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Facilitating a Whole-Life Approach to Career Development: The Role of Organizational Leadership

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Original Publication Citation

Litano, M. L., & Major, D. A. (2016). Facilitating a whole-life approach to career development: The role of organizational leadership. *Journal of Career Development*, 43(1), 52-65. doi:10.1177/0894845315569303



Facilitating a Whole-Life Approach to Career Development: The Role of Organizational Leadership

Journal of Career Development
2016, Vol. 43(1) 52-65

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DOI: 10.1177/0894845315569303

jcd.sagepub.com



Michael L. Litano¹ and Debra A. Major¹

Abstract

This article focuses on the “whole-life” approach to career development. A review of the ways in which career paths have been conceptualized over time demonstrates that increasing consideration has been given to nonwork factors (i.e., personal life and family life) in defining careers. The whole-life perspective on career development acknowledges that employees are striving for opportunities for professional development as well as individualized work–life balance, which changes over the life course. Although the careers literature has emphasized interorganizational mobility as the primary mechanism for achieving these goals, whole-life career development can also be achieved within a single organization when organizational leadership is willing to address employees’ work–family needs. This article addresses how leaders across organizational levels, including executive-level leaders and first-line supervisors, can foster whole-life career development. In addition to beneficial outcomes for employees, potential competitive advantages for organizations implementing the whole-life approach to career development are discussed.

Keywords

career development, whole-life career development, work–family balance, leadership, work–family support, career growth

What is the best way to ensure career development in the modern workforce? We contend that to be managed effectively, career development must be approached from a “whole-life” perspective. Consistent with the recognition that career patterns are shaped by employee decisions made in response to nonwork circumstances (Greenhaus & Kossek, 2014; Valcour, Bailyn, & Quijada, 2007), a whole-life approach to career development recognizes that professional development does not occur in isolation but in the context of the employee’s personal and family needs, which change over the life course. By tending to employees’ changing career, personal, and family needs, organizations can retain valuable employees and gain competitive advantage.

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Many contemporary career theories have emphasized individual responsibility for career development, highlighting interorganizational mobility as the primary mechanism for achieving career goals (e.g., Hall & Mirvis, 1996; Sullivan & Arthur, 2006). However, the best organizations recognize the advantages associated with being an active partner in managing employees' career development and in addressing their work–life needs (Clarke, 2013). Research suggests that opportunity for work–life balance is an important career priority, for both women and men (Vandello, Hettinger, Bosson, & Siddiqi, 2013).

In the sections that follow, we first trace the evolution of employee career orientations and conceptualizations of career development in the academic literature, demonstrating how it has increasingly incorporated the employee's personal and family roles. Next, we elaborate on the whole-life approach to career development. We emphasize the role that organizational leadership plays in facilitating employees' whole-life career development through support for work–life balance. The roles of upper level executives and frontline supervisors are considered, as is the importance of alignment across levels of organizational leadership. Finally, we discuss the competitive advantages that the whole-life approach to career development may yield for organizations.

Incorporating Whole-Life Considerations Into Conceptualizations of Career Development

Economic and societal changes in the United States have contributed to the evolution of career paths and perspectives on career development. Faced with global competition, organizations have become leaner and flatter with fewer hierarchical levels (Hall, 1996). Rather than ascending upward through linear trajectories within a single organization, some employees now pursue multidirectional career paths across numerous organizations to realize objective (e.g., promotions and pay increases) and subjective (e.g., career and life satisfaction) career success (Arthur, Khapova, & Wilderom, 2005). As such, the influence of nonwork domains (family and personal life) has become integrated progressively into the career development literature (Greenhaus & Kossek, 2014; Hall & Mirvis, 1996; Sullivan & Arthur, 2006). There is increasing recognition that contemporary career paths vary in form, at least in part, because individual career patterns are shaped by employee decisions made in response to nonwork circumstances (Greenhaus & Kossek, 2014; Valcour et al., 2007). This section outlines the evolution of employee career orientations and conceptualizations of career development as illustrated in the research literature.

