



FlexBulletin #109: Is Telework the New Vanilla?

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Ice cream began as a vanilla-only treat - not so flexible work

There was a time early in the 18th century evolution of our signature frozen dessert when "ice cream" meant one thing: "vanilla". For several decades, this one flavor fit all. Then along came the addition of home-grown berries (strawberry, blue and raspberry) representing early bursts of diversity. Soon chocolate emerged to form the lasting triad of vanilla, chocolate and strawberry that held sway in dishes, cones and sundaes well into late in the last century. A great American tradition of product proliferation had begun.

Yet the evolution of that sweet treat of flexible work has been different. It seems to have narrowed in a couple decades from many flavors to one. As recently as the 1970s, there emerged in a few years a diverse menu of flexible schedules. Variations on work time and place, they spoke to diverse tastes and each met the needs of different markets. Part-time offered more room for family or education; compressed allowed full days off with full pay; telework enabled less wasted time on the road. After years of firm-by-firm combat, diverse flavors flourished in thousands of enterprises.

Unlike ice cream's many flavors, "flexibility" seems to be moving toward a single, universal flavor

Launched in the 1970s as "telecommuting," this notion of working outside the office seemed strange to the palate of most organizations. Critiques were raised from "How will we know they're working if we can't see them" to "Where will genius come from if we abandon the water cooler?" Over time a phalanx of internal and external change agents - turbocharged by technology - let loose what became a powerful taste for telework.

Soon the old myths, assumptions and fears gave way to a simple fact. When you strip away habits and tradition, one wag described telework thus: "It's not that challenging; on some level it's just a matter of working from a different desk." Over-stated perhaps, but an interesting point. After all telework is a full-time, regular hours, increasingly connected way of working - that typically provides longer hours on a voluntary basis. In many ways it is as plain vanilla as an "alternative schedule" can be.

Telework will sweeten flexibility if it ushers in more flavors rather than being THE flavor

In many organizations and the media, among employees and change agents, the word flexibility has become nearly interchangeable with telework. Telework is a great practice and has yet to reach its full potential. But its prominence may be having a smothering effect on other forms of flexibility. It might be easier for organizations to deal with differences in place than variations in time.

Job sharing might be challenging to execute and not all that common, so it is unlikely to be a highly popular flavor. Compressed schedules could be very popular, but they challenge lengthy days and seem an endangered option. What were once promising flex flavors exist unevenly and without energy.

Consider the many terms used to describe working outside the standard office: telework, virtual work, remote work, offsite work, distributed work, work-at-home, etc. Now count the number of job share pairs or true phased retirees in your office.

Perhaps it's time strike out from vanilla as if flexibility were Baskin-Robbins or Ben & Jerry's

At its core flexible work is a diversity issue. Different workers require different ways to work to contribute and to pursue their happiness. Diversity drives our relentless pursuit of new and better variations of every good and service. There is not just Google, there is search. There is not only cereal but shelves of ever-evolving grains. Vanilla gave way to chocolate and strawberry and then the many versions of 28 flavors, the extraordinary hybrids of Ben & Jerry and nearly infinite flavors in a thousand neighborhood shops.

All sell vanilla, but creative flavors proliferate. So there should be telework and new, innovative and delicious work options as well. To underscore this point, the following list is one version of a 28-flavor flex menu. I hope you find a favorite flavor - and push to get it on a menu near you.

28 flavors of flex

- Part-Time (50%)
- Part-Time (80%)
- Compressed Work Week (4/10)
- Compressed Work Week (9/80)
- Compressed Work Week (19/160)
- Summer Hours (4-1/2 day week)
- Job Share (20/20)
- Job Share (24/24)
- Telework - occasional
- Telework - 1 day/week
- Telework - 2 days/week
- Telework - variable
- Remote Work - 5 days/week
- Remote Work - 4 days/week
- Flextime - 1 hour band
- Flextime - no band
- Flextime - mid-day band
- Partial Retirement - 80%
- Partial Retirement - 50%
- Phased Retirement - 80-70-60
- Work Sharing - whole staff % reduction vs. layoffs
- V-time (Voluntary Reduced Work Time) Time limited part-time
- Annual Hours
- Flex Year/Part Year
- Team Self-Scheduling
- Shift Flexibility
- Predictable hourly schedules
- Phase back from leave

A sample hybrid (a la Ben & Jerry) Extreme Flexibility: the blend of part-time, telework, onsite and leave options to support an employee through recovery from a chronic condition like cancer.

Best regards, Paul Rupert

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