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Bringing Work to Life

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Welcome

Welcome to the latest issue of Bringing Work to Life.

We explored the following topics in the past twelve issues (all newsletters are available at www.elsdon.com/newsletters.htm):

- Workforce planning (May/June 2007)
- Assessing your organization (March/April 2007)
- Individual change (January/February 2007)
- Guiding organizational change (November/December 2006)
- One to one (September/October 2006)
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- Bringing development and performance home (March/April 2006)
- Progressing in your organization (January/February 2006)
- Bringing our best to work (December 2005)
- The promise of affiliation (November 2005)
- Nothing business, it's just personal (October 2005)

In this issue we address “Career plateaus – what to do about them.”

Career Plateaus - What to Do about Them

“At a recent recruiting event in Boston, a highly respected scientist with decades of experience in drug discovery stood alongside graduate students ready to embark on



Ron Elsdon, Ph.D., is founder of *Elsdon Organizational Renewal*, which focuses on supporting organizations enhance effectiveness through revitalized workforce relationships and leadership practices. Prior to establishing his practice, Ron held senior leadership positions at diverse organizations. Ron is also co-founder of New Beginnings Career and College Guidance, which provides caring and personalized help to individuals and families in career guidance, coaching and college planning.

Ron is author of *Affiliation in the Workplace: Value Creation in the New Organization* (2003), a book describing leadership approaches to integrate the needs of the individual with the needs of the organization for the benefit of both. Ron holds a Ph.D. from Cambridge University in Chemical Engineering, an M.A. from John F. Kennedy University in Career Development and a first class honors degree from Leeds University in Chemical Engineering. With his co-author he was

careers. He was not there to screen the eager candidates or offer any advice. Like the grad students, he was waiting to hand over his resume.” These words are from the April 16, 2007 issue of *Chemical and Engineering News*, they highlight the challenge of later career plateauing. And at the other end of the career path “It almost felt as if I peaked at eighteen and it declined from there.” These words could be spoken by many a promising high school athlete, unable to bridge to the professional level as an athlete, and struggling academically. And here is how it might be expressed by someone at a mid-career stage: “I feel adrift, it’s hard to be enthusiastic about going to work. I feel stuck and don’t know how to move forward.”

Each of these three situations speak to a career plateau - a time that seems to offer little prospect of career progression and much risk of decline. As the examples show, such a plateau can happen at any life stage. How can we recognize it? What are the forces that can lead to such plateauing? What can we do about it, should we choose to – both to avoid this happening and to respond if it does?

Let’s examine three career stages: early entry (roughly the first five years after entering the workforce on a full time basis); mid-career (roughly five to twenty-five years in the workforce), and career maturity and rejuvenation (beyond twenty-five years). Let’s first contrast career plateaus with the times when we are energized in our work:

Career Perspectives

- | | |
|--|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Energized <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Work is well aligned with our purpose and values ▶ Enthusiastically approach our work ▶ Clear about next career steps of interest ▶ Interconnected with many people ▶ Continuously learning and developing ▶ Engaged in a broad range of career related activities | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Plateaued <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Work feels disconnected from our beliefs ▶ Hard to engage in current work ▶ Confused about next steps of interest ▶ Small and shrinking group of people to whom connected ▶ Re-treading the same ground with little personal development ▶ Little engagement beyond the current work environment |
|--|--|



When we are energized about our careers, there is strong alignment with our purpose and values, we bring enthusiasm into the workplace, we are clear about our path forward and are interconnected with many others. We are learning and developing, aided by engaging in a wide range of career related activities, such as participation in external groups. When on a career plateau, on the other hand, we


awarded the Walker Prize by the Human Resource Planning Society for the paper that best advances state-of-the-art thinking or practices in human resources.

can lose touch with our purpose and values and our enthusiasm for our work can drop precipitously. We see this in measures of affiliation suddenly declining dramatically as the sense of inspiring purpose falls (Affiliation in the Workplace: Value Creation in the New Organization, Ron Elsdon, Praeger, 2003). We are confused about our path forward, the group of people with whom we are connected is shrinking and little personal development is happening, so there is little engagement beyond current work.

