

Boston College

Moving Work-Life Forward:
Increasing our Relevance and Impact
Brad Harrington

2012

Boston College Center for Work & Family

THE NEW CHALLENGES OF WORK-LIFE

Over the past 20 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 employees 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 breadth of focus and 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 over the past 20+ years has significantly and positively impacted the lives of many working people and their families. In spite of this, however, we have recently seen some organizations de-emphasize or even eliminate their work-life function for one of two reasons. One, is the "belt-tightening" that many companies are doing as a result of our continued economic struggles. Two, is the sense that we have perhaps adequately addressed the work-life concerns of most employees. We 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 workers, including hourly workers, or are they only offered to those 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 could create far more complex issues to address, requiring even more sophisticated and complex solutions which may make our past challenges seem manageable. It is this new set of emergent issues that may sound a clarion call for the next generation of work-life professionals.

The New Challenges

As we look back, we may ironically find ourselves thinking nostalgically on 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 that the challenges that lie ahead of us are even more comprehensive and perhaps more daunting.

Following is a chart that looks at the trends in the workplace that will have a significant bearing on the focus of our efforts.

Work-Life's Set of Expanding 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.) It is one thing to understand these issues and another to really “get it.” When we get it, we move our efforts ambitiously in new directions to embrace 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 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. Women are beginning to play a more dominant role in some industries and are now the primary breadwinners in 38% of US households. Evidence would suggest that this trend is going to continue. In April 2012, The Pew Research Center released the result of a study that showed that

women, at least those in the sample, had a stronger career orientation (i.e. in this case a desire for high earning and career advancement) than their male counterparts and the rate of change on this issue for women was particularly noteworthy.

It's time to get our minds around the fact that it's men who now need to fully internalize what it means to be a working professional and a full-time parent and that employers can play an important role in helping them do so. We have begun to try to better understand what work-life means to men through our research on today's working fathers: [The New Dad: Exploring Fatherhood in a Career Context](#) and [The New Dad: Caring, Committed and Conflicted](#). Judging from the response we received to those studies, this is an emerging issue which needs further research and corporate action.

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. We are also equally aware that the world's population is aging dramatically thanks to that large group of baby boomers who are now reaching or past age 60, and medical and nutritional progress in the world that has led to the extension of life spans. 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.
- 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 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 going to diminish over time.

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 particularly 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 tried to eliminate the conflict that existed in people’s schedules and help them achieve “balance.” One of the primary ways that organizations attempted to help people cope with this was through workplace flexibility and those programs have been well received and have addressed some of the pressing problems working people face on a day-to-day basis. But reducing conflict is not the only, or even the most important, issue we need to help people address. Workplace flexibility is a great tool, but it is insufficient as a stand-alone policy

The bottom line is flexibility matters and this is not time to let that agenda item slip. But when people reflect on their professional and personal lives, it is unlikely that eliminating scheduling conflicts will be the thing that most mattered to them. When we ask ourselves the “big questions” in our lives, we are more likely to ask something more akin to, “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 mattered to me?
- Did the work my firm was engaged in serve an important purpose and meet an important need?
- Did I feel I was an important contributor to the efforts of my organization?
- Did I find meaning in the work I did?
- Did my work 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 but also meet 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 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 hierarchy. Often doing so meant making personal sacrifices, but the challenges were supported by an at-home spouse (i.e. wife) 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 more “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 careers in dual-career couples.

<i>Issue</i>	<i>Traditional Career</i>	<i>Protean Career</i>
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 more 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 assume one size fits all. As a result, organizations need to look for ways to help people find meaning and relevance in their work. This can be done by helping employees see a strong sense of connection to the mission of the organization and by ensuring that the employees’ aspirations for growth and development, and their personal life goals, are aligned with the plans that the organization has for them.

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](#), [Germany](#), [Sweden](#), [China](#), and [India](#)). But nowhere is this truer, 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 not simply a preference, but a need, for unique, country specific work-family programs that are “in-sync” with the legal and cultural norms of each distinct country and region. Not only are organizations addressing work-life programs in multiple countries, but they are also supporting employees who are working across time zones and travelling 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 or their ability to be engaged in their communities.

