

*In the pre-Thanksgiving issue of the **FlexBulletin – #57: Farewell to FWAs?** – we sketched the evolution of flexible schedules from informality to Alternative Work Arrangements to Flexible Work Arrangements. Many readers have described it as a very useful overview. The conclusion of this brief tour was simple: FWAs may have exhausted their power for change. It may be time to shift from noun to verb, from outcome to skillset; to focus not on limited **arrangements**, but on the **collaborative skills** required to embed true flexibility in resistant cultures.*

*While flexibility remains the overarching goal of internal champions, we believe that the time has come to better align means with ends. One cannot achieve flexibility through practices or programs we would call “neo-rigidity.” For the next phase of flexibility to prosper, managers will need to upgrade their skills and become much more flexible managers and employees will need to strengthen their own collaborative skills. Broader forms of flexibility need to be developed, including a range of options for hourly workers and more hybrid forms for millennials and pre-retirees. Online systems will need to be enhanced with more robust menus, monitoring of success and automated coaching to support all users. In the weeks ahead we will explore these opportunities. We will start today by highlighting the dynamic value of **collaborative scheduling**.*

FWAs in corporations evolved as a form of bite-size flexibility. They appealed to skeptical managers and senior leaderships who were not prepared to swallow more fundamental, flexible forms of flexibility. Most of them preferred introducing flexibility as a limited menu that could be contained initially, and possibly expanded over time to more options and more classes of users.

This “toehold/containment” strategy did open the door to some options for millions of people. But the menu never really expanded, leaving, for example, compressed work weeks for exempts and phased retirement for older workers largely as orphans. Large categories of employees – hourly workers, new hires and older workers – remained ineligible for choices that mattered to them. FWAs will continue to have value in many settings. But as agents of growth and change, they seem to have reached their limits

FLEXIBLE WORK ARRANGEMENTS are shifting from a driver of to a brake on flex

- FWAs have become programs, distinct, limited – as much neo-rigidity as true flexibility
- FWAs/flex are identified increasingly as telework – an unworkable option for many millions
- The focus on distinct programs does not lend itself to growing demand for hybrid schedules
- Program design values individual manager openness over skill development

Typically FWA programs end up casting a static net over the flexibility potential in a given organization. The menu of options is based on perceptions of flex that exist before companies have experience with options on a broad scale. But that menu tends to stick. Those who approve FWAs are often a modest percentage of managers – those with positive experiences or key skills. And there is little effort to develop those skills in others. The pool of eligibility is drawn tightly, and is rarely expanded in an aggressive fashion. More expansive flexibility requires a self-renewing framework.

COLLABORATIVE SCHEDULING (or Co-Scheduling) offers a more dynamic approach

In the end, flexibility plateaus if it's only about program. In our workplaces, vibrant flexibility requires ongoing, culture-challenging, innovative ways of behaving. The changes we seek in how people work almost always involve occasional or ongoing shifts in scheduling. And those changes can occur most deeply and effectively

when they are done by true risk-takers and collaborators. Thus **collaborative scheduling** best describes the approach and the goal.

Some familiar behaviors like working offsite (telecommuting) or reduced schedule (part-time) may be created and sustained this way; so might team self-scheduling for hourly workers or hybrid schedules such as a blend of occasional offsite work, flextime and compressed work week. Rather than the menu as starting point, collaborative scheduling starts with assessing the possible schedules and collaborating to build better ways of serving customers and satisfying employees. Making this work requires:

- The capacity of managers and employees to envision mutually beneficial flexibility and regularly redesign it as needed
- The ongoing ability to schedule/reschedule/unschedule work with colleagues
- The skill to plan with certainty, then turn on a dime, to satisfy customers and self

CO-SCHEDULING REQUIRES FLEXIBLE MANAGERS in order to be fully successful

Flexibility is, by its very nature, ongoing collaboration. While Flexible Work Arrangements can be launched into and survive in an environment of uneven managerial skills, collaborative scheduling depends on managers who can – *and do* – practice several core skills. (These are among the vital managerial skills described to us in our millennial research):

- The ability to define the expectations for an employee’s work and modify them as needed
- The capacity to provide consistent, constructive feedback that guides superior performance
- The willingness and ability to resolve scheduling differences in a conciliatory fashion
- Comfort in delegating appropriate scheduling control to employees and teams
- The ability to design and implement adequate metrics to assess the scheduling approach

It is not enough to expect the average manager to possess these skills. Co-Scheduling requires a far more aggressive and hands-on role for companies than that required by FWAs. Employers need to establish high standards for manager behavior, provide targeted and aggressive training and support the development of outcome metrics. And they need to engage employees in training as well.

CO-SCHEDULING DEMANDS EMPLOYEES who can collaborate with peers and managers

Effective flexibility has always been a two-way street. Yet FWA initiatives often lack the development of employees as well as managers. Just as managers are not born with strong feedback and communication skills, neither are employees. Successful co-scheduling is enhanced by employee:

- Mastery of the conciliatory approach to resolving differences
- Competence in assertive communication with peers and manager
- Ability to provide constructive feedback to coworkers
- Capacity for designing and implementing outcome metrics

CO-SCHEDULING PRIORITIZES TRAINING over program

One reason for the plateauing of FWAs is the fall-off of communication and modest training right after program launch. Co-scheduling places a strong emphasis on training front and center. And it offers a range of training – live, online, auto-coaching and other modalities – to reinforce core skills.

The next FlexBulletin will describe the various online tools that can support the transition to Co-Scheduling.

A reader told us “I just found out that you do consulting, guidelines and training.” We do. As we build out the tools and techniques of flexibility, including The Collaborative Scheduling toolkit, we would welcome discussing your organization’s trajectory and plans.

*We also would be happy to brief decision-makers in your organization on the compelling findings of the **Millennial Speaks** flexibility study. Go to our website to preview our many tools, services and delighted customer comments:*

www.rupertandcompany.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.*

© 2011 Rupert & Company. All Rights Reserved