and people of color. This primarily related to hiring and affirmative action policies. As time went on, however, the concept of diversity expanded to include family type, sexual orientation, religion, age, disability, and ethnicity. Organizations began to look at how well they were retaining diverse employees. The poor retention rates shifted the focus from hiring a diverse workforce to creating an inclusive environment where individuals of all backgrounds felt welcome. The emphasis turned towards company policies, practices, and culture. Having identified the barriers to inclusion, diversity staff now work to create cultures and policies, such as mentoring, training, and development, that create an inclusive environment.

Inclusion goes beyond the hiring of diverse workforce; it involves a sense of belonging: feeling respected and valued for who you are; feeling a level of supportive energy and commitment from others so that you can do your best work. The concept of inclusion should take into consideration not only the ways in which an organization interacts with its employees, but also the policies, structures and programs offered, and the ways in which the organization interacts with customers, clients, partners, and vendors. Work-life programs that focus on flexibility and allow for individualized schedules promote healthy work-life balance for employees of all races and cultures. Flexibility is rooted in diversity, looking at each individual and their unique needs. Work-life programs that are sensitive to individual and family needs show how companies can assist in addressing diverse influences in workers' lives.

Action Plan Ideas:

- *Establish and encourage supports for employees from diverse backgrounds that can include: Mentoring aimed at supporting professional development, support networks, and training and career development opportunities.*
- *Develop and engage "Employee Resource Groups" to capitalize upon the knowledge and experience of ERG members to contribute to the development of new products and marketing initiatives to serve new market segments.*

From Health Maintenance to Well-being

Many employers in the United States provide health care coverage for their employees and their families. As health care costs have continued to rise year after year, organizations are paying greater atten-

tion to this employee benefit. Focus has turned from reactive to proactive wellness strategies to help prevent the onset of serious illness or disease before it begins by encouraging healthy eating habits, exercising regularly, and managing stress. Progressive organizations are going one step further by not only focusing on an employee's physical health but expanding this vision to incorporate the concept of "well-being." The focus on well-being has a significant impact—a 2010 Harvard study estimated a decrease of \$3.27 in medical costs per dollar spent on wellness programs (Baicker, et al., 2010).

Well-being takes a holistic approach by recognizing the integration and intersection of career, social relationships, financial security, physical and psychological health, and community involvement. Due in part to persistent job and economic instability, it may be surprising to some that financial stress (e.g. the fear of losing one's job or one's home, or not being able to fund children's education or one's own retirement), has become one of the most compelling sources of stress for employees globally and that these concerns can have an adverse impact on employee well-being and productivity. To counter this, many organizations are offering comprehensive [financial wellness programs](#) and education to employees (MetLife, 2011). This is just one example of how a broader, more holistic approach to well-being can not only diminish or eliminate stress but also can increase overall well-being. Research suggests that this holistic approach has linkages to employee engagement, retention, and productivity, as well as positive health outcomes.

Action Plan Ideas:

- *Develop wellness initiatives with incentives for employees to improve their well-being: their sleep, their level of stress, and overall health.*
- *Convey that the organization and culture care about employee well-being. Work to decrease stress levels at the office and promote a culture of work-life integration.*
- *Offer seminars on a wide range of wellness topics ranging from parenting to smoking cessation to weight loss to sleep management to financial wellness.*

From Flexibility to the Virtual Workplace

Many organizations have embraced flexible work arrangements including flex-time, telework, and reduced work-hours programs. Flexibility remains the most popular and often requested work-life policy for many employees, especially working parents, who at one time were seen as the primary driver for making such an accommodation. But as organizations have become more global, operating in a 24x7 environment, as they seek to eliminate non-value added time (such as employees sitting in traffic), and they look for ways to minimize the high cost of expensive real estate, flexibility becomes less an accommodation for employees than a win-win for both employers and employees.