The Traditional Organizational Career

Notions of “working from the ground floor up” and the “organization man” reflect the traditional organizational career (Clarke, 2013; Whyte, 1956). Employees are hired into entry-level positions and advance hierarchically through “in-house” promotions, maintaining stable employment within a single organization (Weber, 1947; Whyte, 1956). This conceptualization of the career, emphasizing job security and long-term employment within a single organization, dominated the academic literature from the early to the mid-20th century (Hall, 1976; Weber, 1947). Employees competed to advance upwardly through limited positions in the organizational hierarchy (Kanter, 1989). In these careers, the employee not only worked for the organization but had a sense of affiliation and attachment to it (Whyte, 1956). Employee career development was supported by organizational career management and training and development programs, and career success was demonstrated through increasing status and compensation (Kanter, 1989). Until the late 1980s (Hall, 1996), the employee's life outside work (i.e., personal and family) was not viewed as a relevant factor in career development.

The Boundaryless and Protean Careers

In response to globalization, organizational restructuring, and economic conditions, the positional hierarchies within organizations began to level as the 21st century approached, prompting declarations that the traditional “career is dead” (Hall, 1996). Concurrent with these organizational changes, the notion of a career unconstrained by organizational boundaries emerged in the career development literature (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996). For example, Baruch and Rosenstein (1992, p. 478) defined a career as “a process of development of the employee through a path of experience and jobs in the organization(s).” Vertical movement through a single organization was no longer a necessary characteristic of one’s career, and the career development models shifted away from the traditional career (e.g., Arthur & Rousseau, 1996). Employers maintained expectations for high performance and commitment, while simultaneously shifting responsibility for career development firmly to the employee in the name of “employability” (i.e., the idea that in order to maintain their marketability employees are responsible for maintaining and developing their skills; Cappelli, 1999).

Contemporary careers were recognized as varying in form, such that some were characterized by interorganizational mobility, lateral movement within a single organization, or variations in employment arrangements over time to better align with nonwork circumstances (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996; Hall, 2004). Objective indicators of career success were becoming increasingly supplemented by nonwork considerations to form a whole-life perspective on career development (Hall, 2004; Mainiero & Sullivan, 2005).

Arthur and Rousseau (1996) applied the term “boundaryless career” to describe how a career unfolds beyond the borders of a single organization. In the boundaryless career, the individual employee is liberated from organizational constraints on career planning and development, and is free to pursue opportunities to advance his or her career by changing employers. The boundaryless career involves the development of short-term, contractual relationships with multiple employers to achieve external indicators of career success (e.g., promotions and pay increases; Arthur et al., 2005).

Similarly, Hall (1976, p. 201) described the “protean career” as a contemporary career path which, “consists of all of the person’s varied experiences in education, training, work in several organizations, changes in occupational field, etc.” Career development in the protean career is driven by internal (psychological) perceptions of success, such as self-actualization, fulfillment, and satisfaction, rather than the external indicators of success characteristic of other career orientations (Hall & Mirvis, 1996; Sullivan & Arthur, 2006). Although boundaryless and protean careers originally were distinguished by their respective emphases on physical and psychological success and mobility, career theorists now acknowledge the interdependence between the physical and the psychological aspects of careers as a driver of individual career management decisions. Sullivan and Arthur (2006) proposed that physical mobility, which refers to the actual transition across organizational boundaries (i.e., changing employers), interacts with psychological mobility (the perception of one’s willingness and preparedness to make that transition) to influence individual employee career development needs. Careers exhibit various levels of psychological and physical mobility; but perhaps most importantly, these career changes can be heavily influenced by employee responses to nonwork circumstances (Sullivan & Arthur, 2006). For example, an employee could exhibit both physical and psychological mobility in turning down (or accepting) a promotion that would hinder (or facilitate) familial responsibilities.

The Kaleidoscope Career

In response to changing family structures and the prevalence of dual career households, career development researchers introduced new career concepts in the mid-2000s that emphasized the influence of nonwork roles on career management decisions. The kaleidoscope career concept emphasizes that employees’ career patterns shift by continuously considering the impact of work and nonwork

decisions on others in their lives (Mainiero & Sullivan, 2005). In the kaleidoscope career, individuals evaluate the influence of work and nonwork factors on career development and evaluate available resources to find the best fit among work and personal commitments. Sullivan and Mainiero (2007) found that changes in one's career path tend to correspond to psychological considerations across different life stages. In making career-related decisions, individuals continuously evaluate three aspects of their careers, namely, authenticity, balance, and challenge. *Authenticity* refers to the alignment between an individual's internal values and his or her external behaviors and organizational values. *Balance* refers to the attainment and sustainment of equilibrium between one's work and nonwork demands. *Challenge* refers to an individual's requirement for stimulating work and career advancement. The individual's life stages and events influence the career decisions made based on which career factors were most salient at that specific time (Sullivan & Mainiero, 2007). For example, a new parent may place an increased emphasis on balance and respond by accepting a part-time working arrangement to spend more time with his or her family.

