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Guides to a changing workplace

FlexBulletin #53: Turbo-charging Flex as Recruiter?

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[I hope you enjoyed both your brief summer break from the Bulletin and whatever personal break you might have taken. We took a little time to rest the mind and fingers, continue the transformation of our website, generate new online tools and implement what is turning out to be a fascinating study on millennials and flexibility. We look forward to reporting out those results later in September.

*We are speaking to relatively young employees in pairs of focus groups within 10 companies. One interesting finding these conversations shed on company practices is how new hires **perceive** flexibility within their organizations. The millennial experience seems to reinforce a constant theme we hear from many of our clients and prospects: although flexibility is billed first and foremost as a recruitment and retention tool, it is at best an informal and uneven driver of recruitment. Many colleagues can cite an example or two of landing a desirable new hire with the promise of an FWA. But few can describe an environment where flex for new hires is actively encouraged or where the path to a truly flexible way of working is clearly defined and praised as a strong contribution right out of the box.*

Surely we could be doing better. In this “back-to-school” and the subsequent Labor Day issue, we have a few thoughts.]



In hundreds of flexibility websites, news stories and studies over the years (now decades), there is almost always a list of the benefits/gains/values of flexible work. And while different claims show up on and fall off the list, such as commute reduction, sustainability and today's space reduction, the tried and true winners at the top of the list are either “retention” and “recruitment” or the seeming mantra of “recruitment-and-retention.” The latter, spoken almost as one word, was once described to me as the simple idea that “what keeps people will also bring them in the door.”

While this is a logical belief, it carries an inherent contradiction. We have often thought the word flexibility was a bit of a misnomer for the practices we promote. When people say in whatever form that they want greater flexibility in a given job, they really mean that they want greater **control** over *where, when and how* they do their work – with a strong emphasis on true control. It is far easier to challenge traditional forms of control for a proven performer in an existing job than to enter as a neophyte challenging control from before day one. (This is one reason that you will hear countless stories of people going through lengthy interviews and only raising the question of flexibility at the very end.)

WHAT'S SO PROBLEMATIC ABOUT flexibility / shared control?

The difficulties for managers in sharing control are numerous, including:

- The more or less crystalline definition of goals and outcomes
- The ability to communicate crisply and clearly
- The patience, observation and timing to initiate corrective action

- The thorough sharing of critical embedded assumptions

These core managerial capabilities are needed for directing flexible work whether it is being done by a new hire or a proven performer. But each requires very different execution. A quick review of the basics will show that difference and the pressure it brings to drive managers away from allowing flex for new hires.

HOW DO INTERNAL FLEX staff get managed?

The salient feature of one's existing staff is that they are *familiar* – shared assumptions, known foibles and expected communication patterns. Leaving aside the occasional problem performer, they are relatively easy to manage. On the big four core capabilities, one can expect:

- ✓ **Crystalline goals and outcomes** In dealing with existing staff, the bar for goal definition is often lower, especially if the employee is “trusted.” This most basic requirement for any flexible schedule is often loosened rather than tightened for the work-from-home employee
- ✓ **Communicate crisply and clearly** This important directive skill may exist unevenly and be used that way as well. Acres of performance reviews point to communication issues as a source for flexibility failure among flexible managers. But failure is tolerated, and inadequate communication can surround flexible arrangements.
- ✓ **Patience to initiate corrective action** “Managing” is a “hands-on” enterprise – hands on, not face time. It brings monitoring and modification to evolving processes, and thrives on subtle intervention. Tact, timing and testing matter. This is one of the great challenges to flexibility, where heavy-handedness and insistence on face time can be a problem
- ✓ **Sharing of embedded assumptions** The great glue of a flexible workplace is the web of assumptions holding it together – for both good and ill. The broad sharing of assumptions makes goal setting easier, communication more automatic and corrections simpler. Being part of the culture makes flexibility much more possible and predictable.

HOW DO RECRUITS FARE in this managerial matrix?

The simple answer is that the unknown new-hire offers significant challenges in each of these areas. What many managers and organizations suspect is that there is a high enough bar to integrate and acculturate a new hire – let alone one on a flexible schedule. And absent structured supports, retention is a great deal easier to achieve than recruitment.

- ✓ **Crystalline goals and outcomes** In the world of flex there is much talk about clear goals and measurable outcomes. But few organizations evince great pride in their sharp, clear, transparent goal-setting. Defining these for a new person with a new role and tasks is doable but daunting. Easier to hire someone, acculturate them and let flex bloom slowly, if at all.
- ✓ **Communicate crisply and clearly** Since communication is always a bit precarious, and such a linchpin for success, not putting it to tough tests too early often seems the prudent thing to do. The best way to avoid testing it is to not trial run it with unproven users.
- ✓ **Patience to initiate corrective action** Corrective interventions require a demanding and high-level skill set. Mid-course change is as much art as skill, and something managers work hard to perfect. Again, these maneuvers are most stressed with untested managers and flexible new hires. Reluctance to try much of this should not seem surprising.
- ✓ **Sharing of embedded assumptions** “Assumptions,” “habits” and “the way we do things around here” all make up that thing we call culture. It enables a thousand shortcuts and covers a multitude of sins. No newbie can possibly come acculturated – and that makes new hire flex a major educational challenge – and sometimes an overwhelming one.

WHAT CAN BE DONE ABOUT this seeming dilemma?

Challenging as the aggressive integration of recruits into immediate flexibility may sound, a determined organization can develop a strategy and implement an approach that delivers powerful results. Next issue we will examine a supportive infrastructure:

- The key leadership and business messages
- The consistent package to guide selection and integration of users
- The manager skill development suites
- The employee development suites
- The monitoring and metrics system to assure satisfaction

*One of the surprising facts that emerged in recent 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,
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*Rupert & Company, publisher of the **Bulletin**, is the global leader in creating business-beneficial Flexible Work Arrangements.*

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