

CATHLEEN BENKO

Meet an Authority on Today's

BY FLORENCE STONE



Cathy Benko, Vice Chairman and Talent Officer at Deloitte LLP

If it's insights into today's workforce that you seek, the person to ask is Cathy Benko, vice chairman and chief talent officer at Deloitte LLP.

Benko shares her observations in her latest best-selling book, *The Corporate Lattice: Achieving High Performance in the Changing World of Work*. In an interview with *MWorld*, she talked about the changing workforce, what the “corporate lattice” is, and how managers can establish their personal brand in each position they hold.

The last is certainly something in which Benko has demonstrated great skill. From her first job as executive secretary to her present leadership position at Deloitte LLP, the largest privately held professional services firm in the United States, she has proven herself an asset to her firm and its clients.

The information that follows comes from our meeting with Benko, her latest books on today's workplace, and past interviews she has done with the press.

A JERSEY GIRL

As she told one business writer, Benko was one of five girls born into a New Jersey working-class family. Attendance at Katherine Gibbs's Secretarial School landed her a position as an executive secretary in New York City. That position gave her a bird's eye view of how a company works. “It's a great perspective because it lets you see the details as well as the bigger picture,” she told the reporter. Benko held the position briefly, however, accepting soon after a promotion into the company's information technology group. While she trained for her new job, she also did college course work at Ramapo College both nights and weekends. She attended three semesters a year for five years, graduating with a dual degree in Operations Management and Management Information Systems.

Another job move allowed her to utilize her product and project management skills. But the move also prompted her to consider forming her own business, which she ultimately did.

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Nontraditional Workforce

Her systems integration consulting firm did well, but Benko felt she could benefit longer-term from an MBA. While mulling it over, she received an offer she couldn't refuse from a large brokerage firm to join them as vice president of one of their business systems groups. A few years later, the time was right, and she enrolled in Harvard Business School.



Benko's book *The Corporate Lattice* has prompted questions about the changing workforce.

From there she accepted an offer with Deloitte where she was a highly valued contributor and client service professional. She rose quickly through the ranks, acquiring new skills while standing out for her ability to build collegial relationships. In one case, a competitor firm had been unsuccessfully running a multimillion dollar project when the company asked Deloitte to take over. The company's staff wasn't happy about the change, but Benko won over the client's team. All she will say is, "We were fortunate how well it worked. The project sponsor and champion started sending kudos, and the momentum turned in our favor."

Benko's professional advancement continued through the birth of her two children. One major project after another was handled with distinction, and she was admitted into the partnership in 1996, rising up through the ranks in just six years.

E-BUSINESS BACKGROUND

As a young partner, she was appointed Deloitte Consulting's global e-business leader responsible for setting and delivering on Deloitte Consulting's e-business agenda. A keen observer of events around her, Benko realized that the effects of the new technology would result in a fundamental shift in the way business was being done, and these changes would continue as the technology expanded. This was the beginning of a four-year effort that paid huge dividends to Deloitte—and that led to further advancement of Benko.

For one, she found herself on Deloitte Consulting's executive and operating committees, the only woman among more seasoned male partners. She recalls an early executive meeting when she sensed some tension in the group so decided to confront it, "There's a lot of tension

“At the heart of the lattice organization is a customized workplace that provides agility and options for both employees and employers.”

in the air, and I think it’s me. In fact, I think it’s my red hair,” she told the group. At first there was silence, but then one of the members of the group finally spoke up, “Actually, you’re right. There is tension in the room, and it is you. But it’s not the red hair. It’s because you have hair.” Hearty laughter ensued, and once again she had smoothed the transition into a new role.

By 2002, at the urging of Doug McCracken, Deloitte Consulting’s CEO at the time, Benko began work in collaboration with eminent Harvard Business School professor F. Warren MacFarlan on what would become her first book. Titled *Connecting the Dots: Aligning Projects with Objectives in Unpredictable Times*, the book’s intention was to show how companies could maximize the worth of e-business and the project investments that were in process when the internet bubble burst. The book, still selling well today, wound up being published in several languages and achieved somewhat of a cult following within its target market. This book’s completion was followed by the assignment to take over as high technology industry leader as well as Deloitte’s lead client service partner for a large tech firm. Both positions gave her key observation posts to monitor developments in the changing world of work.

At this point, Benko received another appointment: head of Deloitte’s Initiative for the Retention and Advancement of Women (WIN) which gave her a seat on Deloitte LLP’s executive committee and first chair in Deloitte’s efforts to attract, advance and retain a highly-skilled and diverse workforce.

THE NEED FOR MASS CAREER CUSTOMIZATION

Her accomplishments and what she learned in that position led to her next book, *Mass Career Customization: Aligning the Workplace with Today’s Nontraditional Workforce*, with coauthor Anne Weisberg, and her subsequent appointment as vice chairman and chief talent officer. In the latter position, she is responsible for driving the strategy to attract, develop, and advance a highly skilled and diverse workforce to Deloitte. As Benko observed in a newspaper article, “I’ve got a dream job, looking out for the best of the best talent the market has to offer for the largest professional services firm in the country. Not too shabby for a Jersey girl.”