Originally, the literature surrounding the kaleidoscope career was only applied to women in the workplace, but the progressive shift in U.S. gender role attitudes from traditional to more egalitarian has made this career path equally applicable to men. Sullivan and Mainiero (2007) found that men and women tend to focus on different career aspects (balance, challenge, and authenticity) depending on their career and life stage. In general, both men and women focus on challenge early in their life spans. Men then gradually shift their focus to career authenticity followed by balance, whereas women tend to focus on balance before authenticity. Younger male participants were found to pursue more family-focused career patterns, consistent with the societal shift toward egalitarianism. Similar research suggests younger generations emphasize "living" over "working" and are more concerned with managing work-life balance (e.g., Beutell & Wittig-Berman, 2008). Mainiero and Sullivan (2005) found that younger employees were more likely to emphasize balance and authenticity, whereas older generations prioritized career challenge. These findings highlight that employees' careers do not develop based on a single trajectory but instead change based on personal life stage and events.

The "New" Organizational Career

Recent career development research has accentuated the frequency of employment changes among employees seeking career success (e.g., Colakoglu, 2011). A report from the Bureau of Labor Statistics (2012) revealed that younger baby boomers held an average of 11.3 jobs from ages 18 to 46. These findings reveal that on average, younger generation employees are remaining with an organization for less than 31 months.

Despite this concerning trend, there are indications that a career within a single organization is still a viable and desirable option for employees (Clarke, 2013). Employee interviews revealed that those who frequently pursued career development through interorganizational moves were motivated by a need for career and personal development *and* work-life balance (Clarke, 2013). Others who were employed by a single organization for at least 10 years emphasized the importance of having been provided flexibility, opportunities for career and personal development, and a shared responsibility for career management through a strong employer-employee relationship. These employees stressed the importance of having a career compatible with their personal lives.

The new organizational career is one that provides the flexibility of a contemporary career within a single organization. Employees are afforded internal mobility opportunities (e.g., new roles, international or cross-cultural experiences, and flexible work arrangements) that may preempt the need to seek opportunities through alternate employment. Organizations provide employees with career-specific development opportunities, which are one of the three facets of *career growth* (i.e., one's perceptions of development and advancement opportunities within an organization; Weng & McElroy, 2012; Weng, McElroy, Morrow, & Liu, 2010). Organizations can support employee development

by implementing training programs or job rotations in various departments that allow employees to broaden their knowledge, skills, and abilities (Clarke, 2013). In the new organizational career, career-specific development opportunities are integrated with the personal needs and values of the employee to facilitate whole-life development.

The new organizational career fosters balanced employer–employee relationships, such that employees desire richer experiences than the strictly transactional employer relationship inherent in contemporary careers. This perspective on careers holds a relational aspect that encourages a two-way exchange relationship between the organization and the employee. The support generated in this relationship affords opportunities for employee development to be supplemented with individualized consideration of one’s changing personal circumstances (e.g., family demands) over life stages.

The Work-Home (WH) Career Perspective

Recognizing the mutual influences that one’s career and personal needs have on one’s career path, Greenhaus and Kossek (2014) recently proposed a WH career perspective. The WH perspective highlights how career development issues, including the appraisal of career success, decisions regarding global assignments, and career sustainability, can be better understood by considering how they are impacted by one’s personal life. For example, Greenhaus and Kossek (2014) stressed the interdependencies between employees’ career management decisions (e.g., extensive travel) and family circumstances (e.g., birth of a child). This implies a holistic or whole-life approach to making career management decisions regarding issues such as promotional opportunities, inter- or intraorganizational mobility, and retirement. The WH perspective suggests that one’s personal life and career can both contribute to the experience of career development through life satisfaction and work–family balance satisfaction (Greenhaus & Kossek, 2014).

