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Guides to a changing workplace

FlexBulletin #55: Millennials Speak: “Manage Flexibly”

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Millennials Speak – Come Hear Them in Their Own Words
Work-Life Congress • Manhattan • October 19 • 4:15—5:45

For several months, we have worked with nine leading employers on some very eye-opening research. We conducted 22 focus groups with 205 millennials determining their views on flexibility. The executive summary and full report – [Millennials Speak: A New Generation Seeks Focus, Flexibility and Feedback](#) – are now on our website. Stacey Gibson and I will be presenting the findings and recommendations of the study at Wednesday’s Working Mother Work-Life Congress. We will be joined by Michelle Birnbaum of MetLife, one of the participating employers.

While we thought going in that we might find that millennials resembled “boomers with an edge,” we discovered that they add to their impatience with “waiting for flex” a far deeper critique of the barriers to flexibility and a demanding agenda for change. Our stimulating conversations with more than 200 articulate members of our present and future workforce caused us to rethink many of our assumptions about the imperatives facing the champions of flexibility. Hopefully this study will provide us an opportunity to engage with you in thinking about these issues and the opportunities for action that your companies might consider. This **Bulletin** will give you a brief summary of what we learned

More character than caricature Unrehearsed and without apparent coordination, the participants in these flexibility focus groups seemed to summarize their views on flexibility in a single mantra. It was not “let me work any hours I want” or “I’ll be at Starbucks if you need me” or “I’ve got to catch up on my Facebook postings” before I can get around to your request.

It was: Be clear about my work, give feedback to improve it and let me schedule myself *“as long as the work gets done.”* These millennials rarely mentioned programmatic flex solutions like telecommuting, flextime or other Flexible Work Arrangements – although they didn’t reject these. Rather, they see the path to flexibility coming through capable managers who are as clear about and committed to results as they are.

Out of our 30+ hours of conversation with these intriguing groups, several headlines emerged:

- *Flexibility flows from a clear work process, quality supervision and the ability to self-schedule*
- *Millennials prefer flexibility now, but they assume and expect it when they have families*
- *These participants were strong planners, expecting success in both life and work*

Key Findings The **Millennials Speak** study does give voice to at least this one major segment of what is also called Generation Y: those working at major employers and planning on careers in

those or similar organizations. Participants were drawn from these employers: Bayer, Discovery Communications, Eli Lilly & Co., KPMG, McGladrey, Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center, MetLife, MTV Networks and Sodexo. The full study includes quotations from more than thirty participants. Below are five of the key findings from the research:

- **Flex is valued highly among Total Rewards (pay, benefits, PTO and flex)**
2/3 of participants rated flex #2 or #3 in value – with pay almost always #1
- **Most see a clear line between work and personal life, with some blending**
Virtually all who saw that line being blurred cited work bleeding into personal life.
- **A “flexible manager” provides clear targets, empathy and ample feedback**
This is a “collaborative,” not “traditional” style
- **Most want stronger career development to prepare for the future**
Many are unwilling or unsure about giving “all” for the senior positions
- **On matters of “loyalty” and “job hopping” they embrace “conditional loyalty”**
Many have watched their parents’ one-way loyalty backfire and seek a 2-way street
- **The value of “face time” and “time in” elude them and seem destructive**
They assume “virtual when possible” and don’t buy “decades in” for promotions

Simply put, these millennials are willing to work hard and meet commitment with commitment. They are quite willing to put in long hours in the early stages of their career. But they place a high value on efficiency and have low tolerance for face time, a lack of corrective feedback and poor planning by leaders. They do not intend to shortchange their families for no compelling reason. They are not “job-hoppers” but they are unlikely to remain for years in an inflexible environment.

Our Conclusions Based on all the groups and the full set of findings, actionable conclusions emerged. They included:

- **They frame the issue of flexibility as a work process challenge**
They much prefer transformation to assimilation in how employers manage
- **Flexibility is not Flexible Work Arrangements or a limited menu**
These millennials talk about broad flexibility, not options like telecommuting
- **They want the power of technology integrated into the way they work**
Most view virtual tools not as endpoints, but as a means for greater efficiency
- **They have clear expectations of leaders and want them met**
When they say they want feedback, they expect managers to learn how to give it

Unlike previous generations, these millennials see the challenge of a more flexible workplace as transformational rather than programmatic. And rather than coming to the need for flexibility later in life, they seem clear from the beginning of their careers that it is an essential element. While many older employees have said, or might say now that whether you can have flexibility or not “depends on your manager,” the millennials we spoke with seem to believe that enabling flexibility – or managing flexibly – is a function of skill. Skills can be taught and learned, and they believe that employers have an obligation to set high standards and meet them.

Recommendations The millennials described a diverse and ambitious agenda for change. No doubt different cohorts within complex organizations will have different priorities, different paths to a more flexible workplace. These recommendations likely apply in most settings.

- **The time has come to fully enable managers to manage flexibly**
The decades-old mantra “flex depends on my manager” has run its course
- **Companies need to insist on clear work requirements and quality feedback**
Millennials will not endure 60-hour weeks for no reason or get stale feedback annually
- **Study your millennials thoroughly and let positive needs push change**
Avoid the tendency to assume that this cohort just needs assimilation
- **Redesign your flexibility system around key principles rather than menus**
Use the millennial anchor of “as long as the work gets done” for many forms of flex
- **Embrace flexibility as a better way of working and engaging staff**
As newcomers to the workplace, millennials should partner in work redesign

These elements from the study's executive summary give some sense of this generation's views. But the power of **Millennials Speak** is in the many verbatim comments captured in the full report. You can download it from our website, www.rupertandcompany.com.

And we would welcome your comments on our new [Facebook](#) site, [Rupert and Company](#).

*A reader recently told us "I didn't realize that you did consulting and things like guidelines." 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, we 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*

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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