



FlexBulletin #21 – Flexibility: 1st, the Positioning

May 13, 2009

[Our last Bulletin, [Flexibility via Mutual Respect](#), kicked off a series on a proven approach to building truly business-beneficial flexibility - a method that prioritizes enhanced productivity while also building employee retention. This Bulletin addresses the critical positioning of flexibility in an organization so that it is integrated into the culture and the habits of managers and employees for long-term acceptance and success.]

Shifting Away from Accommodation For two decades, employee need and satisfaction have been the drivers of Flexible Work Arrangements across businesses. Beleaguered parents wanting reduced schedules and flextime and haggard commuters queuing up for telecommuting and compressed schedules have led to millions of options where none existed before. Unfortunately, these triumphs brought with them some challenging baggage:

- FWAs were initially seen as a static form of employee benefit - and often still are
- A good employee's reason for wanting an FWA might matter more than its impact
- Too often managers "accommodated" flexibility - typically with one-off deals
- The result: flexibility took on life as accommodation of, by and for employees

In the last decade, the repositioning of flexibility has begun in earnest. New initiatives have:

- emphasized the business case or business value or business benefit
- promoted cost savings through reduced turnover or less office space; and
- shifted the negotiation of FWAs onto a more business-like footing

Unfortunately these macro-level claims do not directly engage and undo the accommodation view of flexibility that has held sway for so long. A more profound shift in understanding is needed.

Conciliating Control & Contribution Genuine flexibility requires a different paradigm. Instead of *flexibility-as-benefit*, a business-beneficial approach promotes *flexibility-as-ongoing-work redesign*. This perspective recognizes that in the realm of workplace flexibility there is a continuing tension between employees' desire to **control** where and when work is done and the manager and company's desire to maximize **contribution** through control. Resolving this conflict - not papering it over - is essential to mainstreaming flexibility in the business process.

Working through these differences requires more than perfunctory back-and-forth negotiation.

Conciliation - a key principle of Mutual Respect - provides the method for:

- engaging managers and employees in the search for real mutually beneficial outcomes
- turning the conversation about FWAs into an opportunity to rethink work process
- assuring all FWA requests are viewed through the prism of peer and customer need
- insisting that back-and-forth continue through as many "maybe's" as necessary

In the end, conciliation levels the playing field, maximizes creativity and builds commitment.

Welcoming "More Flex" Like Higher Earnings There is a simple way to assess how flexibility is viewed in an organization. Many companies may claim that they have a business-like approach to flexibility and believe in their strong business case. And yet, it is the rare organization that aggressively promotes all forms of FWAs and celebrates increases in business-beneficial flexibility with a small fraction of the energy devoted to cheering earnings increases.

Many steps will be required before most organizations see flexibility as an integral and advantageous part of their business. There are not only process issues to address, but structural and attitudinal challenges. Eventually headcount, a barrier to reduced schedules, will have to be transformed. Powerful but challenging options like compressed schedules for exempts and job sharing will require active promotion. Growing business centrality will lead to these issues being addressed and over time, process changes will help mainstream flexibility.

In the next Bulletin we will look at the structure and tools that support the fully business-beneficial approach. In the meantime, please browse our website - www.rupertandcompany.com - to look at some of our client case studies and resource segments that describe our approach to consulting and training on business- beneficial flexibility.

Best regards,
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