The WH perspective incorporates both the work and the family domains into one’s ability to sustain a career. A WH sustainable career preserves and facilitates human and career development through resources related to balance and positive domain-related experiences (Greenhaus & Kossek, 2014; Iles, 1997). WH career sustainability concentrates on the cross-domain spillover of well-being, energy, and other positive experiences and states (Greenhaus & Kossek, 2014).

Similar to other conceptualizations of balance (e.g., Litano, Myers, & Major, 2014; Major & Litano, 2014), the interdependencies between one’s work and nonwork domains are constantly changing over time and across various career and life stages in WH sustainable careers. This perspective emphasizes that each domain (e.g., home) should be considered in decisions related to the other (e.g., work). For decisions related to career development, the decision-making process should include reflection on one’s familial responsibilities and how experiences will transfer between the work and the nonwork domains (i.e., family, self, and community). The WH perspective on careers builds on the notion that employees are taking a whole-life approach in the consideration of career management decisions, ultimately impacting the way organizations and researchers should conceptualize and manage employee development.

Career Development Through the Whole-Life Lens

A common theme in the contemporary career literature is that whole-life considerations (i.e., those stemming from both the work and the home domains) are a major driver of career decision making. In addition to the desire for upward mobility (i.e., promotions), the inability to balance one’s nonwork responsibilities and the consideration of personal circumstances act as key antecedents to interorganizational mobility (Clarke, 2013; Sullivan & Mainiero, 2007). We contend that whether one’s career is largely intra- or interorganizational depends on the available opportunities for creating whole-life balance.

Individual work–life balance refers to the achievement of fulfilling experiences in both work and nonwork domains while expending resources reasonably across both role sets (Kirchmeyer, 2000; Mainiero & Sullivan, 2005). One’s personal balance differs intra- and inter-individually and does not necessarily entail an equal investment across domains or time (Litano et al., 2014). Major and Litano (2014) characterized personal balance as a form of adaptability that empowers individuals to pursue goals in the changing landscape of their work and personal life. At a given point, for example, this may involve geographical relocation in order to earn a promotion, and at another point, one’s family role may be prioritized due to the need to care for an aging parent. Ultimately, perceptions of work–family balance are enhanced when work–family conflict (WFC) is minimized and work–family enrichment is maximized (Frone, 2003). Greenhaus and Beutell (1985, p. 77) defined WFC as “a form of interrole conflict in which the role pressures from the work and family domains are mutually incompatible.” WFC is associated with an abundance of negative outcomes, including reduced job and life satisfaction (Kossek & Ozeki, 1998) and weaker career success and job performance (Allen, Herst, Bruck, & Sutton, 2000). Conversely, *work–family enrichment* is defined as “the extent to which experiences in one role improve the quality of life in the other role” (Greenhaus & Powell, 2006, p. 73). Work–family enrichment is related to positive outcomes including job and family satisfaction, and organizational commitment (McNall, Nicklin, & Masuda, 2010). When there is a perceived work–family imbalance, employees may seek alternative employment with organizations that better accommodate their personal and/or career needs.

How Organizational Leadership Supports Whole-Life Career Development

Whereas finding balance between work and nonwork was once viewed as a burden that fell to employees’ to manage, many employers now grasp the benefit of being involved in work–life management (Major, Burke, & Fiskensbaum, 2013). Across organizational leadership levels, managers play an essential role in supporting the balance of employees’ needs for whole-life development. In this section, we focus on the contributions of upper- and lower level organizational leaders and the importance of aligned work–life support across leadership levels. Upper level leadership is comprised of executive managers, senior leaders, and human resource (HR) executives. Lower level leadership includes immediate supervisors and frontline managers. We contend that organizational leadership plays a vital role both in restructuring the organizational culture to be flexible and accepting of employees’ personal growth needs *and* in communicating and facilitating their policies and expectations at an individual level.

Upper Level Leadership

In the work–family literature, the “organization” is typically operationalized by executive-level managers and senior leaders (Chen & Bliese, 2002). These upper level leaders maintain three primary responsibilities with respect to employee whole-life development. First, these leaders and policy makers play an integral role in the development of formal work–family policies and benefit programs. Second, they construct and sustain organizational cultures by which all nonexecutive leaders and employees are constrained (Giberson et al., 2009). Finally, these leaders assume responsibility for ensuring that the climate of the organization matches its formal policies by empowering lower level leaders to respond to family-friendly requests (Major & Lauzun, 2010).