Today, many organizations have taken flexibility a step further and have moved to a virtual workplace. Field personnel no longer need to report to work or even have a designated office space. Call centers can be staffed with distributed employees working from their own homes. And employees need not relocate in order to take on new, expanded roles in their companies. Much of this has been driven by the pervasive availability of low cost technologies which can connect employees virtually rather than physically. Recent estimates indicate that in 2010 almost 20% of the U.S. working adult population worked from home or remotely at least one full day each month. Furthermore, the number of employees working remotely on a more regular basis is on the rise, with 84% of those that telework reporting that they do so one day a week or more, compared to 72% in 2008 (WorldatWork, 2011). Several scholars have found that virtual work can positively impact both employees and employers. Virtual work can increase the quality of em-

ployees' work and family lives by boosting their perceived autonomy and can allow them to work longer hours before reporting issues with work-life conflict (Hill, et. al., 2010; Gajendran & Harrison, 2007).

This shift does, however, raise many of the same questions organizations struggled with in terms of flexibility: trust, measuring employee output, and getting comfortable in a low or non face-time environment. But it takes these issues even further to include questions regarding building relationships, fostering teamwork, and creating and maintaining corporate culture, cross-cultural competence, measuring and evaluating performance, and manager preparedness to lead virtually.

The rise in the virtual workplace also brings with it a host of practical issues resulting from many, and sometimes many thousands of, employees housing their own office and it creates far greater levels of spillover and permeability between home and work. In the contemporary virtual workplace there is “no place called home” that is insulated from and provides a respite from today’s 24x7 workplace. We need to better understand the implications of this and create opportunities for healthy segmentation between work and home life.

Action Plan Ideas:

- *Foster a culture that promotes trust and flexible work. Our global 24/7 work environment requires new ways of work, emphasize that working flexibly can mean working better to meet the needs of customers.*
- *Improve communications with a focus on performance and results rather than face time in the office. Managers and employees can put measures in place to determine accountability for projects and performance at their role. These metrics can offer far better assessment of performance than “Face-time” or “seat time.”*
- *Make remote capability part of your business continuity/disaster management strategy. Provide technology tools for employees to work in a location away from the office and to facilitate team connectedness (e.g. video conferencing, social networking, etc.).*

From Work-life to Workload

Work-life has traditionally been seen as a way of helping individual employees deal with their unique challenges in trying to balance / integrate their working and non-working lives. Work-life took a broader “systems” view in helping foster integration - i.e. it looked at not only what was happening in the workplace but also how that impacted life outside of work (and vice versa). The programs we have discussed, such as dependent care and flexible work arrangements, are targeted to help employees facilitate greater “harmony” between their competing roles and priorities. While such programs are helpful in alleviating conflict, they can be seen as a Band-Aid approach that does not address the underlying causes of conflict and stress – namely workload. Offering employees greater flexibility can help them cope with heavy workloads, but does little to address the issues that were causing conflict to begin with.

Work pressure and stress are on the rise as organizations are understaffed, increasingly global, and fast-paced (WFD Consulting, 2010). Workload has been positively linked to both psychological and physical strains, from anxiety, depression, and frustration to headache, fatigue, and cardiovascular disease (Bowling & Kirkendall, 2012). Research suggests, however, that well-developed organizational resources such as supervisor support and increased autonomy can serve as buffers for the consequences of high workload (Diestel & Schmidt, 2009).

It may be accurate to suggest that human resource departments do not have control over workload, viewing this as a leadership challenge, not with HR's domain. But failure to take actions to at least research, identify, and hopefully address, the underlying causes of excessive workload can dramatically undermine the credibility of the workplace supports, such as flexible work arrangements, that HR is putting in place. Some may see HR's unwillingness to address the workload issue as evidence that work-life initiatives are a veneer and in fact, the organization has little or no intention of truly creating more sustainable workplace practices.

