



**FlexBulletin #48: Are We Changing Desks – or Cultures?**

May 4, 2011

*[In the last Bulletin -- [Job Sharing: Productive or Prohibitive?](#) – I made this observation in a final bullet contrasting job sharing and offsite work:*

- **Unlike telecommuting/remote work, job sharing is seldom in a campaign** – one could argue that offsite work is an easier sell, being “working at a different desk” rather than “challenging the way we structure work.”

*Let me go on the record straightaway: I am a several decades user and a long-time champion of telecommuting and remote work. I have consulted for many dozens of companies that have fielded tens of thousands of offsite workers. It is an immensely popular option for millions and may it live long and prosper! What I want to address here is not the value of offsite work, but a broader question: where are we headed when telework is seen as the starting and ending point of flexibility? I can't help but reflect on our 1980s work at *New Ways to Work in San Francisco* when known and barely known forms of flexibility were researched and promoted for their true **culture change** and **social contribution** value.*

*The standard for success was not just lightly modifying individual business cultures, but **redesigning the way the larger culture enabled its people to work and live**. It made sense to create robust options of part-time work and job sharing for families and students, compressed schedules and telework for exhausted commuters, worksharing to spread employment in downturns and phased retirement for older workers. Such social and organizational outcomes could only succeed by marching hand in hand with basic change in the way tens of thousands of employers and millions of employees redesigned the way they worked. Looking at the way “flexibility” has evolved, today's vision seems a bit narrower in focus and outcome. Let's look at offsite work, the leading edge of that evolution.*

**TELEWORK EXPLODES, with IT and Facilities providing the fuse**

I recall two decades ago when Gil Gordon, telecommuting pioneer, patient colleague and good friend would tirelessly respond in one venue after the other to the pressing anti-telecommuting question of the time: “How will I know they're working if I can't see them?” Despite his and many of our efforts over the years, remarkably that question persists. The transformational response to that question opened the door to a very different way of working:

- Managers would define stretch goals and outcomes to guide the telecommuter's work
- Employees would have a high degree of schedule control and work to peak performance
- Communication systems (including live events) would avoid isolation & career “death”
- Training would be abundant from orientation to skill-building to ad hoc problem-solving
- Supervision would become more regular, developmental and collective

**[A note on terminology:** Language has always been a problem in this section of the flexibility menu. The term “telecommuting” grew up in the 1980s, and was intended to convey the concept of “bringing work to the workers, not workers to work.” Although it captured a typical practice of one or two days a week working at home, it could mean fully home-based. The term “remote work” emerged in the mid to late 1990s to describe the growing practice of full-time offsite work. In this century we have welcomed “telework” which seeks to encompass offsite work of any

duration and “distributed work” which covers everything (and always reminds me of the old slogan “work anytime, anywhere” which some feel has morphed into today’s “work all the time, everywhere” standard. That’s the subject for another **Bulletin**.)

What does it matter what term you use? What matters are the differences in practices and outcomes that grow out of distinct behaviors. What I will call telecommuting in this piece is a general practice of working offsite (typically at home) from one to three days a week. I describe “remote work” as working fully offsite (typically at home.) The key difference is presence in and attachment to the living organization. A three day a week telecommuter shares some issues with the remote worker, but there are significant differences:

- ✓ Being in the office a couple days a week allows informal check-in with manager and peers
- ✓ Remotes often complain of feeling out-of-sight-out-of-mind; that can be because they are
- ✓ The assignment of clear objectives may need constant refinement; presence helps this
- ✓ The modest “absence” of telecommuters may lead to inadequate attention to their needs

### ***WHO ADDRESSES these distinct concerns of telecommuters, remote workers and their managers?***

Only you can answer this question for your organization. In the last few years, the old question of “are they working if I can’t see them” seems to have given way to two distinct answers:

- ◆ large amounts of telecommuting have been approved for a variety of reasons with the **assumption** that good goal-setting and monitoring will happen and enable supervision
- ◆ a growing number of remote workers has emerged as part of space-saving and cost-cutting initiatives, the assumption seeming to be that good management will flourish of its own

As I said earlier, I am hardly an opponent of these trends. I do believe, however, that they will deliver far more of their potential if attention is paid to designing, delivering and monitoring the transformational components of these new ways of working. Otherwise we risk just changing the desk people work on rather than rethinking the way they work. I have been involved in developing remote work initiatives for two decades, and have been struck by several things (not all true for all efforts) that can mark such projects:

- Since Facilities drives many of these cost-cutting efforts, and its IT partner can generate significant costs, there is reluctance to invest/spend on training/online tools/change management consulting
- With the momentum coming (typically) from Facilities and IT, HR/Training are often a late and junior entrant to the process
- Since there is often limited experience with implementation on the human side, the true requirements for both managers and employees are not fully understood – and delivered
- Ironically, we have never been in an engagement where some senior managers did not comment on the skills limitation of their direct supervisors – but skipped training anyhow

### ***HOW DO WE STRENGTHEN the growing practice of offsite work?***

The key I believe is to identify and ramp up the transformational content in this way of working. Drawing on the list generated at the outset, I would suggest the following:

- **Managers would define stretch goals and outcomes to guide the telecommuter’s work**  
*This critical task should begin with the employee taking the lead in the proposal process and both participants creating a full and flexible work plan; online training could help*
- **Employees would have a high degree of schedule control & work to peak performance**  
*The “I have to see them” spirit lives on in many organizations requiring strict “company hours” and total accessibility to offsite workers; the potential of these arrangements to allow very creative scheduling with global counterparts, better work-life integration, etc. is wasted*
- **Communication systems (including live events) would avoid isolation, career “death”**  
*Remotes in particular need conscious, and sometimes costly, live connection. To avoid the triumph of the potential downsides of offsite work, one must design virtual systems that overcome them – and not leave success to chance. You will find an impressive approach to these issues in the second half of [Flex Bulletin #17 – Power of Remote Work](#)*

■ **Training would be abundant from orientation to skill-building to ad hoc problem-solving**

*Your participants can help define the training requirements. They are likely to include orientation (live or by webinar) with managers and employees, implementation (online) training for all and possible depth training and coaching for managers.*

■ **Supervision would become more regular, developmental and collective**

*Success depends on the quality of ongoing supervision. It typically needs to improve in focus, consistency and openness to concrete problem-solving. Improved mentoring content is also helpful. And using conference calls for development and not just meetings is a plus.*

There is a wave of offsite work underway. If it is rethought and reshaped toward work redesign and not just job relocation, it could help open up other forms of flexibility to greater effectiveness and acceptance.

+++++

[DIALING FOR DATA] *Stacey Gibson and I will be calling many of you over the next few weeks for brief calls to understand if and where you are in the remodeling adventure. We can discretely share the results with all of you in a future issue. (And on the same call we will seek, and happily accept, your suggestions for other issues that the **Bulletin** might take up.)* The calls have been quite productive so far, and we look forward to your continued cooperation.

Best regards,  
Paul Rupert  
President  
Rupert & Company  
Chevy Chase, MD  
301-873-8489  
[paulrupertdc@cs.com](mailto:paulrupertdc@cs.com)

*Rupert & Company, publisher of the **Bulletin**, is the global leader in creating business-beneficial Flexible Work Arrangements. To see our Bulletin Archive, approach, services and client stories go to:*

[www.rupertandcompany.com](http://www.rupertandcompany.com)

*To see our online toolkit, including the telecommuting and remote work guides and training, go to:*

[www.flexwise.com](http://www.flexwise.com)