



Research Opportunity

For some time we have heard and read accounts of the new, different and more insistent desire of the Millennial generation for flexibility. Because these claims tend to be general or vague, they provide little guidance for those who are charged with modifying their companies' approach to flexibility.

We are undertaking a multi-company set of focus groups to explore with as many as 200 Millennials the forms of flexibility they seek, the value they attach to it and the processes they expect for getting the flexibility they want. We need a few more volunteers.

There is no fee for committing the minimum of two groups and receiving a full report and debrief on the findings. If you are interested, please [click here](#) and Stacey or I will contact you.

[The Great Recession has clearly affected many corporate practices, including flexible work efforts. The impact has been hard to assess, and it is no simple matter to predict when we will see a return to what we might call the “new normal.” We thought our readers would be a great resource in shedding some light on the state of flex – and were pleased that a good number stepped forward for what turned out to be generous conversations. Fifteen companies, ranging from aerospace and banking to consumer products and technology, spent up to an hour describing their progress, practices and priorities over the last two years.]

In reviewing all the conversations, we identified five themes that characterized the majority – though not all – of the companies. These results seem consistent with our perception of clients and prospects in this period. But they remain a modest sample, and we plan to continue contacting other of our readers to flesh out the picture – with an additional emphasis on looking forward to activity through 2012. In the meantime, we'd ask you to email us with the following:

- [Click here](#) to comment on how your company compares to the themes or another matter
- [Click here](#) to indicate your willingness to chat with Stacey or me about your flex state]

Based on our conversations with many of you, flexibility has taken a hit during this recession. One participant summarized the situation as “the change in the economy reduced the priority of flex.” Another said “We pretty much stopped work on flex in 2008.” Others may have seen a milder effect, but *almost no one* spoke of ramping up a robust initiative or seizing boldly on flex as a way to keep people engaged. In fact, the themes we heard, in rough priority, were:

- **The trajectory of flex is largely status quo**
- **Change-making is typically “do-it-yourself”**

- **Space-saving is accelerating, often in isolation**
- **There are pockets of resistance, from whole business units to managers**
- **Policy, guidelines exist – but they don't seem exciting or inspiring**

THE TRAJECTORY OF FLEX is largely status quo

“There are a lot of things we need to do, but there's little support for doing them now.”

There is not just one version of the status quo. Frozen flex would be an oxymoron, so we were drawn to the image of ballet dancers stopped mid-stride – a sort of flex on hold. Examples we heard were:

- Senior leaders don't buy business value message; economic downturn reduced priority
- Lack of policy, decentralized implementation and manager autonomy slows usage
- An exclusive and aggressive focus on mobility and real estate ruled out other flex
- An unsupportive senior leader + federal audits created “stealth flex”

In many cases positive steps were being taken toward enhanced flexibility. But it seemed that the size of the steps and the greater nature of the challenges would likely pose a barrier to change and yield a continuing status quo.

CHANGE-MAKING IS TYPICALLY do-it-yourself

“There is room for improvement in our tools, but we lack the resources to get updates.”

As we listened to the stories of champions trying to make progress in difficult environments, we were struck by the absence, or limited nature of active partnerships with third parties. We are not suggesting that progress or creativity is impossible without seasoned assistance. Rather, we observed that opportunities to apply external resources seemed to be off the table. Several cases in point were:

- A company with good progress finds the lack of senior support rules out assistance in upgrading training and other tools
- An organization with success in driving flex into the organization is stalled in installing a necessary tracking system
- A company that has made great strides and produced some positive, measurable results on its own remains frustrated: *“What bothers me is there are enough leaders who intellectually get why flexibility is valuable yet they still have an emotional block to it”.*

SPACE-SAVING IS ACCELERATING, often in isolation

“Facilities and IT were planning a major space-saving initiative without HR or FWAs at the table.”

- In a highly decentralized flex environment with limited supports, a major top-down, structured space-saving initiative is underway
- A large organization has a broad range of flex practices – from lots to little – across business units, while a major initiative to transform workspace proceeds independently
- Only one global company described a large, senior management-supported and integrated flex initiative with a strong remote work and space-saving element

THERE ARE POCKETS OF RESISTANCE, from whole business units to managers

“We have substantial pockets – areas I would call less than supportive.”

- Several companies report that the lack of senior management enthusiasm gives business leaders and even individual managers permission to hold out against adopting flex
- One company described an unevenness of offerings due to acquisitions of businesses without flexibility and no systematic means of creating uniform flex practices
- Most companies allow manager discretion in approving FWA requests – but this enables many managers to “just say no” and this is proving a hard behavior to overcome

POLICY + GUIDELINES EXIST – but they don't seem exciting or inspiring

"We have policies and guidelines in place, but they lack "flash" – people don't rush to them."

- When asked about the level of satisfaction with their guidelines, no participants expressed a high degree of enthusiasm for their current tools
- Several people described their companies' desire to have a combination of new guidelines, tracking and training tools – although investment in these may not be imminent
- Many companies have the problem of "clogged" intranets and navigational challenges; viral tools would add value in raising the flex profile, but no toolkit was described that way

Clearly what we heard from these companies was a classic good news/bad news tale. The good news is that champions remain in the trenches innovating and delivering steps that make their workplaces more flexible. The bad news is that senior and business leaders do not seem to see enhanced flexibility as a priority. A result is reduced organizational focus, fewer resources to work with and a tough environment for making the business case.

This is not unlike company behavior in previous recessions. Although this is the time to lay the groundwork for a more effective and engaged workforce, there is often a lag between demand and supply. Although the conditions are challenging, we were impressed once again with the seriousness of purpose and the results achieved by the champions with whom we spoke.

*One of the surprising facts that emerged in our conversations with readers was caught in this quote: **"I didn't realize that you did consulting and things like guidelines."** As we talked further, we realized that in one area at least we had been very successful with our hopes for the **Bulletin**. We wanted each issue to be a thought piece, not a marketing sheet. Apparently we've succeeded. That said, Stacey and I would be delighted to talk with any of you about your plans and needs. **Click [here](#)** to request a preview of our new "flashy" guidelines or visit our website at:*

www.rupertandcompany.com

You can see our classic FlexWise Guidelines and Training toolkits at:

www.flexwise.com

Best regards,

Paul Rupert
Stacey Gibson

Rupert & Company
Chevy Chase, MD
301-873-8489
paulrupertdc@cs.com

*Rupert & Company, publisher of the **Bulletin**, is the global leader in creating business-beneficial Flexible Work Arrangements.*