Action Plan Ideas:

- *Encourages leaders to take a serious look at workload issues in your organization. Consider multiple factors such as employee stress, downsizing contributing to unmanageable workload, low value tasks that can be eliminated, required presence at meetings and other methods for alleviating overwork.*
- *Provide business teams with training to implement ways to reduce non-value added activities. Work teams should strategize about how they can get their collective work done and still respect the personal time of individuals on the team (see Perlow, L. *Sleeping With Your Smartphone*, 2012).*

From HR Programs to Workplace Culture

For many years, those of us in the field have been concerned with how to make work-life initiatives less programmatic and more integral to the culture of the organization. This has continued to prove a significant challenge. But as we review the ways in which the field needs to broaden its focus, it should be increasingly evident that work-life is not an accommodation strategy for a few, it is the heart of an organization's people strategy. Scholars have found that a supportive workplace culture, not work-life programs and policies, is most effective for reducing negative spillover for employees as they manage the overlap between their personal and professional lives (Mennino et.al., 2005). Seeing this systems approach as the foundation of an organization's people strategy will allow organizations to develop plans and initiatives wisely, taking into account all the factors that will yield optimal levels of employee engagement and productivity that do not sacrifice the long-term well-being of employees in the process. Such a system requires:

- A high level of understanding of human behavior and the forces that act on individuals both within and outside the workplace
- A willingness to "buck the trend" of seeing one's people as a disposable resource
- The heartfelt belief that "people are truly our most important asset" in a knowledge based economy – a sentiment often expressed but rarely demonstrated

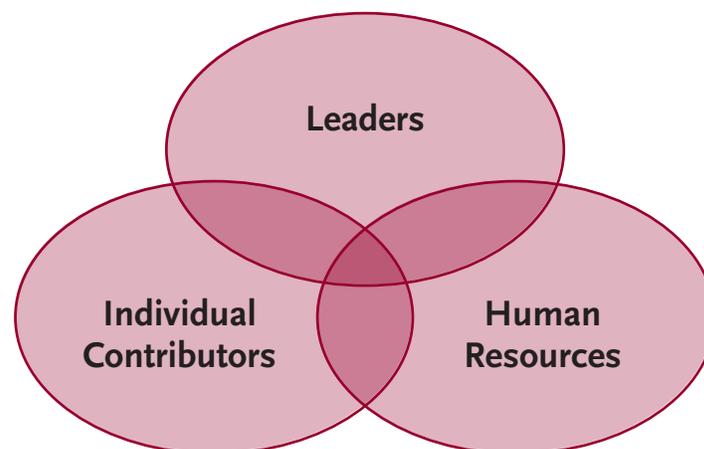
A strategic, integrated people strategy begins with two clear components that serve as the guiding light and the sound foundation for that strategy. ***The guiding light is the organization's mission and strategy.*** Simply put, the mission (and vision) of an organization states "What do we want the organization to be?" This includes the products and services it will provide, the markets it will serve, and the value it will provide to a set of customers who can take many shapes. Customers are simply the consumers of the organization's work – they can be purchasers, students, patients, etc. The strategy simply reviews how the organization will fulfill its mission and achieve its vision. How it will continue to meet important customer needs.

The sound foundation consists of the organization's values and its workforce expectations. An organization's values reflect how it desires to work and behave toward its customers, its employees (most importantly) and the communities in which it operates. These values are driven by the culture which has been created initially by its founders and leaders (Schein, 1996). But it must also be forged with a clear understanding of the needs and expectations of its workforce which, as we have pointed out, have changed significantly in recent years. The **mission and strategy** are focused on **what we do** and the **values and expectations** on **how we will do it**.

For the organization to operate effectively and with integrity, there are two important things that must be kept in mind. First, workforce strategies must be aimed at achieving the goals of the organization. Second, they must reflect the values of the organization and the needs of its workforce. Programs that do not support these will be seen as irrelevant or worse, counter-productive.

