



FlexBulletin #39: Turning Engagement into Output

November 17, 2010

[Let us open this issue with a warm and enthusiastic “Happy Thanksgiving!” and the great hope that you will be flexible in your travel plans, your time with relatives – and above all your choice of desserts We offer this greeting with the growing awareness that it seems to occur a little bit earlier every year. Many of our clients, colleagues and friends seem to be launching their break earlier in the week, and some into the end of this week. Perhaps this is recognition of how long and intense our workweeks have become and “Thanksgiving Week” has become a way to recharge and restore. If that’s true, perhaps a new flexible work option is evolving. Opposite the compressed week, it’s the Holiday Expansion Week. Whatever it is and wherever it’s headed, enjoy it!]

[In the last issue of the Bulletin – [FlexBulletin #38: “Stretch Goals for Productivity”](#) – we described how disciplined and effective answers to the first question of the common proposal form could yield measurable increases in productivity. Typically the first two questions on this form offer an opportunity to identify the potential productivity of a redesigned flexible work arrangement. Those questions are, more or less:

- 1. In what ways might this proposed way of working allow you to maintain or improve your individual performance or contribution? [Or in brief, how can I work better?]*
- 2. How might this way of working improve the way you and your team deliver services to our internal and external clients? [Or, how can I serve customers better?]*

*We provided both mediocre and impressive responses to **Question 1** in **Bulletin 38**. We will finish out this productivity series by addressing **Question 2** in this issue.]*



Does Engagement Occur Automatically with Flexibility or Is Intentionality Needed?

In late October I saw a number of you at the annual Working Mother conference in New York City. There were many presentations on flexibility and much conversation in the air about what we call “remodeling, relaunching or redoing” flexibility. As has been the case in conversations we’ve had with clients and prospects lately, there seems to be a growing focus on seeing flexibility achieve greater “engagement.”

While the word can mean different things to different people, it strikes us that this generic notion of being committed and adding value is a new resting point on the flexibility output continuum that goes from:

satisfaction → retention → engagement → productivity

In other words, engagement can drive flex users toward retention, or it can serve as a platform to build productivity. How a company positions it, what expectations are shared throughout the enterprise and what models are celebrated can determine which direction engagement takes.

As we said last issue, some arrangements for some people enhance personal productivity (Question 1). Others offer improved client or customer service (Question 2). Some offer both. In reviewing thousands of completed proposal forms over the years and hundreds just this year, we found that far too many describe neither outcome. Here are some sample telecommuting responses to Question 2 in what we would call the “maybe engaged, maybe productive school.”

[2. *How might this way of working improve the way you and your team deliver services to our internal and external clients?*]

- *“I’ll get more done without the coworker interruptions. The team will benefit.”*
- *“The more satisfied I am, the better service I’ll deliver to customers.”*
- *“I’m known in my group as being hard to reach; this will improve my accessibility.”*
- *“Without the commute I’ll average longer hours and may take more client calls.”*

Now all these statements may be true: believed by those who made them and accepted by those who approved the proposal. But what level of engagement and potential productivity gains do they represent? Let’s examine two common claims and see.

“I’ll get more done without the coworker interruptions. The team will benefit.”

It’s perfectly possible that the opportunity to telecommute on some basis will lead to this employee’s greater engagement. But the notion that “good work by one will lead to good results for all” is far from a plan for enhanced productivity. There may be some increased benefit for the team, but it’s safe to say that when a vague gain is promised, a compelling outcome is rarely achieved.

“Without the commute I’ll average longer hours and may take more client calls.”

Again, this arrangement may increase the employee’s engagement. And it is possible that overall hours – if that’s a meaningful metric in this increasingly results-oriented world – will lead to more output. And further it could be that client call response will be improved. But that’s quite a string of ifs, and a small team and client payoff.

So How Does One answer Question 2 and See Engagement Morph into More?

Let’s start with what employees and managers should avoid: easy solutions, the first things that come to mind and sentences that start and end with me. We are talking about new ways of working, innovation and culture change. These are not matters that come to mind easily, right off the bat or without thinking about people outside of oneself. As we said in suggesting a process for answering Question 1, there are several key steps:

- Intensive diagnosis of how one’s job adds value and could add more such gain
- A willingness to rethink the way a job is configured and to experiment boldly
- A relentless search for ways to combine talent, time and place in unique ways

A telecommuter answered the Question of improved client service as follows:

- I will disengage my telecommuting days from the normal schedule, so I can:
 - Spread my work across 16 or 18 hours, accommodating my family
 - Take advantage of the “off-peak” hours to support global colleagues when they are working
 - Spell colleagues who currently carry the burden of offshore calls
- Take advantage of quiet time to complete agreed-upon writing of priority docs
- Use time saved by not commuting to assist Director in quality initiative

This is a different answer. It appears to be a formula for enhanced satisfaction, retention, engagement and productivity. It is neither formulaic nor unthinkable, and it does not require thought and innovation beyond most employees and managers.

*[In the interest of early adjournment for Thanksgiving, we will show just this one example of a productivity-oriented and engaging reply to Question 2. We hope that you will take the concept with you over the holiday and develop your own answers to Question 2 for real or imagined requests. In the next **Bulletin** we will explore some novel tools to support this creative way of thinking and build flexibility that has real staying power.]*

Best regards,
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