Upper level managers and HR executives are key participants in the development of work–life policies and programs. These family-friendly programs include parental leave policies, flexible working arrangements, on-site childcare, and work redesign initiatives (Kelly et al., 2008; Thompson, Beauvais, & Lyness, 1999). Work–life policies and programs allow employees to better juggle their

competing work and nonwork responsibilities, and are linked to reduced WFC and enhanced work–family enrichment (e.g., Kelly et al., 2008). Senior leaders and HR executives are also capable of formally restructuring job requirements to better accommodate employees’ nonwork lives, and to set realistic expectations for work-related time demands. For example, schedule control and flexible working arrangements serve to reduce WFC (Byron, 2005). Restructuring employees’ roles to be more flexible may be mutually beneficial as these work arrangements provide more work–family resources and enhance subordinate job satisfaction and citizenship behaviors (Kossek & Ozeki, 1998). However, family-friendly initiatives are ineffective if employees do not perceive their use to be supported by the organization (Allen, 2001; Thompson et al., 1999). The extant literature has suggested that when employees perceive the organization’s work–family culture to be unsupportive, they refrain from utilizing family-friendly policies for fear of negative career repercussions, such as being overlooked for a promotion or receiving negative performance evaluations (Judiesch & Lyness, 1999; Thompson et al., 1999).

Organizational work–family cultures are shaped by the values held by upper level leaders and policy makers. Thompson, Beauvais, and Lyness (1999, p. 394) defined work–family culture as “the shared assumptions, beliefs, and values regarding the extent to which an organization supports and values the integration of employees’ work and family lives.” Executive-level managers cultivate positive perceptions of a work–family culture by reducing fear of negative consequences associated with family-friendly benefit use, establishing reasonable organizational time demands that are compatible with other life domains, and providing and encouraging managerial support of work–family balance at all levels of leadership. Work–family policies are most utilized and effective when employees perceive the organization’s work–family culture to be positive and supportive (Allen, 2001; Thompson et al., 1999). A supportive family-friendly organizational culture may be particularly important for men reluctant to utilize flexible working arrangements for fear of being stigmatized as feminine and poor workers (Rudman & Mescher, 2013). Upper level leaders also communicate expectations and support to lower level leaders, increasing the likelihood that they too will facilitate employees’ whole-life career development by attending to work–family needs. It is imperative that executives work with direct supervisors to ensure that the organization’s formal work–life policies are supported by a positive work–life culture.

Lower Level Leadership

As the organizational leadership representatives most proximal to subordinates, direct supervisors are responsible for ensuring that organizational resources are used to meet employees’ whole-life career development needs. Frontline supervisors are often the gatekeepers to work–life policy and program use, and thus play an essential role in facilitating work–life balance. Work–family research demonstrates that subordinate perceptions of supervisor support for family are negatively related to WFC (Kossek, Pichler, Bodner, & Hammer, 2011). Direct supervisors are responsible for conducting whole-life developmental needs assessments and providing support to facilitate employees’ effective work–life management.

A whole-life needs assessment is a diagnostic process that involves communication with one’s subordinates designed to address their current work and personal issues and specify future personal and career development–related needs (Gupta, 2011). This process provides the supervisor with information about how he or she can best utilize available resources to support employees’ whole-life needs. This communication is particularly essential in accommodating career development needs as life stages change. For example, whole-life needs assessments may provide information about changes in employee role values (e.g., balance and challenge; Sullivan & Mainiero, 2007) that can be addressed accordingly. Understanding that an employee may be shifting his or her priorities from one domain to the other due to a significant life change may afford both parties the opportunity to appropriately

manage such a situation. With the information acquired in the whole-life needs assessment, supervisors are equipped to encourage and facilitate each employee's career development through their strategic use of organizational resources and policies.

