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Guides to a changing workplace

[In response to our late summer reader appeal for feedback and suggested topics for future issues, we heard many appreciative comments about the value of the first year's FlexBulletin. Today we resume twice-a-month publication of the FlexBulletin, Volume 2, starting with a topic brought up by several of you. This concerned a phenomenon as old, persistent and pervasive as the quest for flexibility itself. We kick off year 2 with the "floodgate" question:]

"How do you put to rest the challenge 'What if everyone wants a flexible schedule?'"

I recall hearing this "floodgate" question repeatedly in my earliest consulting days. I came across it again and again this summer, working with clients, speaking with prospective clients and reviewing 30 years of flex experience for a book-in-progress. It leapt out repeatedly from my library of US and European flexibility books and periodicals dating from the late 1970s.

No mention was more striking than the booklet written by our New Ways to Work EquiFlex Project in the late 1980s and published in 1991. Our Corporate Committee included early flex advocates from major national employers. As part of our strategy to promote wider use of flexibility, we published *"Flexibility: Compelling Strategies for a Competitive Workplace."* Its purpose was to highlight the positive power of flexibility and debunk disabling myths. Its "Facts & Fallacies" section included this seemingly persuasive argument:

"Fallacy: *Flexibility has a domino effect. If we let a few employees job share or change starting time, everyone will want to.*

Fact: *No organization which has used voluntary work-time options has reported a flood of requests for change. The fact is, most people prefer a full-time job and a regular schedule, and they cannot afford to significantly reduce their work time. Some employees really do need flexibility to function well in their jobs, however, and surveys show that flexible options are popular with almost everyone. Besides, organizational policy always gives managers control over whether or not to use or allow flexible work arrangements."*

The simple, updated summary of this 1991 argument against fear of floodgates is:

No one has ever seen a flood of requests upon launch - no company, no option, nowhere
Most people prefer or are bound to "a full-time job and a regular schedule" - period
Most employees appreciate having flexibility available and some use it - a small percentage
Managers always have control over the levels of use - they can prevent any flood

Sitting at my Apple II computer 20 years ago, these arguments seemed decisive. Experience has confirmed them. Surely more experience would eliminate this concern by 1995 or 2000. While we've seen generations of Macs, iPods and iPhones march across the landscape, the floodgate question remains the most predictable in any engagement and the most distorting in any rollout. Is there attitude at work that trumps decades of data? I would suggest these possibilities:

Distrust of Employees There seems to be some underlying disrespect of employees based on the fear that given the choice of work or leisure, engagement or withdrawal, most of them would

choose convenience over contribution. If this is the case, a flex flood is always imminent. Such fears can easily overcome data, no matter how compelling.

Doubt about Managers Most leaders will openly salute the strength of their line managements while privately expressing concern about their ability to hold the line against employee excess. If the gate-keepers can't hold the flood, who can?

Faith in Face-time Limited progress has been made in true goal refinement and outcome management, but control for contribution rather than presence is not universal. When leaders question the system's ability to control inputs, they won't trade "all hands on deck" for a highly fluid workplace. You'll never have a flood if the most you allow is a trickle.

If these attitudes - skepticism of employees and managers alongside faith in face-time - account at least in part for the persistent fear of the floodgate, and if such views have persisted for two decades, changing them will not be easy. In the next issue, we will explore a reality-based strategy for speeding up the progress.

Fall conference season has started and I would encourage you to join us for several sessions in October and November. At the Working Mother Work-Life Congress in New York on October 27-29, we will be presenting with Abbott on their exciting approach to flexibility and remote customer service teams. We will also be facilitating a "ThinkFest" session on "Collaborating through Cancer and Chronic Conditions". You can join our sessions or look for us at our Rupert & Company booth. On November 6, Credit Suisse is hosting a Working Mother Town Hall focused on flexibility. We are facilitating a workshop with Sodexo highlighting its great initiatives on formal and informal flexibility and its uniquely effective approach to remote work. Hope to see you there.

Best regards,
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