The causes of such plateauing will differ according to life stage, here are some examples looking both from an internal individual perspective and from the perspective of external factors:

Causes of Career Plateauing

Stage	Internal Factors	External Factors
Early Career	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Unclear aspirations ▶ Lack of flexibility 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Life circumstances ▶ Competition ▶ Declining sector
Mid-Career	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Changing priorities ▶ Skills atrophied ▶ Failure to maintain contacts 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Organization politics ▶ Merger or acquisition ▶ Declining sector
Career Maturity and Rejuvenation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Lack of awareness of potential options ▶ Path tied to organization not self 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Age discrimination ▶ Org. restructuring ▶ Declining sector



In those early years, factors that can lead to plateauing include lack of clarity about personal aspirations since work and life experiences are still developing. Lack of flexibility in considering options can also be a significant internal factor. External factors include constrained life circumstances due to growing inequality in our society, growing competition for example in popular jobs or from emerging global regions, or being part of a declining work sector.

In mid-career, changing priorities may be significant as criteria for success often shift from external validation to internal life purpose. Sometimes a mid-career plateau results from skills being allowed to atrophy, or failure to invest sufficient time in maintaining a vibrant network of contacts. External factors that can surface include challenging organization politics, a merger or acquisition that redefines organizational needs and a declining work sector.

In the later stage of maturity and rejuvenation, lack of knowledge of potential options can again emerge as a key factor, along with too strong alignment with an

organization to the detriment of individual needs. External factors can include the challenge of age discrimination, the influence of organization restructuring and being part of a declining work sector.

So how might we address these issues? While there are some differences according to career stage, let's look at commonalities, building on a foundation that we each own responsibility for our career fitness. We need to first understand the situation that may lead to a career plateau and then act on that knowledge. These are steps to consider:

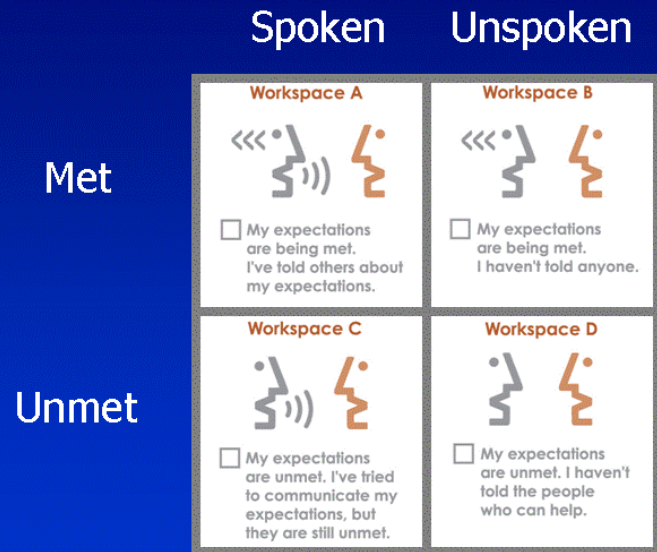
1. Building understanding

- Conduct a regular re-assessment about the important and meaningful parts of work life:
 - Pay close attention to personal intuition and those surfacing concerns that suggest a growing sense of frustration or feeling of stagnation. Take an inventory of the current situation, examining hopes, aspirations and expectations and the extent to which they are being met. Explore the gaps and what they mean both in terms of the nature of work and the situation within which it is conducted.
 - Clarify aspirations, values, interests and desired skills (see the October 2005 issue of *Bringing Work to Life*) to help assess whether a major shift in direction is warranted, or whether a smaller mid-course correction would be sufficient.
 - For those in an organization, clarify the extent to which the organization's values are aligned with personal values (see the March/April 2007 issue of *Bringing Work to Life*) and consider moving on if there is a significant disconnect.

2. Acting on that understanding

- Based on an assessment of the situation, determine whether the issues are linked primarily to the organization or to the nature of the position or function.
 - If this is an issue about the nature of the position or function, rather than the organization, begin an external exploration process to examine alternatives that may include new and non-traditional approaches to work, for example working independently (see the July/August 2006 issue of *Bringing Work to Life*).
 - If this is an issue linked primarily to the organization, consider the extent to which expectations have been communicated and are being met as shown on the following grid (from Inscape Publishing, which offers an assessment that brings additional insights to work expectations).

