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# Protean organizations

## Reshaping work and careers to retain female talent

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### Abstract

**Purpose** – This paper aims to understand women's careers better in order to help organizations make changes to increase female retention. Two specific questions are addressed: Are women adopting a protean career orientation by becoming career self-agents?; and Are women's career decisions guided by the kaleidoscope values of challenge, balance, and authenticity? Results are used to discuss changes that organizations can make to better attract and retain female talent.

**Design/methodology/approach** – Open-ended semi-structured interviews were conducted by telephone with 25 women graduates of a top ranked international business school located in the USA who had voluntarily left the workforce at some time in their career and had since returned to work.

**Findings** – Results show that 17 of the women interviewed followed a protean career orientation when they returned to the workforce, finding part-time or reduced-hours positions or completely changing careers. Of the women, five returned to work following a traditional career orientation and three chose to return to a job rather than reinitiating their careers. The vast majority of the women who adopted a protean career were driven to do so in order to satisfy their need for balance in their lives. Overall, eight of the women expressed a need for authenticity in their careers and only two mentioned a desire for challenge. Many of them felt they had already satisfied their need for challenge earlier in their career, as the KCM suggests.

**Practical implications** – As with protean careers, protean organizations adapt to evolving circumstances. Companies that recognize and respond to the need to reshape how work gets done and how careers are built will achieve a competitive advantage by attracting and retaining valuable female talent. Organizations should shift their focus from an emphasis on face time to an emphasis on results, giving employees more control over how, when, and where they work. They also need to move away from the traditional career model that emphasizes full-time, continuous employment and instead embrace arc-of-the-career flexibility that allows women to adopt a protean orientation, managing their own careers in order to align them with their personal values.

**Originality/value** – The paper helps to explain the motives behind professional women's career moves and makes suggestions on how organizations can better attract and retain female talent.

**Keywords** Women, Careers, Multiskilling, Job satisfaction, Quality of life, United States of America

**Paper type** Research paper

### Introduction

The most critical source of competitive advantage in today's knowledge economy is human talent (Bartlett and Ghoshal, 2002). Because of this, attracting and retaining talent is a key strategic concern for organizations. Competition for talent is becoming even fiercer in the face of a growing labor shortage (Frank *et al.*, 2004). More than 21 million baby-boomers are expected to retire over the next decade and there will not be enough new entrants into the labor force to fill their positions (Hewlett, 2007). The US



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workforce has grown by around 12 percent this decade, but is only expected to grow 4 percent between 2010 and 2020 (Benko and Weisberg, 2007).

Ironically, as the need to compete for talent is escalating, organizations are failing in their efforts to retain highly educated women. While men and women are entering the workforce at the same rate, their numbers become increasingly unequal as they move up the corporate ladder. More than half of all graduate degrees are now awarded to women, but 98 percent of CEOs at *Fortune* 500 companies are men. A total of two-thirds of highly qualified women either leave work for good, or reject corporate careers in favor of a less conventional career path (Hewlett, 2007). In the current environment, organizations can no longer afford such great losses of talent. They must figure out how to stop the female brain drain.

A better understanding of women's careers can help organizations make meaningful changes in order to retain female talent (Sullivan and Mainiero, 2008). While research on women's careers tends to focus on their individual choices, such as opting out, women's career decisions are in large part a reaction to outdated work structures, policies, and cultures that do not fit their lives. The limited career options offered by many companies leave women with few real choices (Shapiro *et al.*, 2008; Stone, 2007). Deep, widespread changes to the traditional workplace are needed so that women have more options and don't feel forced to choose between career and family. The overarching goal of this paper is to help organizations improve their ability to attract and retain female talent by better understanding women's careers and what drives their career decisions.

There is a profound disconnect between the traditional career model, characterized by continuous, full-time, long-term employment and objective measures of success like salary and promotions and the needs of women workers. As primary caregivers, women have more non-work responsibilities than men, making it difficult to adhere to the norms of the traditional career model. New career theories like multi-directional careers (Baruch, 2004) or boundaryless careers (Arthur, 1994) are emerging that better reflect the needs of a more diverse workforce. These theories recognize that many women are crafting customized careers in response to their personal values and particular life situations (Valcour *et al.*, 2007).