As we stated in the original [Work-Life Evolution Study](#) (Harrington, 2007), the ability to achieve the mission, execute the strategy, and do so in accordance with the organization's values requires the effective collaboration of the three major constituents: organizational leaders, employees, and the human resource function. Their roles in creating culture can be represented by the diagram and text that follow:

Organizational Mission and Strategy



Organizational Values & Workforce Expectations

- **Leadership:** Leaders - from top management to first line supervisors - play a crucial role in developing and sustaining an effective organizational culture. In order to create a culture that is responsive to employees' needs, senior managers must have and communicate a clear vision of the mission, values, and aspiration for the organization. This must include, as a central focus, a people strategy that stresses integration and commonality between organizational aims and positive outcomes for organizational members (i.e. employees.) This will create a culture where employees see strong alignment between their goals and those of the organization – the key to employee engagement.
- **Human Resources:** The human resources function plays a critical role in developing an effective and inclusive workplace. To do so, it is critical that HR be well grounded in the business strategy, labor market trends, and employees' changing needs. Utilizing employee surveys, best-practices benchmarking, and other external research, the human resource function should make recommendations to leaders that address the needs of the workforce. They should develop policies and initiatives across the spectrum of HR activities (e.g. staffing, inclusion, total

rewards, development, work-life, and health and wellness) that facilitate the achievement of organizational objectives through sound people management processes. Perhaps most importantly, HR should play the critical role of facilitators of organizational and culture change. All of these efforts will ensure that people are truly seen as an organization's greatest asset and will increase the retention of top talent who are highly engaged in the workplace.

- **Individual Employees:** Employees need to take greater responsibility for effectively and proactively managing their own careers. With the right training and policies from the HR function and support from an aligned management team, individuals should take ownership for a number of key things. First, they should establish their own work-life priorities. Second, they should initiate conversations with their managers to discuss ways that they can achieve organizational and individual objectives. Third, they should maintain career plans that are mutually beneficial to both themselves and their employers.

It is critical that these three groups not only carry out their individual roles effectively, but also work together in an integrated manner. Disconnects between the three groups will lead to problems that will undermine the effectiveness of these efforts and lead to an underperforming workplace. For example, if HR launches programs that are not driven by and fully supported by leaders, the programs will lack credibility in the eyes of organizational members. If policies are instituted but are not well communicated, employees will be unaware of them and they will suffer from poor utilization. If employees are not clear on their own career-life priorities, they will not be in a position to discuss with their manager ways to develop more appropriate work-life solutions that will meet both their professional and personal needs. Finally, if managers are not trained in how to manage in the new environment, they will likely be unprepared for dealing with and effectively supporting individual or workgroup needs.

What is needed is an integrated and aligned approach to implement these complex but critical programs, make them an integral part of a corporate people strategy, and foster a truly effective workplace culture. All players in the organization need to be well-versed in their roles and well-connected with one another to turn this vision into a reality.

Action Plan Ideas:

- *Work at all levels within the organization: leader, line manager, individual contributor, to help instill a culture that values employees as whole persons.*
- *Make sure leaders are aware of demographic changes in the workforce and current workforce trends that will require shifts in the way work gets done and in the evolution of the employee culture.*

SUMMARY

In 2007, the Center published *The Work-Life Evolution Study* which took a deep look into both the forces that were impacting the field and what new directions the field needed to take in order to continue to offer high levels of value to employers. Over the intervening five years, what is clear is that (a) progress has been made and (b) the challenges that lie ahead of us are likely even more daunting than the ones we have wrestled with in the past. New issues are emerging that employers must address in order to operate in today's global, technologically enabled, and extremely complex business environment.

The business case for what we do – call it work-life, workforce effectiveness, cultural change, or whatever – is more powerful than it has ever been. But at the same time, we need to understand that the ability to communicate our value proposition to our leadership teams is more critical than ever in light of the continuing global economic challenges which can sometimes lead to short-term thinking on people-related strategies – our most important asset that we cut at a moment's notice.

Our goal is to find a way that all of us, regardless of the industry we work in or our specific area of focus, can clearly articulate our offerings and value proposition to our respective organizations in a way that recognizes the many challenges our businesses face, but that also makes clear the many ways our work will positively impact organizational effectiveness.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Many thanks to the team at the Boston College Center for Work & Family for their contributions to this white paper. Fred Van Deusen, Danielle Hartmann, Jennifer Sabatini Fraone and Iyar Mazar all lent extensive research, writing, and editing support. As always, thanks to my family and especially my wife Annie for serving as my sounding board and providing constructive critique.

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