Communicating Expectations



Source: Inscape Publishing



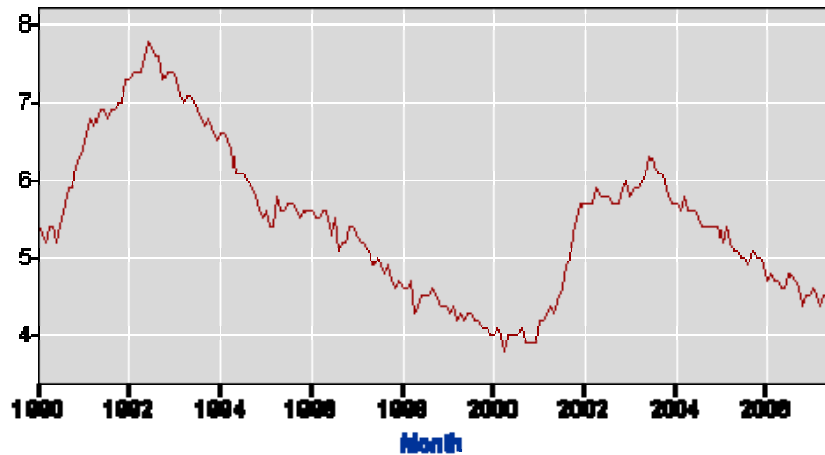
- If expectations have been communicated and are not being met consider exploring options outside the organization. On the other hand, if they have not been communicated, consider creating an outline of accomplishments and the value added to the organization together with an outline of career expectations, then scheduling a time to speak with supervisors/mentors about both of these items.
- A key distinguishing attribute of those who maintain career vibrancy is maintaining an active network of contacts with whom ideas, thoughts and aspirations can be exchanged. This is a group with whom the primary emphasis is one of giving, for example passing along information about new and emerging trends. Spending time defining this network and committing to expanding and deepening these relationships is critical.
- Stay current with trends and directions in sectors of interest. This may mean attending association meetings, it may mean regularly exploring on-line sources, to be clear about emerging directions and what they mean personally.
- Finally, consider plateaus as a natural part of the employment life cycle. Frederic Hudson and Pamela McLean in Life Launch frame this as a continuing cycle in four movements: Go For It, Stuck in the Doldrums, Cocooning and Getting Ready for the Next Chapter, with Stuck in the Doldrums as the plateau stage.

While external forces and internal factors can create plateaus in our careers, the opportunity and capability to break free is inside each of us should we so wish. In doing so we can, as Rumi observed centuries ago, “Let the beauty we love be what we do.”

Workforce Trends

Recent workforce trends send mixed signals about the likely path forward in the short term, recognizing that slowing growth rate of the workforce means growing scarcity of people in the longer term. A continued strong employment situation is reflected in an unemployment rate at 4.5% in May 2007, as shown in the following figure, slightly lower than the 4.6% of a year ago.

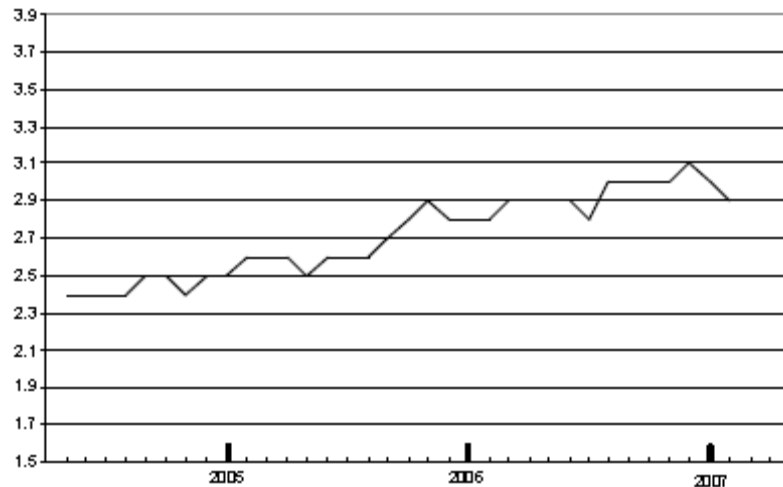
U.S. Unemployment Rate (Seasonally Adjusted), %



Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics

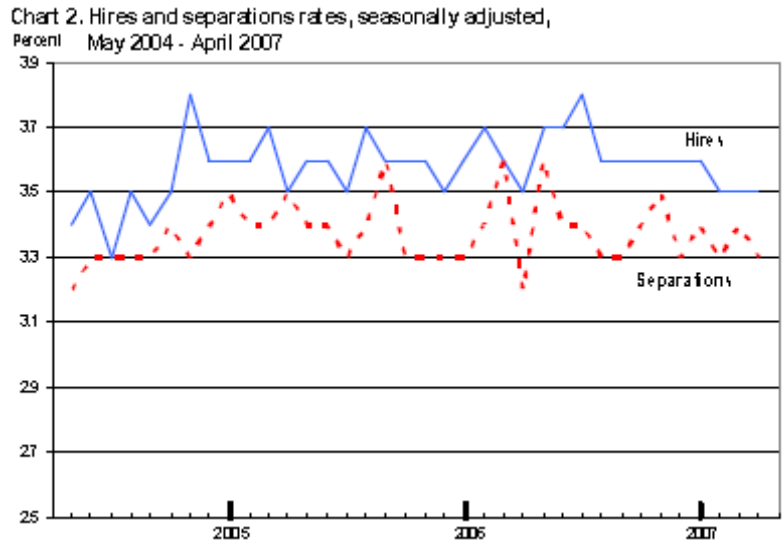
Job openings are generally a leading indicator of employment conditions at the peak of an economic cycle as organizations tend to reduce hours before cutting positions when conditions slow (Bringing Work to Life, March April 2007). As the following figure shows, there is some indication of recent reduction in the job openings rate although it is too soon to tell whether this is within the range of normal monthly fluctuations or whether this speaks to a longer term trend.

Chart 1. Job openings rate, seasonally adjusted, Percent May 2004 - April 2007



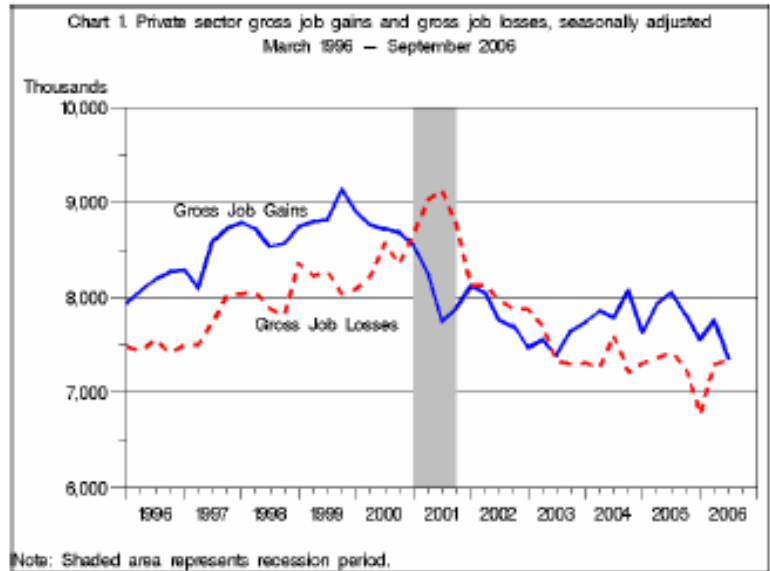
Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics

Hires continue to exceed separations as shown in the following figure, which speaks to continued strength in employment conditions.