Women are poorly represented at the higher levels of organizations in part because they are rejecting the rules of the traditional career model that must be followed in order to make it to the top in most organizations. While women want to work, they don't "want to work in the way you have to work in order to reach the top these days" (Tischler, 2004). In weighing the costs and benefits of following a traditional career, many women, especially mothers, decide the costs of advancing to a higher level are too high (Grady and McCarthy, 2008). Instead, they are choosing the kind of career that enables them to be successful on their own terms, to find their balance (Heslin, 2005).

Two career models may be particularly useful for understanding women's careers. The protean career (Hall, 1976, 2004) is conceptualized as an individualized, self-directed career guided by personal values and subjective measures of success. In a similar vein, Mainiero and Sullivan's (2006) kaleidoscope career model (KCM) describes how careers are created by individuals as they make decisions based on the shifting importance of challenge, balance, and authenticity across their lifetime. Although the protean career was introduced several decades ago, it has been the focus of limited

empirical research (Briscoe *et al.*, 2006; Valcour and Ladge, 2008). The KCM, because it is so new, likewise has limited empirical support.

The current study investigates women's careers using both the protean career and the kaleidoscope career concepts. Two specific questions are addressed:

- (1) Are women adopting a protean career orientation by becoming career self-agents and crafting their own careers?
- (2) Are women's career decisions guided by the kaleidoscope values of challenge, balance, and authenticity?

The results of this study are then used to discuss changes that organizations can make to better attract and retain female talent.

#### *Women's careers*

Women are at a particular disadvantage when attempting to conform to the traditional career model. Most work structures and organizational cultures are still based on the traditional view of the ideal worker who does not let outside responsibilities interfere with hours on or commitment to the job. This profile does not fit the reality of women's lives. The workplace has changed very little in the past 50 years, yet the workforce has changed dramatically. And while half of the workforce is now made up of women, societal norms still expect women to shoulder the brunt of household and care giving responsibilities. The amount of non-work responsibilities that most women have makes it extremely difficult for them to conform to the expectations of the ideal employee. And as jobs become more extreme, characterized by longer hours and increased performance pressures (Hewlett and Luce, 2006), women are having an even harder time fulfilling both their work and their non-work demands.

Because women value relationships and connectedness with others to such a great extent, they often sacrifice their needs for others (Gilligan, 1982). This leads them to carefully evaluate the potential impact of their career decisions on the lives of significant others (Powell and Mainiero, 1992). This explains, in part, the slow progress that women are making advancing into higher-level executive jobs (Burke and Vinnicombe, 2005). Many women decide the sacrifices they have to make to get to the top just are not worth the rewards, the cost in terms of the negative impact on their family life is perceived to be too high (Grady and McCarthy, 2008). The inflexibility and extreme demands of so many jobs today leave women searching for alternatives.

While the popular press has dedicated much attention to the idea of professional women opting out of the workforce (Belkin, 2003; Story, 2005; Wallis, 2004), in most cases these women are only out of the workforce temporarily (Cabrera, 2007; Hewlett and Luce, 2005). When they return, many women are choosing to be "career self-agents", rejecting the traditional "work is primary" model that is often unworkable in their lives and instead setting their own terms of employment (Shapiro *et al.*, 2008). Rather than opting out of work, women are opting out of the traditional career model, becoming free agents who create careers that allow them to fulfill their changing needs across the course of their lives (Mainiero and Sullivan, 2006).

#### *Protean careers*

According to the protean career concept, individuals can reshape their careers in response to changing life circumstances, just as the mythological Greek god Proteus

was able to change his form at will (Hall, 1976). Two central elements characterize the protean career: self-directedness and personal value congruence (Briscoe *et al.*, 2006). Traditionally, individuals relied on the organization to take responsibility for their careers. In a protean career individuals are self-directed in that they take a proactive role in managing their own careers. Thus, women who become career self-agents are essentially adopting protean careers. The self-directed nature of a protean career often results in multiple career cycles, which can help women accommodate family responsibilities. They may go through numerous cycles as they seek to create careers that satisfy their own personal needs and definition of success (Valcour and Ladge, 2008).