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 attention 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.”

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 perhaps 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.

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 mode, 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 the 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.

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 for creating the opportunities for healthy segmentation between work and home life.

From Work-life to Workload

Work-life has traditionally been seen as a way of helping individual employees deal with their individual 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). Programs we have discussed, such as dependent care and flexible work arrangements, were targeted to help employees facilitate greater “harmony” between their competing roles and objectives. While these programs were helpful, they often were seen as a Band-Aid approach that did 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.

It may fair for many in human resources to suggest they have little if any control over workload seeing it as a leadership issue, not a human resources issue. But failure to take actions to at least research 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 this issue as evidence that work-life initiatives are a veneer and that the organization has little or no intention to create more sustainable workplace practices.

From HR Programs to Workplace Culture

For a number of years, many of us in the field have been focused on how to make work-life initiatives less programmatic and more integral to the culture and fabric 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 clearly evident that work-life is not an accommodation strategy, it is the heart of an organization's people strategy. 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.

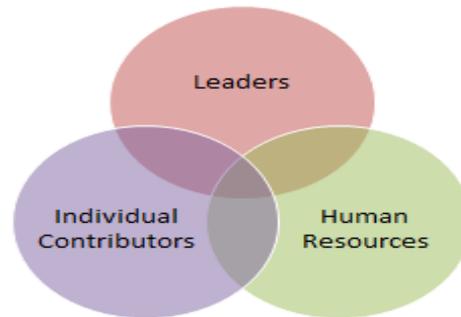
The sound foundation consists of the organization's values and its workforce expectations. An organization's values reflect how it desires to work and behave toward its customers, its employees (most importantly) and the communities in which it operates. These values are driven by the culture which has 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 pointing 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 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 / 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.

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 operating 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.

REFERENCES

- Boston College Center for Work & Family. (2011) *The MetLife Study of Financial Wellness across the Globe: A look at how multi-national companies are helping employees better manage their personal finances*. Research Report. New York: MetLife Life Insurance Company
- Galinsky, Ellen, Aumann, Kerstin, and Bond, James T., (2008). *Times are Changing: Gender and Generation at Work and at Home*. New York: Families and Work Institute
- Galinsky E., Salmond, K., Bond, J. T., Brumit Kropf, M., Moore, M. and Harrington B. (2003) *Leaders in a Global Economy: A Study of Men and Women*. New York: Research report by Families and Work Institute, Catalyst, and the Boston College Center for Work & Family.
- Hall, Douglas T. (2001). Careers In and Out of Organizations. San Francisco: Sage Publications.
- Harrington, Brad and Hall, Douglas T. (2007) Career Management and Work-Life Integration: Using Self-Assessment to Navigate Contemporary Careers. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publishing
- Harrington, Brad and Ladge, Jamie J. "[Work–Life Integration: Present Dynamics and Future Directions for Organizations](#)," *Organizational Dynamics* 38 (2) (2009):148-157.
- Harrington, Brad and Ladge, Jamie J. (2009) "Got Talent? It Isn't Hard to Find": In Boushey, Heather and O'Leary, Ann (2009) The Shriver Report: A Woman's Nation Changes Everything. Washington, DC: Center for American Progress.
- Harrington, Brad, Van Deusen, Fred, and Ladge, Jamie J. (2010) *The New Dad: Exploring Fatherhood Within A Career Context*. Chestnut Hill, MA: Boston College Center for Work & Family. Research Report
- Harrington, Brad, Van Deusen, Fred and Humberd, Beth. (2011). *The New Dad: Caring, Committed and Conflicted*. Chestnut Hill, MA: Boston College Center for Work & Family. Research Report
- Hartmann, Danielle, Series Editor (2009-2012) *The Global Executive Briefing Series*. Chestnut Hill, MA: Boston College Center for Work & Family
- Schein, Edgar. (1996). *Organizational Culture and Leadership* (Second Edition). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Van Deusen, Fred and James, Jacquelyn (2008). *Overcoming the Implementation Gap: How 20 Leading Companies are Making Flexibility Work*. Chestnut Hill, MA: Boston College Center for Work & Family