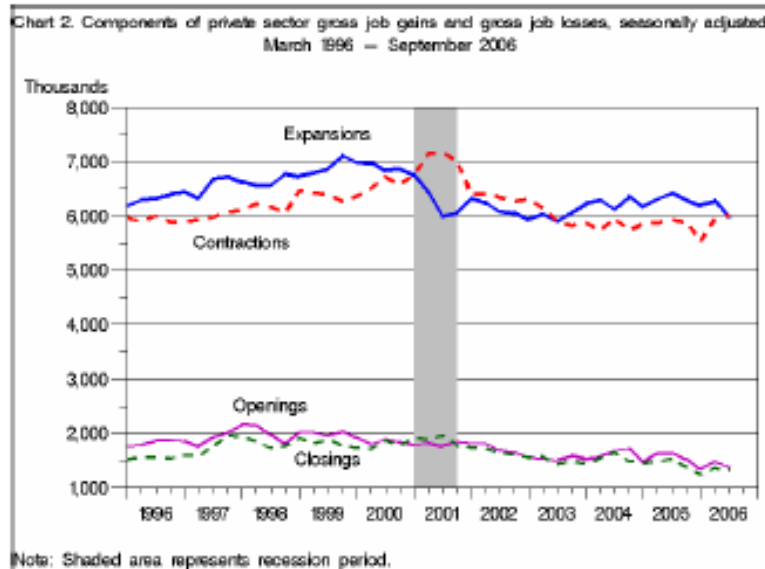
Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics

This is also reflected in the trend of private sector job gains and job losses as shown in the following figure:



Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics

Where the net gain is driven primarily by expansion of existing businesses as shown in the following figure:



Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics

Furthermore, a recent slight downturn in mass layoff events (involving at least 50 people from a single establishment), as shown in the next two figures, speaks to continued strength in workforce conditions.

Chart 1. Mass layoff events, seasonally adjusted, May 2002-April 2007

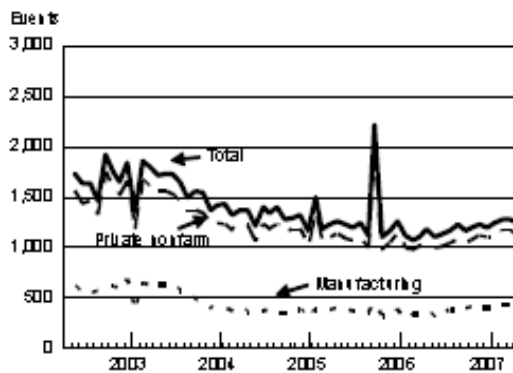
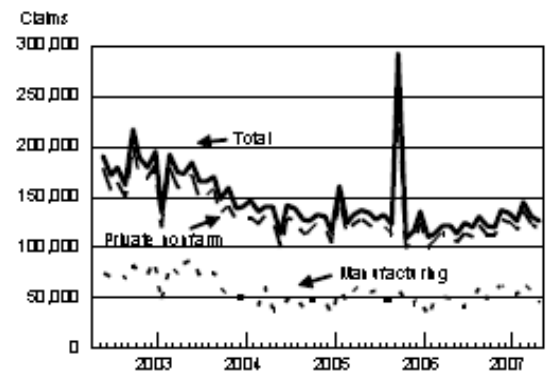


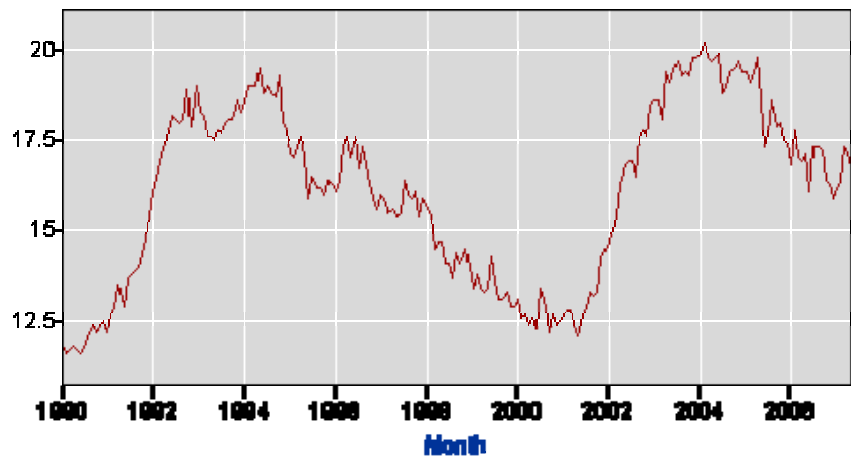
Chart 2. Mass layoff initial claims, seasonally adjusted, May 2002-April 2007



Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics

Meanwhile the average weeks of unemployment has stayed at around 16-17 weeks for about a year, as shown in the following figure, underlining the challenge of addressing longer term unemployment.