This leads to the second reason that the protean career may be especially apropos for studying women's careers: emphasis on personal value congruence. Women define their career differently than do men. Their definitions of success often focus on subjective rather than just objective outcomes (Lirio *et al.*, 2007; Sturges, 1999; Pachilicz *et al.*, 2008; Valcour and Ladge, 2008; Wise and Millward, 2005). In protean careers, career success is internal, based on fulfillment of one's personal values. Psychological success, such as a sense of personal accomplishment or family happiness, is valued over more traditional measures of success like monetary rewards or progression up the corporate ladder. Defining success subjectively based on fulfilling personal values allows women to experience psychological success, even if they do not achieve more traditional measures of success (Valcour and Ladge, 2008).

Given the importance of personal values to protean careers, some studies have specifically examined the nature of the values that drive protean careers. Two values that emerged in Sargent and Domberger's (2007) study were: being engaged in work that makes a contribution to society and achieving work-life balance. Vigoda-Gadot and Grimland (2008) found a positive relationship between a protean career and good citizenship values or altruistic behavior, defined as doing good things for others. Work that allows individuals to help make the world a better place, like a calling, has also been associated with protean careers (Hall, 1996; Heslin, 2005). Last, the protean career is defined in part by its emphasis on the value of continuous learning and mastery. Individuals following a protean career engage in a lifelong series of developmental experiences. In fact, challenging work, such as stretch job assignments, is vital for building the employability necessary for pursuing a protean career (Hall, 1996).

A final aspect of the protean career that makes it well suited for the study of women's careers is that women have been found to engage more often in short-term planning using incremental career strategies, a common characteristic of protean careers, while men have more long-term career goals, which is more typical of traditional careers (McDonald *et al.*, 2005). Men and women start off with similar preferences regarding their careers, however, these preferences diverge over time due to different experiences. Life situations, often having children, move women off their original career path (Becker and Moen, 1999; Hull and Nelson, 2000). They redefine their career aspirations and adopt short-term strategies that best fit their changing circumstances.

Not only are there theoretical reasons for using protean career theory to study women's careers, but there is also empirical evidence of positive outcomes for women on protean career paths. Reitman and Schneer (2003) found that women on a protean career path were better able to combine work and family. They were equally as likely

as men to be married and have children, while women on traditional paths were less likely than men to be married and have children. There was income equality between men and women on protean paths, whereas women following traditional paths earned 20 percent less than men. And finally, more women on a protean path reached top management positions than did those on a traditional path.

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*Kaleidoscope careers*

A second career model that has great potential for studying women's non-linear careers is the Kaleidoscope Career Model. The KCM describes how career patterns shift over time as individual's needs and interests change (Mainiero and Sullivan, 2006). The model proposes that three parameters, authenticity, balance, and challenge, influence career decisions. Authenticity is defined as being true to oneself. It leads people to look for work that is compatible with their values. Balance refers to the desire to successfully integrate one's work and non-work lives. Last, challenge includes the desire for autonomy and responsibility, as well as an interest in learning and growing. These three career motives can be likened to the mirrors in a kaleidoscope. They are always present, yet changing life situations cause different parameters to be the primary focus at different points in time. Just as one turns a kaleidoscope to see new patterns, so do career patterns evolve in response to changing life priorities.

The values that have been identified as drivers of a protean career are very similar to those proposed by the KCM as influencing career decisions: work-life balance, authenticity, such as making a contribution or doing good things for others, and challenge through continuous learning and mastery. Another similarity between the two career theories is evident in Briscoe *et al.*'s (2006) discovery that the career attitudes they measured in order to assess a protean career orientation varied across career stage and context. Career attitudes are likely determined by kaleidoscope thinking and would be expected to change over time as life circumstances cause individuals to prioritize one type of value over another. Also, kaleidoscope careers are "created on the individual's own terms, defined not by a corporation, but by the individual's own values and life choices" (Sullivan *et al.*, 2007). So like protean careers, kaleidoscope careers are self-directed.