The importance of the immediate supervisor is further evidenced by research demonstrating that high-quality leader-member exchange (LMX) relationships are predictive of positive work-family outcomes (e.g., Major, Fletcher, Davis, & Germano, 2008). LMX theory posits that supervisors develop unique, reciprocal exchange relationships with individual employees that are based on the mutual affect, contribution, professional respect, and loyalty (Liden & Maslyn, 1998). As subordinates complete prescribed and extra-role duties, they distinguish themselves from their peers and are more likely to be provided with resources that support their personal and career needs. A high-quality LMX relationship is mutually beneficial as subordinates are afforded more communication, support, feedback, flexibility, and role negotiation—all resources that can facilitate one's career and personal balance (Liden & Maslyn, 1998). Reciprocation leads to increased task and contextual performance and reduced turnover intentions, benefiting the supervisors and organization (Duchon, Green, & Taber, 1986).

Matthews, Bulger, and Booth (2013) suggested that family-supportive supervisor behaviors (FSSBs) may account for the relationship between LMX and positive work-family outcomes. FSSBs are a set of behaviors demonstrated by supervisors that are supportive of employees' family lives and include emotional support (i.e., considering subordinate's feelings and well-being), instrumental support (i.e., allowing and encouraging employees' use of family-friendly programs), role-modeling behaviors (displaying effective work-life management behaviors that function as an example for subordinates to follow), and creative work-family management (i.e., restructuring work roles to accommodate both the organization and the employee; Hammer, Kossek, Yragui, Bodner, & Hanson, 2009; Hammer, Kossek, Zimmerman, & Daniels, 2007). FSSBs are associated with increased positive work-family spillover and reduced WFC (Hammer et al., 2009). Supervisors who develop high-quality LMX relationships provide their employees with the opportunity to negotiate idiosyncratic deals (i-deals), which may be represented by the creative work-family management dimension of FSSB. I-deals are special employment terms between an individual employee and a supervisor that are intended to benefit both parties (Rousseau, Ho, & Greenberg, 2006). When supervisors feel authorized and empowered by upper level leadership, they can leverage these arrangements to better manage each employee's personal and career roles and goals (Lauzun, Morganson, Major, & Green, 2010; Major, Lauzun, & Jones, 2013), ultimately facilitating whole-life development in an organizational career.

In addition to establishing a high-quality relationship with one's subordinates, supervisors can proactively serve as mentors to stimulate positive employee work attitudes and career prospects (Scandura & Williams, 2004). Mentors invest in their protégés' whole-life development by offering support and resources, providing challenging tasks, coaching, and feedback, and by using their clout in the organization to sponsor and safeguard the protégé (Kendall, 2013). Kendall (2013) suggested that supervisors should foster mentoring relationships with subordinates to facilitate employee personal and career development. Pan, Sun, and Chow (2011, p. 265) define supervisory mentoring as "an intense interpersonal exchange between the supervisor and a subordinate in which the supervisor provides support, direction, and feedback regarding career plans and personal development." Supervisory mentors are more committed to the long-term development of the subordinate, and the pair shares a more meaningful personal relationship than other mentor arrangements (Booth, 1996). According to Richard, Ismail, Bhuian, and Taylor (2009), supervisory mentors have more opportunities to provide career-related resources than nonsupervisory mentors. Given their knowledge of subordinates' career and personal needs and their responsibility for subordinates' work-related development, supervisory mentors are well positioned to facilitate employee "whole-person" development (Kram & Isabella, 1985). Supervisory mentors provide employees with role modeling, career support, and psychosocial support (Scandura & Ragins, 1993), which are associated with objective (e.g., promotions,

compensation, and salary growth) and subjective (e.g., career satisfaction, expectations for advancement, and career commitment) indicators of career and personal success (Allen, Eby, Poteet, Lentz, & Lima, 2004). In addition, protégés report reduced WFC via mentor support (Nielson, Carlson, & Lankau, 2001).

Coordinating Leader Support Across Levels

Research shows that the use of family-friendly practices is associated with reporting to a family-supportive supervisor (Breugh & Frye, 2008). Of course, supervisors are most likely to refer their employees to family-friendly programs when they are aware that such programs exist in their organizations and when they believe that program use will be associated with beneficial outcomes (Casper, Fox, Sitzmann, & Landy, 2004). Thus, the importance of aligning support for work–family balance across leadership levels cannot be overstated. Leaders across organizational levels play an integral role in supporting employees’ work–life management. Meta-analytic evidence suggests that work–family-specific organizational support acts as a mediator in the relationship between work–family supervisor support and employee WFC (Kossek et al., 2011). Put simply, organizational and supervisor support for work–family is most effective in the reduction of WFC when both are present and perceived positively. Perhaps most importantly, family-friendly programs are only effective when employees perceive that their supervisor and organization support their use (Allen, 2001; Kossek et al., 2011). As an example of misaligned support, a well-intentioned supervisor may be limited in his or her ability to provide the appropriate family-friendly resources if he or she does not feel empowered to respond to family-related requests. Research suggests that supervisors accommodate work–life requests more often than not, and when first-line managers deny employees’ work–life requests the primary reason is lack of authority (Lauzun et al., 2010).

