

FlexBulletin #74: Happy Flex Year – for Sure

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Happy New Year!

May flexibility flourish and all of us prosper

It's Time for Change As we enter a new year armed with a fistful of resolutions, we all tend to look forward and backward. For several years I've used the January **Bulletin** for a blow-by-blow account of progress made in workplace flexibility, challenges raised and prospects for the future. For 2013, I thought I'd step back and look at the larger arc of flexibility as we have come to know it and practice it.

As many of you will recall, I spent more than a few issues in 2012 observing the growing limitations of [Flexible Work Arrangements](#). I wrote of a next stage of flexibility which we called [Collaborative Scheduling](#). We spent the year discussing this approach with clients and colleagues, developing supportive tools and implementing this approach with select employers.

In 2013 we are putting a stake in the ground. While we will continue to consult, train and provide the highest quality online tools to those wanting the most effective approach to FWAs, our New Year's resolution is to partner with organizations that want to implement a Collaborative Scheduling system.

That said, I want to assure you that the **Bulletin** will not become an endless infomercial for a single point of view. As we have in years past, we will continue to take the broadest possible view of flexibility and write of trends, truths and traits that will build the flexible workplace we all seek.

Earlier in the month, when I would normally have been writing the **Bulletin**, I ended up working on the article below. In discussions with John Hollon, Editor of [TLNT](#), an excellent HR newsletter. I agreed to write a piece that summarized my view of 2013 as a year of transition from flexibility as program to flexibility as practice. It is, I hope, a pithy summary worth sharing.

I welcome your comments and look forward to conversations over the course of the year. And whatever your plans, hopes and resolutions, I wish you a rich and fulfilling 2013.



Workplace Flexibility: This Year, Collaborative Scheduling Is Ready to Take Off

Will workplace flexibility surge in 2013? And will it resemble the limited programs of the past?

The answers: “very likely” and “far less program, much more practice.”

A likely surge in flex will follow the fiscal cliff resolution and the steady, month-by-month growth in employment. In my 40 years of building flexible workplaces, demand for flexibility has grown steadily and supply has ebbed and flowed with the unemployment rate.

It's a great barometer. Fuller employment makes recruitment and retention a high priority and the supply of flex increases noticeably. A robust job market emboldens would-be job hoppers to demand greater control over where, when and how they work.

Yes, more flexibility – but very different

If history is any guide, flex will surge this year.

Not only will there be more flexibility, but it will be very different. Today's dominant model of Flexible Work Arrangements with a narrow menu aimed at exempt staff has exhausted its pioneering potential. The era of programs is winding down.

Over the past four decades, flexibility has gone through programmatic stages, each an advance in its time: one-size-fits-all flexibility programs (1972-1980s), "alternative work arrangements+ (1980s-1990s)," "flexible work arrangements" (1990s-present)."

Nearly all these programs were more marginal than mainstream, more exclusive than inclusive, depending too often on the vagaries of the economy and the whims of the manager. This emphasis on programs – on options rather than capacity, on individual manager openness rather than the development of essential skills – has limited the power of flexibility to transform the way we work.

The shift from stale programs to the deeper and wider practice of collaborative scheduling is underway

Advantages over programs of the past

Major employers are turning to the design and implementation of collaborative scheduling initiatives as a skill-based strategy driven by unique business gains. This approach insists on well-trained managers and employees who can negotiate and renegotiate schedules to maximize employee engagement and contribution.

The clarification of results and the opportunity to redesign individual and team work processes are at the heart of collaborative scheduling. The attributes of this "flexibility as practice," include:

- **Ongoing business-beneficial negotiation** of schedules and worksites;
- **Creation of a company-wide**, core flexible management skill set;
- **Deployment of powerful online supports** to managers and employees;
- **Application of flexible practices** in areas of wellness, retirement and business continuity

Collaborative scheduling offers distinct advantages over the narrow programs of the past. It is based in a primary organizational function – scheduling and staffing – rather than a benefits-oriented HR function. It enables a broad, employee-driven and fluid set of scheduling choices for both exempt and hourly staff.

Practices embedded in the company culture

It positions flex not as a stand-alone program, but as a set of skill-based practices, embedded in the company culture, that both manager and employee learn and use on a regular basis. It offers applications of flexible management skills not only in a broader menu, but in areas such as managing those at a distance, scheduling flexibly to bring associates back from chronic conditions and building the infrastructure for business continuity.

Once flexibility is cut loose from the constraints of program, company flex champions can set and achieve business goals that require superior collaboration between managers and their teams. As the economy recovers and business challenges proliferate, it's time for flexibility to achieve its full promise in the workplace.

Paul Rupert has collaborated with colleagues, clients and business leaders to embed flexibility in the workplace for the past 40 years. His consulting firm, Washington, DC-based [Rupert & Company](#), has provided dozens of major employers with innovative strategies, training and online tools to build the flexibility the market will bear. Paul has played a leading role in developing flexibility systems in companies ranging from Aetna and AOL to Wal-Mart and Xerox, and is the architect of the Co Scheduling approach.

***We welcome your comments on this Bulletin. If you write, please email me at:
paulrupertdc@cs.com***

Best regards,
Paul Rupert

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

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