



Rupert & COMPANY

Guides to a changing workplace

FlexBulletin #27: Informal Flexibility

[Welcome, new readers, to the FlexBulletin - our twice monthly vehicle for advancing the way we think about flexibility in the evolving workplace. We hope you will enjoy our brief essays and let us know any issues and conundrums you would like us to address. And we wish all of you a Happy Holiday season.]

"Flexibility" has come in the last decade to refer primarily to "Flexible Work Arrangements" (FWAs). We have worked with dozens of companies to formalize their approach to flexible options such as telecommuting, part-time and job sharing. The goal: equitable access, business value and consistent administration. Now many companies seem to be turning their attention to employee need for so-called informal flexibility. While companies might take diverse paths to structuring what has been highly unstructured, few have developed clear approaches. This Bulletin focuses on a very promising initiative in this area undertaken by one of our clients.

For years in interviews, focus groups, and surveys - and with employees at all levels - the desire for formal FWAs has emerged as a very strong one, albeit for a *modest* number of employees. The need for informal flexibility is typically expressed by a much larger percentage of the population, and it is expressed with considerable urgency day in and day out. Examples of this informal flexibility are:

- Asking for unexpected or last-minute schedule changes
- Needing to make outside appointments during core working hours
- Being able to fit a brief series of classes into the workday
- Having assurance of the time required to coach a sports team
- Arranging to work from home to enable emergency dependent care

Access to both formal and informal flexibility is quite uneven in most organizations. The higher up the management structure one goes, the more likely it is that informal flexibility is common and formal FWAs are rare. The middle levels in many companies can request FWAs and may be able to negotiate informal flexibility - *depending on the openness of one's manager*. And lower level and/or hourly workers are less likely to have either form of flexibility. Against this backdrop, for millions of employees the need and desire for expanded informal flexibility is a major priority

Sodexo - a continuing client of ours - has taken this priority very seriously. When it undertook its comprehensive flexibility and culture change initiative several years ago, Sodexo's Diversity and HR leadership saw in its business services workforce of more than 100,000 people the need for both formal and informal flexibility. A strategy was developed to design and launch its formal FWA system first, deferring the introduction of informal flexibility until later. Over a 2-year period:

- The corporate and business leaderships were fully engaged in the FWA approach
- A broad cross-functional team edited online FWA guidelines and designed the launch
- HR Divisional staff were prepared for their roles as trainers and coaches
- A robust rollout included management conference presentations and strong case studies

In such a large organization, it could be tempting to complete a several-year FWA project, call the result "workplace flexibility" and forget about the challenge of informal flex. To its credit, Sodexo did quite the opposite. It created an inclusive and well-positioned Flexibility Implementation Team (FIT) which spanned various levels of the key business units. Over a 9-month period, this energetic team analyzed the barriers to greater informal flexibility and developed clear solutions that would build a more flexible climate. The design complemented the formal FWA approach, especially in its key assumptions:

- occasional flexibility is not an entitlement; it's a temporary change in how work is done
- such changes should have a positive or neutral impact on business and the employee
- decisions should not occur in isolation, but address the work group and work process

Sodexo did not want to make the process for requesting and deciding on requests for informal flexibility a cumbersome one. At the same time, it did want to provide simple standards and processes and enable greater consistency across its large workforce. **The solution:** FIT and Rupert & Company chose to develop a website that would be consistent with R&C's customized FWA website and would include these key elements:

- **Leadership Message** Strong endorsement and encouragement to adopt the solution-oriented framework
- **Principles** Restatement of the principles that guide both formal and informal flex
- **Best Practices** Scenario-based guide to preferred ways of proposing informal flex
- **Behaviors to Avoid** Robust review of how not to negotiate informal flex

With a consistent approach, a supportive website and a clear communication strategy on informal flexibility in hand, FIT secured the support of Sodexo's leadership. At its Fall Management Conference Sodexo launched the new, integrated approach to flexibility - now named *Flexibility Works!* In the period ahead this organization will broaden and deepen, and in essence relaunch, a more powerful flexible culture at Sodexo - one that keeps its original commitment to flex for their diverse workforce as they deliver on Sodexo's slogan: "*Making Every Day a Better Day.*"



You can access R&C's model version of our informal flexibility guidelines by going to our new public website featuring all of our FlexWise guides and training tools at www.flexwisetools.com.

We'll resume publication of the *Bulletin* in January
of what we hope will be a prosperous 2010 for everyone!

Best regards,
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