While there are a number of arguments for why the protean and the kaleidoscope career models may be particularly useful for studying women's careers, the kaleidoscope career model has actually been used to distinguish distinct career patterns for men and women (Sullivan and Mainiero, 2007). A *beta* career pattern has been found to be more typical for women. It is characterized by a focus on challenge in early career, with issues of balance becoming more important in mid career, and authenticity becoming the primary focus in late career. Men, on the other hand, have been found to more often follow an *alpha* career pattern. This pattern also begins with an emphasis on challenge in early career, then the focus moves to authenticity in mid career, and finally to balance in late career. Findings further show that the alpha career pattern typically followed by men is linear and fairly straightforward, whereas the beta career pattern followed by a majority of women is more complex and often non-linear.

In summary, it appears that women may be driven to adopt protean career orientations in order to satisfy their personal values of challenge, balance, and authenticity that shift in importance over their lifetime. In order to examine this

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proposition in more detail, the current study explores the career trajectories of professional women with the goal of answering two key research questions:

*RQ1.* What career orientation do women adopt when they re-enter the workforce after having taken time off: protean or traditional?

*RQ2.* Do women seek to satisfy the kaleidoscope values of challenge, balance, and/or authenticity when making their career decisions?

## Method

The women who participated in this study had originally responded to a survey of women graduates of a top ranked international business school located in the USA. In addition to responding to the survey that explored their career experiences, the women were asked if they would be willing to be contacted for a follow-up interview. Of the 220 women who agreed to participate in an interview, 80 had voluntarily left the workforce at some time in their career and had since returned to work. From this pool, 25 women were randomly chosen for interviews.

Open-ended semi-structured interviews were conducted by telephone and the interviews were taped and transcribed in full. Interviews averaged an hour in length. General demographic information was collected first. Then the women were asked questions related to their career trajectories. Questions focused on descriptions of the job they had before they left the workforce, why they left, how long they were out of the workforce, descriptions of the job they returned to, and the reasons for choosing that job. Two coders analyzed the transcripts and when there was disagreement they arrived at a final coding decision after an in-depth discussion. Average overall interrater agreement was 92 percent.

Using qualitative data analysis techniques, such as those described by Strauss and Corbin (1990), the transcripts were analyzed following a deductive approach. First, the two main areas of distinction between traditional and protean career patterns: career self-management and personal value congruence (Briscoe *et al.*, 2006; Sargent and Domberger, 2007) were used as guidelines to code each re-entry as exhibiting either a protean career orientation or a traditional career orientation. Second, in order to test the extent to which personal values are associated with kaleidoscope thinking, the career values of challenge, balance, and authenticity were also coded during data analysis.

## Findings

Respondents' ages ranged from 34 to 57 years-old. Almost half of the women were in their 40's, the mean age being 44 years-old. Two of the respondents were single with no children, four were divorced mothers, and 19 were married with children. Overall, 14 of the women had two children and eight had three children. Of the 25 women, 24 began their careers working for large corporations. Their graduate degrees in international business had landed them positions in companies such as Citibank, IBM, Levi Strauss, SC Johnson, Morgan Stanley, Eastman Kodak, and Accenture.

When asked their reasons for stepping out of the workforce, 12 of the women said they quit their job to stay home with their children, nine said they stopped working to follow their husband who relocated for his job, and five quit because they were tired or burned out. A total of four of the women said one of the reasons they stopped working was because they were not happy with the job, in some cases citing discrimination.



However, on average women were happy with their jobs when they quit. When asked on a scale of 1 to 5 how happy they were with their past job, 5 being very happy, the average response was 3.8.

The average amount of time the women spent out of the workforce was four years. Of the women, 11 returned to work because they wanted to work again, citing reasons such as they enjoyed working or their children were older or they were bored not working; eight cited financial reasons for returning to the workforce. When asked how they found the job they returned to 21 of the women said they found their job thanks to a contact, so networking was very important for re-entering the workforce.

Results for the two main research questions, what career orientation do women who return to work adopt and do kaleidoscope values drive their decisions, are presented below. Table I provides a summary of the career orientation and values for each of the interviewees.