Finally, the culmination of her experiences and successes of her previous books led to her current book (with coauthor Molly Anderson), *The Corporate Lattice: Achieving High Performance in the Changing World of Work*. In this book Benko describes the shopworn corporate ladder assumptions and argues that the workplace must adopt more nimble leadership and management ways to engage its people and remain agile as an organization.

Benko’s professional success has not gone unnoticed. She has been cited by a number of prestigious organizations, including Women in Technology International (WITI) and the *San Francisco Business Times*, which has named her one of the “Most Influential Women in the Bay Area” for eight consecutive years.

You can sense Benko’s enthusiasm for the changes occurring in the workforce and the opportunities they offer for companies that can make sense of them. She sums it up this way: “Organizational structures are flatter. Employees are less tethered to traditional offices and set

hours. Nonroutine and project-based work is far more prevalent. Family structures have changed markedly with traditional dad-goes-off-to-work and mom-stays-home households dropping like a stone. Women now constitute half of the U.S. workforce and are the primary breadwinners in 40% of households. Men cite career-life conflict increasingly more often than women, and younger generations are bringing different attitudes to work at the same time that older workers are looking for options to stay in the labor market. Careers zig and zag. Work is done whenever and wherever. And information flows every which way.”

THE CORPORATE LATTICE DEFINED

Benko uses the term “corporate lattice” as the title of her latest book to contrast the corporate ladder, the enduring standard for the way companies have operated for the past industrial-age century. Like a garden trellis, the lattice model today resembles a 3D structure that extends in multiple directions. In her opinion, “a lattice is a fitting visual for how work gets done, how careers are built, and how participation is fostered.”



Benko uses her speaking opportunities to learn more about the lattice workplace.

According to Benko, “At the heart of the lattice organization is a customized workplace that provides agility and options for both employees and employers. Individuals have more than one way to get ahead—and even more than one way to define what getting ahead means. For employers, these options create strategic flexibility and drive greater employee engagement, resulting in superior performance.”

She explained the three key components of a lattice:

- 1. How careers are built.** Depicting career paths as multidirectional with moves up and down, as well as diagonally and across. Success is defined and achieved in a multiplicity of ways.
- 2. How work gets done.** Shifting from 9 to 5, in the office to results-driven work through a hybrid of remote and physical locations and communication methods.
- 3. How participation is fostered.** Moving from top down to all in, as technology enables relationships, teamwork, and collaboration that can no longer be constrained (or controlled) by the traditional rules of hierarchy.

In Benko’s opinion, while companies are making what she refers to as “lattice investments”—like Web 2.0 technologies, career pathways, remote and virtual work sites, social networking, workplace flexibility, and inclusion programs—they continue to maintain a ladder mindset and structures, with ad hoc and reactive efforts that fall short of the opportunities available.

Said Benko, “The corporate lattice model allows companies to create a scalable, cost-effective approach to work with many benefits—from lowering real estate costs to attracting and engaging top talent, to maximizing technology investments and mitigating risk.” Besides advice for companies, she offers a guide for individuals. As she told us, “Lattice organizations offer more options—but with more choice comes more personal responsibility, no matter where you sit in the organization.”

“The U.S. Department of Education estimates that 60% of all new jobs in the early twenty-first century will require skills that only 20% of the current workforce possesses.”

Benko noted that our corporate structures are morphing from a ladder to a lattice construct due to key trends, each of which is likely familiar. However, as they converge, their momentum is accelerating—and compounding—requiring a more coordinated and comprehensive response. These trends include:

1. A shrinking pool of skilled labor.
2. Nontraditional families with nontraditional needs are making up most of the working populations.
3. Women’s and men’s workplace flexibility needs and expectations are increasingly similar.
4. Flattened organizational structures are eliminating avenues for traditional advancement.
5. Across generations, employees want more career-life options.
6. Technology is expanding the ways work gets done.
7. Workers are more multicultural than ever before.

While workforce trends are driving significant need for flexibility, varieties of new technologies are enabling unprecedented possibilities for designing how and where work gets done. Information-age technologies are creating marvelous opportunities for employers and employees, and as we’ve seen time and again, technology also has a way of accelerating change.

We asked Benko if there is a single answer for employers. “There isn’t,” she told us. “There is no longer a single model of engagement. What motivates individuals is as varied as the diverse backgrounds, cultures, family structures, and experiences that come together at work.” She pointed out how success differs from one individual to another, and changes as people move through their lives. Consequently, she said, “The cookie-cutter ladder approach, built at a time where scaling efficiency was the name of the game, are not as effective as they were in the past.”

So Benko sees a driving trend toward customization of the workplace. “Corporate agility and individual choice are now central to achieving high performance. The ladder belief that high performance and sustainable career-life fit are opposing forces must give way to a new reality: that they are mutually reinforcing and inextricably linked.” ^{MW}

Benko, Cathleen, and Molly Anderson, The Corporate Lattice: Achieving High Performance in the Changing World of Work. Copyright 2010, Deloitte Development, LLT. Published by Harvard Business Review Press.

Benko, Cathleen, and Anne Weisberg, Mass Career Customization: Aligning the Workplace with Today’s Nontraditional Workforce. Copyright 2007, Deloitte Development, LLT. Published by Harvard Business School Press.

McGinn, Kathleen L., and Deborah M. Kolh, Simmons School of Management, and Research Associate Cailin B. Hammer, Cathy Benko: WINning at Deloitte. Copyright 2006, Harvard Business School.

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