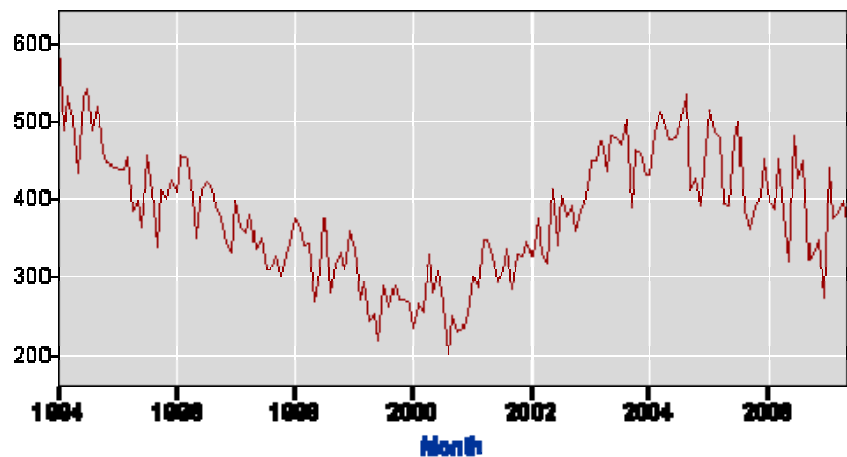
Average Weeks of Unemployment



Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics

Concern from this trend is reinforced by the number of discouraged workers (those not looking for work and not in the labor force) hovering around 400,000 for the past two years as shown in the following figure:

Discouraged Workers (in thousands)



Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics

So we see mixed signals, on one hand a continued overall trend of falling unemployment rates, hire rates exceeding separations and a short term reduction in mass layoff events; while on the other hand some indication of a decline in the job openings rate, a sustained high length of unemployment and a sustained high number of people absent from the workforce and not looking for work. As we move forward it becomes ever more critical to reflect the needs of all parties affected by employment. So that those who give much in their daily work, not just the wealthiest among us, also receive much.

Quote

“When asked about her secret to getting volunteers, Mother Teresa said: ‘I just ask them to come and love the people, to give their hands to serve them and their hearts to love them.’”

Quoted in Purpose and Power in Retirement by Harold Koenig.

Eldson Organizational Renewal (EOR) Recent Mentions

- Reviews of “Affiliation in the Workplace: Value Creation in the New Organization.” Ron Eldson. Praeger, Westport, CT (2003)
 - Harvard Business School
 - [HBS Working Knowledge: Organizations](#)
 - Global Diversity Institute
 - [Global Diversity Institute - The Journal of Diversity Praxis](#)
 - Journal of Asian Economics
 - [ScienceDirect - Journal of Asian Economics : Ron Eldson, Affiliation in the Workplace: Value Creation in the New Organization, Praeger Publishers, Westport, CT \(2003\) 280 pp. \(hardcover\), ISBN 1-56720-436-8, \\$49.95.](#)
 - Greenwood Publishing Group
 - [Affiliation in the Workplace — www.greenwood.com](#)
- Chapter titled “How Can You Grow Your Practice with Purpose?” in National Career Development Association Monograph, “Starting and Growing a Business in the New Economy” Edited by Sally Gelardin, 2007
- Recorded Webinar for Project Management Institute
 - “Becoming Career Fit in Turbulent Times”
 - <http://pmi-issig.org/Default.aspx?tabid=319>
- “Building a Strong Workforce Through Affiliation.” Chapter 26 in “On Staffing: Advice and Perspectives from HR Leaders.” Eds. Nicholas Burkholder et al, John Wiley & Sons, Inc., Hoboken NJ (2004)
 - http://www.wiley.com/WileyCDA/WileyTitle/productCd-0471410691_descCd-tableOfContents.html
- “The Growing Divide Calls for Advocacy.”
 - Article in March, 2007, NCDA Career Convergence magazine
 - <http://209.235.208.145/cgi-bin/WebSuite/tcsAssnWebSuite.pl?Action=DisplayNewsDetails&RecordID=947&Sections=&IncludeDropped=1&AssnID=NCDA&DBCCode=130285>