*Career orientation*

The first research question addresses the career orientation that women adopt when they re-enter the workforce after having taken time off. Of the 25 women in the study, 17 of them returned to the workforce as career self-agents, following a protean career orientation. Most of them returned to a career that allowed them to work either part-time or reduced hours, while some chose a new career that allowed for more flexibility. Of the women, five returned to work following a traditional career

| Interviewee | Age | Job | Career orientation |                | Kaleidoscope values |         |              |
|-------------|-----|-----|--------------------|----------------|---------------------|---------|--------------|
|             |     |     | Traditional career | Protean career | Challenge           | Balance | Authenticity |
| BE          | 42  |     |                    | ×              |                     | ×       | ×            |
| TK          | 46  |     | ×                  |                | ×                   |         | ×            |
| JL          | 51  |     |                    | ×              |                     |         | ×            |
| TH          | 46  |     |                    | ×              |                     | ×       |              |
| RS          | 37  |     |                    | ×              |                     | ×       |              |
| MC          | 57  | ×   |                    |                |                     |         |              |
| MS          | 34  |     |                    | ×              |                     | ×       |              |
| PO          | 39  |     | ×                  |                |                     |         |              |
| MS          | 39  |     |                    | ×              |                     | ×       |              |
| MG          | 46  |     |                    | ×              |                     | ×       |              |
| CS          | 36  | ×   |                    |                |                     | ×       |              |
| AP          | 41  |     | ×                  |                |                     | ×       |              |
| TH          | 41  |     |                    | ×              |                     | ×       |              |
| BR          | 47  |     |                    | ×              |                     |         | ×            |
| JL          | 36  |     |                    | ×              |                     | ×       |              |
| RN          | 50  |     |                    | ×              |                     |         | ×            |
| DB          | 44  |     |                    | ×              |                     | ×       |              |
| KW          | 52  |     | ×                  |                | ×                   |         |              |
| PF          | 45  |     |                    | ×              |                     | ×       |              |
| CC          | 54  |     |                    | ×              |                     |         | ×            |
| AL          | 42  |     |                    | ×              |                     | ×       | ×            |
| RS          | 43  | ×   |                    |                |                     |         |              |
| BS          | 46  |     | ×                  |                |                     |         |              |
| LMR         | 44  |     |                    | ×              |                     | ×       | ×            |
| DH          | 38  |     |                    | ×              |                     | ×       |              |

**Table I.**  
Career orientation and  
principle career values

orientation, returning to careers similar to the ones they had left that required full-time commitment and long hours. Finally, three of the women had not returned to careers; instead they adopted a job orientation (Heslin, 2005), working on average 20 hours per month in areas unrelated to their educational training or past careers. One did occasional projects for her husband's company, another helped families relocate to her area, and one taught fitness classes.

Of the career self-agents who adopted a protean career orientation, eight went back to work in the same industry where they had worked before but found either a part-time position or were working a reduced-hours schedule. Several of them were doing project work as independent contractors in law, finance, computers, or insurance. One woman returned to work in the semiconductor industry with a three-day-a-week schedule. Another started working for a non-for-profit organization four days-a-week. She later changed to five days-a-week working 7.30 a.m. to 2.30 p.m.

Of the women interviewed, nine demonstrated the self-directedness of a protean career by completely changing careers. A total of two of them became coaches, working from home offices mainly during the hours when their children were in school. Another became a financial consultant also working independently from a home office and two women chose not to return to their corporate careers and instead became elementary school teachers in order to have schedules more compatible with those of their children.

While 17 of the women interviewed followed a protean career strategy, proactively searching for different ways of working that fit their needs, five of them returned to work following a traditional career orientation. That is, they returned to the career that they had left, continuing along the same career path at the same accelerated pace as before. A total of three of these women, two of whom were divorced, listed financial reasons as their motivation for returning to work. So it is likely that they were concerned about the possible financial implications of becoming a career self-agent. One of them admitted she would not have had the career she had if it hadn't been for her divorce. The financial motivation kept her from "settling for just an OK job and a second income".

Of the two women who returned to a traditional career, but not for financial reasons, one was working in Africa and commented that she and her husband were both able to pursue their careers because they had affordable help, including a nanny, a cook, and a driver. So the need for balance had not pushed her to look for an alternative to the traditional career. Furthermore, she was working for a not-for-profit organization, which allowed her to satisfy her need for authenticity. The other woman did not return to work until her children were much older, so she was also less concerned with the issue of balance.

