



# Rupert & COMPANY

Guides to a changing workplace

## **FOOD FOR THOUGHT #1**

### **FlexBulletin #104: Flex Needs Many More 'Top Chefs'**

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#### **Should 'Top Chef' set the standard for deciding how we work?**

Flexible schedules have made a steady, decades-long climb from oddity to ubiquity for millions of employees and managers in a broad range of companies. Most have used a process that mimics the preparation of the average meal: review a menu of options, pick and study the detailed recipe, assemble the key ingredients and stir/bake/fry until ready to serve.

Unless a flex dish fails in the early stages (*poor menu choice, incompatible ingredients or reluctant chef*) or in the process of preparation and serving (*under-cooked, poorly sauced or just plain tasteless*) it can persist for years, and freezing seems to prolong its life. Just as the eventual dish is prepared in relative isolation by a chef (*employee*) and sous chef (*manager*), it only receives the occasional organizational review or random comment after the fact.

This process of seeking satisfactory flex seldom resembles the superior engagement and intensity of "Top Chef" or other highly engaging cooking contests. In the more gripping and breakthrough TV shows, there is strong demand for intense innovation, a competitive climate that drives unusual outcomes and an expert panel to judge and recommend rethinking and continuous improvement.

#### **Is settling for a 'Cook-by-Numbers' approach a recipe for success?**

"So what?" you might ask. The problem is that the vast majority of flexible schedules have greater and longer-lasting consequence than the preparation of a single meal, no matter how perfect. Yet most proposals for and decisions about flex command limited time, attention and imagination. They resemble the modest and linear process of menus, recipes and isolated cooks. They demand little in the way of collaboration and invention, and typically produce acceptable but unimaginative, business-as-usual outcomes.

In the late 1990s, when our consulting group first developed and popularized the now widely used individual proposal form for Flexible Work Arrangements, we assumed that employees were invested in powerful outcomes. Thus the employee was asked to demonstrate how a new way of working would benefit the user and add unique and otherwise unachievable value to the organization. It was expected that managers would join in this collaborative process and, in a healthy back-and-forth, deepen the innovation of scheduling and the payoff to both companies and individuals.

#### **It's as if both participants and judges eventually settled for fast food**

While this process was developed pre-TV chefs, it aimed high - and well beyond industrial cooking. After working with over a hundred companies and observing hundreds more directly and indirectly for two decades, I can say that most policy-and-procedure guides and actual negotiations seem to fall short of the high value-creation standard. The hoped for Innovation and deep mutual gain, the knock-your-socks-off outcome that inspired even greater efforts among peers, seldom occurred.

More creative ways of working, potentially in shorter hours, were exceeded by the real estate savings and longer hours that became a common argument for telework. Some advocates set out to achieve more, but their aspirations often faded within months. Flexibility became much more a benefit, guided by an on-demand process. Manager involvement, demand and contribution seldom gained traction; an environment of collaborating for superior results rarely took hold.

### **Can - and should there - be a little more sizzle on this steak?**

Recent conversations with clients and current prospects have highlighted the need for seriously rethinking this approach. We are all confronting a world in which major changes in flexible work have occurred. As the recession recedes, flex as a recruiting and retention tool is regaining its allure. Workplaces are being squeezed between the unique, quite different demands of their Millennial and Boomer workforces. And ironically the migration toward widespread use of many forms of telework is threatening the availability of reduced and hybrid schedules. It is time to stir the pot.

Among the emerging challenges raised by long-term clients and prospects:

- Millennials are not seeking the old menu; they want to innovate and cook up hybrids
- Boomers are seeking true phased retirement, launching ongoing negotiations of time, task and knowledge transfer - not settling for the recipe of "terminate and return as contractor"
- Those facing limited-menu, cook-by-numbers options are seeking recipes for pitching new dishes that finally persuade the kitchen full of managers who have never embraced flex

It is no small matter to progress from the foundational, deeply ingrained and one-way model of cooking enshrined in the late Julia Child's *Julia's Kitchen* to the essential, more robust process suggested by *Top Chef*. In the next several Bulletins we will address some of the key elements required for this transition: *a far broader "menu"; the script of a collaborative process; the unique skillsets of "Top Chefs"; and the taste test for continuous improvement.*

***We welcome your comments on this Bulletin. When you write, please email me at:  
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