- “Reaching for Our Deep Gladness”
 - Article in May, 2005, NCDA Career Convergence magazine
 - <http://209.235.208.145/cgi-bin/WebSuite/tcsAssnWebSuite.pl?Action=DisplayNewsDetails&RecordID=625&Sections=6&IncludeDropped=&AssnID=NCDA&DBCode=130285>
- Mention in article on cost of turnover
 - East Bay Business Times, April 2005
 - [Turnover costs exceed employers' estimates - 2005-04-25](#)
- “Worklife Survival: Finding a Fit”
 - Article for HR West, February 2005 (Northern California Human Resource Association)
 - <http://www.nchra.org/StaticContent/Download/EXT0205007.pdf>
- Interview in the education field “Affiliation as a Unifying Principle in Education”
 - Career Pro News
 - [Affiliation and Education](#)
- MBTI Step II workshop
 - CCDA News, April 2005
 - [Local Chapter News](#)
- Review of ICDC Global Issues Forum
 - CCDA, January 2005
 - [ICDC Global Issues Forum](#)

About EOR: Our Value Contribution

We enhance your workforce, leadership and organization by:

- Using proprietary approaches to understand workforce and leadership challenges
- Creating tailored action plans and solutions to strengthen workforce and leadership practices
- Building individual capabilities and contributions

We enable you to focus on external results and building value, confident that your organization and leadership are operating at peak effectiveness.

Our Mission

To support your organization by enhancing performance, productivity and

effectiveness through revitalized workforce relationships and leadership practices.

Our Approach and Values

We tailor our engagements to the needs of each organization with a process designed to surface critical issues, identify root causes, build effective solutions, monitor progress and implement.

With a scope that ranges from system and organizational interventions to work with individuals, our focus is on the heart of the relationship among the individual, the organization and the community. We believe that organizational and community prosperity are built on enabling each person to fulfill his or her potential.

Our Services

We work with individuals and groups in your organization to drive performance and development for both the short and long term. As a result people will choose to work in your organization and will prosper there.

We bring solutions when you need to:

- Reverse declining revenues and performance
- Revitalize your workforce
- Stem the loss of key talent
- Redirect your organization to new areas
- Stop losing customers or market share
- Penetrate new markets
- Combat aggressive competitors
- Handle major change
- Break down communication barriers
- Energize your leadership team
- Successfully build on an acquisition or merger

Our proprietary services include:

- State-of-the-art tools to take the pulse of your organization and then move to action
 - Web enabled systems
 - Experts to gather and analyze information, moving your organization to action
- Individual leadership coaching to give you world class leadership capabilities
 - Leaders who know themselves and their aspirations, build their capabilities and become catalysts developing others

- Workshops to build interpersonal skills in your organization so that:
 - Communication is timely, concise, accurate and personal
 - People listen to each other
 - Negotiations are quick and effective
 - Differences create rather than destroy value
 - Teams move forward, get results and quickly commercialize new products and services
 - People understand and link their motivations to your organizational needs
 - Your teams understand what it takes to create a committed, energized workforce
 - People use their time well
- Systems that make it easy to drive performance and build capabilities by:
 - Linking objectives throughout the organization
 - Strengthening key competencies
 - Making sure you have the bench strength where and when you need it
 - Giving people tools to take charge of their own careers and development and have a major long term influence on your organization
- Proprietary simulation and modeling techniques that let you explore how to maximize the value of your workforce
 - Move from guessing what might happen to looking in depth at the financial impact of different approaches