While three of the women interviewed returned to a traditional career path due to financial reasons, five others also cited financial reasons for returning to work, but they chose to follow a protean career orientation. One of the divorced mothers re-oriented her career by becoming a teacher. Admittedly, she made much less money, but flexibility was more important to her than a high salary. This is a good example of the key role that personal values, especially the desire for balance, play in shaping a protean career.

The findings show that a majority of the women interviewed returned to work following a protean career orientation. They took charge of their careers and actively sought ones that would satisfy their particular life circumstances. Their career decisions were self-directed and guided by personal values.

*Career values*

The second research question deals with the issue of the values that women seek to satisfy when making career decisions. Specifically, the career values of challenge, balance, and authenticity, proposed by the KCM to drive career decisions, were explored. Of the women interviewed, 16 mentioned the importance of trying to find balance. All but three of the women following a protean career orientation said they had changed careers in order to better integrate their work and non-work lives. On the other hand, only one of the five women who returned to work following a traditional career orientation mentioned the importance of balance. It is clear that balance was a key value driving women to proactively change their careers.

Of the women, eight mentioned authenticity as an important aspect of their career; seven of these women were following a protean career orientation. Their interest in being authentic led them to search for a career that would allow them to be true to themselves or to make a contribution to society. Women who became teachers and coaches talked about how rewarding they found their new careers to be. The one woman who continued along a traditional career path and also mentioned the importance of authenticity had a very high level job working in Africa for a non-for-profit company.

Only two women mentioned the importance of having a career that challenged them and both of them returned to work following a traditional career orientation. Interestingly, 20 of the 25 women interviewed mentioned how challenging the job they had prior to leaving the workforce had been. A few of them even commented that they had already proven themselves in their careers and were now looking for other things, especially balance.

The *beta* pattern that the KCM proposes for women is clear among this group of women. They all began their careers in highly challenging positions after having received advanced degrees in international business. Life circumstances led them all to step out of the workforce temporarily. Most of the women in this study were in mid career, their average age being 44, and, as proposed by the KCM, balance was overwhelmingly what these women valued the most. Finally, eight of the women mentioned the importance of authenticity. A total of five of the eight were older than the average age of 44, three of them being in their 50s. So, again, as the beta career pattern suggests, authenticity appears to be valued more by women in late career.

It was clear from the women's comments that their pursuit of a protean career was driven in large part by their desire to better integrate their work and non-work lives. A business owner said she loves the fact that she is "totally independent and I get to design my workday". Another woman who works from home explained that she "would never have taken this job if I had to get up in the morning and put on pantyhose and makeup and leave the house by 8 and come home at 7 o'clock at night; I wouldn't do it because I want to be here for my kids".

**Discussion**

An overwhelming majority of the women in this study followed a protean career orientation when they returned to the workforce after having taken time out. In most cases they obtained part-time positions or worked reduced hours. Some started their own business or chose less demanding jobs, like teaching. In line with a protean orientation, the women were self-directed in managing their careers, rejecting the

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traditional corporate careers that they had pursued previously in favor of new careers that better fit their evolving life circumstances.

They further exhibited a protean orientation in that their decisions were driven by personal values. Most all of the women that changed their career orientation did so in order to obtain more balance between their work and non-work lives. Given that the majority of the women interviewed were in mid career, this lends support to the KCM prediction that women at midcareer are predominately concerned about the issue of balance, often adjusting their career ambitions to obtain a more flexible schedule (Sullivan and Mainiero, 2008).

The difficulty of fulfilling both family responsibilities and work demands led these women to trade careers that had allowed them to achieve high levels of objective success for careers that typically provided fewer monetary rewards, yet allowed them to achieve subjective career success. Of the women interviewed, 14 reported making lower salaries than they had before they stepped out, yet comments abounded regarding how much happier they were with a more balanced life. Pursuing a protean career allowed them to achieve career success based on their own personal criteria.