Lauzun and colleagues’ research suggests that employee perceptions of organizational work–family practices may be most favorable when support for work–family balance is aligned across leadership levels. A seamless line of communication between upper- and lower level leaders facilitates alignment of work–family support. For example, work–family feedback gathered by direct supervisors can help executive-level leaders to identify characteristics of the work-context that need restructuring. Alignment in work–family support across leadership levels provides the organization with an opportunity to be continuously mindful of employees’ changing whole-life career development needs, making the organizational career a more viable option for employees.

Organizational Benefits of Fostering Whole-Life Career Development

The opportunity for work–life balance makes the whole-life approach to career development attractive to employees. Here, we consider the advantages to employers. Although the body of research examining such issues is small, there are indications that organizations focusing on whole-life development gain a competitive advantage in recruiting and retention, and also realize improved organizational performance and effectiveness (e.g., Ngo, Foley, & Loi, 2009; Sands & Harper, 2007).

Perhaps the “organizational career” is not dead, but revivable provided that the organization takes a whole-life approach to career development. Organizations adopting career management strategies that facilitate whole-life career development may have a competitive advantage in attracting and retaining valuable employees. Indeed, the *Fortune* list of “100 Best Companies to Work For” is populated by employers that devote resources toward accommodating employee career *and* personal development (Levering & Moskowitz, 2014). Research by Lewis and Smithson (2001) revealed that workers in more egalitarian cultures feel more entitled to employer support for work–life management than in cultures that possess traditional gender role attitudes. Interviewees suggested that work–family support and resources prevent employees from seeking alternate employment and act as a means of recruiting

talented workers, which supports the notion that work–life management may be in the employer’s best financial interest. The “business case” for work–life management was also supported by Clifton and Shepard (2004), who suggested that these initiatives are effective because family-friendly companies attract a larger applicant pool enabling the organization to be more selective. Organizations that provided and supported work–life programs attracted higher quality candidates and realized increases in organizational productivity through increased employee output. Evidence from a recent meta-analysis suggests that the presence of family-friendly programs is predictive of applicant attraction (Uggerslev, Fassina, & Kraichy, 2012).

Although limited in scope, a growing body of literature has been dedicated to exploring how the accommodation of employees’ whole-life development needs may positively affect organizational performance and effectiveness. For example, organizational commitment to employees’ emotional and physical well-being positively impacts organization-level return on assets (Lee & Miller, 1999). The authors posit that commitment to employee well-being stimulates a mutual sense of loyalty that generates performance improvements and organizational success, acting as a competitive advantage for these organizations. Further research has evidenced that organizations investing in employee human capital development realize increased financial performance, return on equity, and customer satisfaction (Carmeli & Schaubroeck, 2005). Sands and Harper (2007) found the use of family-friendly programs to be negatively related to employee turnover and positively associated with organizational return on assets and return on equity. Ngo, Foley, and Loi (2009) found work–life program availability to be related to increased market performance (i.e., sales/turnover, net profit, and new product development) and HR-related performance (e.g., employee morale and retention). Thus, organizations that approach career development through a whole-life lens attract more applicants, retain valuable employees, and may realize increases in productivity and financial performance. Accommodating employees’ personal needs through work–life initiatives may improve retention and make the organizational career a more viable option.

Summary

The organizational career is practical for employees when their professional development needs are addressed in concord with consideration of their nonwork circumstances. Through support for work–life balance, organizational leadership can facilitate employees’ whole-life career development by providing the benefits of the contemporary career paths within a single organization. In return, these organizations realize a competitive advantage through increased profitability, retaining valuable workers, and attracting talented applicants. Facilitating a whole-life approach to career development provides organizations with an opportunity to reinvent the organizational career in the new career era.

Acknowledgments

Special thanks to Benjamin R. Kaufman for his help in preparation of this article.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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