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Guides to a changing workplace

FOOD FOR THOUGHT #2

FlexBulletin #105: Flex Menu Makeovers: On to Food Trucks?

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If you ran a restaurant, would you stick with the same old menu for three decades?

In the last *Bulletin*, [Flex Needs Many More 'Top Chefs'](#), we drew on the cooking metaphor to suggest that a serious makeover of our somewhat stale and dated approach to flexibility was overdue. We described the elements of the necessary transformation as "a far broader "menu"; the script of a collaborative process; the unique skillsets of 'Top Chefs'; and the taste test for continuous improvement. Today let's consider the menu. With your indulgence we will expend the food metaphor to these items.

The flexibility menu du jour is typically a set of Flexible Work entrees: flextime, part-time, job share, compressed work week, telecommuting and, in a nod to nouvelle cuisine, remote work. These main courses were first codified and popularized through the writings of my New Ways to Work colleagues Barney Olmsted and Suzanne Smith *in the late 1980s*. Their hardback *Creating a Flexible Workplace* had the heft and impact of a trend-setting cookbook. Indeed, some called it "The Joy of Flexing."

What stays, what goes - and why?

Of interest now is the fact that what was widely posted as the 6-dish menu began with richer offerings. Barney and Suzanne proposed three more flexible options: Phased and Partial Retirement, Voluntary Reduced Work Time and Work Sharing. Each of these required active and flexible management which was harder to prepare and sustain. They represented the pre-retirement glide for older workers into diverse forms of part-time; the option of periodic, time limited family friendly schedule reduction; and the reduction during a downturn of a percentage of time everyone worked rather than termination of a portion of the workforce - appealing to all at risk of a downturn.

These more challenging dishes were occasionally ordered off-menu, but did not become standard items. For decades, that pride of place went to easier entrees. And as "telework" - working full time in one place rather than another - becomes the flex menu leader, the choices that require more intensive management have faded. Job sharing is as widely heralded as it is rarely used. Compressed workweeks, which employees love, have been steadily removed from the menu over the last decade. And part-time schedules struggle to remain a viable choice.

And then come marked market changes, as demography brings us new opportunities

2017 is a long way from 1987. It's possible that in those thirty years, most new customers have asked Verizon for landlines rather than smart phones. Or that the only "food truck" on most city streets is selling ice cream. But we all know demographics, family structure and tastes in scheduling have changed and iPhones and food trucks are everywhere. Unfortunately, the scheduling equivalent of the smartphone or Uber or fast food has not yet appeared.

As is often the case, change follows demographics. The Boomers and Millennials are the bookends driving the menu makeover. Phased and Partial Retirement is threatening to become an entrée after decades of being the most talked about and seldom implemented option. It is important to say that an appetizer version of this "choice" has been occasionally offered - as one user described it, "I was terminated before retirement age and brought back as a contractor with no benefits." To us Phased Retirement involves continuation of regular employment.

As older employees extend their working lives and traditional retirement ages fade away, employers are recognizing that they need to retain valuable assets and transfer knowledge. But it is much easier to add a form of phased retirement if it's simple, programmatic and demanding little in the way of active collaboration between pre-retiree and manager. In other words, if you can add a new item to the old menu without disturbance, fine. The challenge ahead is to truly change the menu offering.

Boomers may expand the menu, but Millennials are riding in on food trucks

Millions of words have been written about the Millennials and flexibility - in blogs, studies, and all forms of social media. Their appetite for flex is assumed to be as diverse and compelling as their interest in novel cuisine nurtured by food trucks, pop-ups and fusion. Yet one struggles in wading through all this data for a simple truth: what kind(s) of mutually beneficial flexibility do Millennials actually want? There seems to be an assumption that this soon-to-be-largest labor cohort ever can be fit into a set of cookie cutter options developed in the last century.

Our firm has done many focus groups with and including Millennials, and we have some notions about the flex menu these folks wanted. We learned two significant things from this exploration:

1. No one knows enough about what Millennials really want. Only they know and they may not be at all sure of what they want and if it is possible. Only open-ended probing will reveal the next stage. After all food trucks and their focused, unique offerings did not exist in the late 1980s; the market and innovators made them. It is time for extensive market research.
2. Having said we don't know what the new flex menu will look like, we have some sense of the direction. To a foodie the trend might be "grazing." If the traditional menu is categorical (steak or seafood, flextime or part-time), we heard much interest in hybrid flexibility such as the ability to migrate among telework, part-time and flextime in a given week. Programmatic options cannot be done as programs in this form. Like phased retirement, they demand active management and self-management.

We'll address that management process in the next issue.

We welcome your comments on this Bulletin.
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