The results of this study support the emerging preferences theory that Hull and Nelson (2000) developed to describe gender differences in careers. They attribute the differences to the fact that men and women start off with similar preferences regarding their careers, however, these preferences diverge over time due to different experiences. Becker and Moen (1999) found that younger women started out with more egalitarian ideas and major career expectations, but life situations, often children, moved them off their career path. Hewlett (2007) explains that women tend to redefine their career aspirations, often downsizing their ambitions as they head through their thirties.

The fact that women are still expected to shoulder the majority of the childcare responsibilities in our society leads them to make adjustments in their careers in order to accommodate the needs of children (Crittenden, 2001). This trend can be seen among physicians, where gender differences in hours worked and earnings emerge only after women take on family responsibilities (Sasser, 2005), and among academicians where females are disadvantaged in their careers due to family constraints that cause them to impose geographic restrictions and to choose family-friendly jobs rather than pursuing positions in prestigious departments (Kirchmeyer, 2006).

Inflexible work schedules, long hours, and travel demands make it impossible for many women to balance work and family responsibilities, so they are forced to follow a protean orientation in order to create careers that allow them to manage these competing demands. It has been argued that women really do not have a choice at all, considering how limited their options are. Most women face a choice gap which is the difference between the career choices they would have made had they not had care giving responsibilities and the choices they actually make given the realities of their responsibilities combined with the lack of options at work (Stone, 2007). As jobs become more extreme it will become even harder for women to manage their work and non-work lives, in effect increasing the choice gap.

#### *Organizational implications*

Organizations are facing a significant brain drain of female talent. Somewhere around 42 percent of professional women voluntarily leave their careers, at least temporarily (Cabrera, 2007; Hewlett and Luce, 2005). And more importantly, only 5 percent of the

highly qualified women looking to re-enter the workforce would consider working for the company they left (Hewlett and Luce, 2005). The inflexible demands of the traditional career model that most organizations still cling to are forcing women to forge their own career paths. Women are crafting careers that allow them to combine work and life, to satisfy their personal values, and to achieve their own definition of success. Until the traditional career model is no longer the norm, talented women will continue to leave organizations and adopt protean careers.

As a result, organizations are losing talented employees in whom they have made substantial investments in training and who have established relationships with their clients. As the war for talent intensifies, organizations will no longer be able to afford to lose such an important part of their talent pool. Losing female talent is even more serious when one takes into account that companies with more women on their top management teams have been found to outperform companies with fewer women managers (Catalyst, 2004). Organizations with more female leaders can better understand and respond to their female clients and customers.

Companies will only be able to attract and retain women when they change work structures and policies and career models so that women have the flexibility they need to fulfill both their work and their non-work responsibilities. While many firms have flexible work policies, the cultures of most organizations continue to reward face time and full-time work. In these cultures women who work from home or work reduced hours are often seen as less committed to their careers. As a result, they are not given choice assignments and are passed over for promotion. Another problem with flexible hours is that they all too often are not truly flexible. Once an employee has chosen a "flexible" schedule, say working from 7.30 to 3.30, expectations are created that eliminate the flexibility needed to, for example, take their ailing mother to the doctor at 1.30. Women's need to integrate their work and non-work lives is so great that they require real control over working hours.

### *Changing work*

One way to provide true flexibility is to move away from an emphasis on face time and physical presence and toward a focus on results. Best Buy has done just this in implementing an alternative work program called Results-only Work Environment (ROWE) (Ressler and Thompson, 2008). Employees have total control over when, where, and how long they work. The only thing that matters is that they meet their objectives. No one is judged for coming in late, leaving early, or not showing up at all. Managers create very clear goals and expectations and employees are rewarded based on outcomes.

Holding employees accountable for outcomes while giving them control over their time has had a number of positive results. Over 3,000 Best Buy employees work in a ROWE and not only are they happier, but productivity has increased an average of 35 percent and turnover rates in some divisions are down by 90 percent (Ressler and Thompson, 2008). While ROWE was not designed specifically for women, it is likely that working in an organization that rewards results rather than physical presence would have an especially positive impact on mid-career women who place such a high priority on work-life balance.

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*Changing careers*

In addition to changing work structures so that results are emphasized over face time, career models also need to change. Flexibility in place and time needs to be combined with arc-of-career flexibility (Hewlett, 2007). Providing flexibility over the arc of a career allows for individuals to pass through a series of stages in their careers. They may have periods of intense work followed by some time out, then ramp back up to part-time or reduced hours work, and later return to work full-time, possibly telecommuting once or twice a week.

Companies that provide flexibility across the career allow women to continue their careers while also adjusting their workloads in order to better balance work and non-work demands. Unfortunately, the culture of most workplaces does not allow for arc-of-career flexibility. Recruiters and employers are very suspicious of people who take time out. And there is stigma attached to working reduced hours or part-time schedules. Continuous, full-time employment and long hours are still used to judge employee commitment and performance.

Deloitte has attempted to address these problems by replacing the traditional career model with mass career customization (MCC), a career approach that allows employees to manage their careers in response to their life circumstances (Benko and Weisberg, 2007). Employees can change their career paths over time by adjusting four different career dimensions. The first one is pace or the rate of career progression. The second is workload, which refers to the quantity of work output. The third dimension includes options for when and where work gets done, that is location and schedule. And the final work dimension is role, which includes position and responsibilities.

MCC gives employees flexibility over the course of their careers by letting them adjust any of these dimensions in response to the changing demands in their lives. It offers transparency by making the trade-offs associated with choices more explicit. For example, the role of an employee who chooses a reduced workload and a restricted schedule would most likely be that of an individual contributor rather than a leadership role. Furthermore, because MCC is not an accommodation that is limited to a small group of employees, it does not have the stigma or career penalty that so often accompanies the use of more traditional flexible work arrangements.

The impetus for the development of MCC was to improve employee retention by solving the misalignment between today's workplace and its nontraditional workforce. Like ROWE, MCC applies to all employees, men and women alike, although the positive impact on the advancement of women has been especially significant. For example, the number of women in the highest-ranking group of partners and principals at Deloitte increased by 13 percent in 2007 (Deloitte, 2007).

*Limitations and conclusions*

A potential limitation of this study is that it includes only professional women. All participants had a graduate degree in international business, thus limiting the generalizability of findings to other populations. The women interviewed could afford to take time out of the workforce and clearly this is an option that most women do not have. However, this does not negate the conclusion that many highly educated women are rejecting traditional organizational careers in lieu of protean careers that better satisfy their personal values. The truth is, the women included in this study are

precisely the women that organizations are most concerned with retaining as the war for talent escalates.

A second limitation of this study is that all of the women interviewed had taken a career break. In a sense they were already pursuing protean careers by having stepped off the career ladder. Women who are financially unable to stop working or for other reasons choose not to take a career break may be less likely than the women in this study to adopt a protean career orientation. Nonetheless, five of the women who had taken a break re-entered the workforce following a traditional career orientation, so temporarily opting out was not automatically a move toward a protean career.

This study confirms that many professional women are rejecting traditional organizational careers in favor of protean careers. They are opting for self-directed careers that let them achieve subjective career success by allowing them to satisfy both work and non-work responsibilities as well as fulfill their needs for authenticity. Current inflexibilities and out-dated assumptions about how work should look and how careers should be built will continue to drive women out of organizations.

As suggested by the metaphor of the Greek god Proteus' ability to change his form at will, a protean career implies adaptability: individuals adjust to evolving circumstances by changing the shape of their careers (Inkson, 2006). Using the same metaphor, Wall (2005) suggested that organizations need to become "protean" by embracing change. He argued that the most effective organizations are those that adapt to changes in the environment. The current mismatch between today's workplace and the workforce exists because organizations have failed to recognize the need for change. Protean organizations that recognize and respond to the need to reshape both how work gets done and how careers are built will achieve a competitive advantage by attracting and retaining valuable talent, particularly women.

In order to retain highly educated, talented women companies must change their policies and cultures regarding careers and increase workplace flexibility. Employees should be given more control over how, when, and where they work, while still being held accountable for results. Organizations must also move away from the traditional career model that emphasizes full-time, continuous employment. Instead, they should embrace arc-of-the-career flexibility, allowing women to manage their own careers by adjusting their work loads at different points along the way in order to satisfy their changing needs across the life span.

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