



## **FlexBulletin #77: Collaboration Needs Skills, Not Location**

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***Must it Always be Either/Or?** Along with you I have dipped a toe or more into the great flood of articles, interviews, posts and screeds about the Yahoo/Best Buy banning of offsite work. I know we live in a binary world, and our media seem to accentuate this negative. But the news & opinion consumer of the last several months has been treated to a rapid-fire sequence of solutions framed as budget cuts vs. tax increases, armed guards vs. banning ammo and telecommuting vs. all hands on deck.*

*By the time the air had gone out of the Yahoo-inspired controversy and the polar positions had hardened, I had grown weary of the sterile back-and-forth claims of "I can do it better from home" against "It can only be done in the office." It seemed to me that if the goal was collaboration, then the question was as much how as where it was done.*

*So I posted this final set of observations as the last in my series on [TLNT](#). I was encouraged by several **Bulletin** readers to reproduce it here. If you want to see all my flex and Yahoo posts on TLNT since the beginning of the year, just click on my name on the most recent post and you'll see all the articles.*

*With all this behind us, I promise a blockbuster, traditional Bulletin next week. Tentatively titled "Shooting Ourselves in Both Feet", it will suggest a path forward to for both users and champions of flexibility.*

*Enjoy the piece.*

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## **To Yahoo, Best Buy et al: "It's the Skills, Not the Location!"**

Just when the dust was settling on Yahoo, along came Best Buy. Another endangered company with a new CEO was pleading for "All Hands on Deck!" as it abolished its ROWE (Results-Oriented Work Environment) version of flexible work

### **Collaboration, Collaboration – Who Owns the Best Collaboration**

Yahoo and Best Buy each argued that collaboration was best done in the office.

According to the [Yahoo HR memo](#): "To become the absolute best place to work, communication and collaboration will be important, so we need to be working side-by-side. That is why it is critical that we are all present in our offices. Some of the best decisions and insights come from hallway and cafeteria discussions, meeting new people, and impromptu team meetings. ..."

Best Buy spokesman Matt Furman told the [Minneapolis StarTribune](#): "It makes sense to consider not just what the results are, but how the work gets done. Bottom line, it's 'all hands on deck' at Best Buy and that means having employees in the office as much as possible to collaborate and connect on ways to improve our business."

Hundreds of critics shot back with anecdotes, boatloads of statistics and strong assertions that offsite work was more productive, especially when it was buoyed up (ironically) by the collaboration tools supplied by the likes of Best Buy and Yahoo. Collaborating at a distance, the critics argued, was the wave of the future and telecommuters didn't need an office or huddles around the water cooler to "help the business."

## **Can Proximity Guarantee Productivity? Does Closeness Create Collaboration?**

At the heart of this intense discussion about the effectiveness of offsite vs. onsite work is a dangerous assumption: we know *how* to collaborate, but are divided about *where* it's done best. I doubt that Yahoo, Best Buy or most of us know how to collaborate very well or with predictable value – wherever we are.

I have a lot of experience with remote work: 8 years as the first inter-city remote in a demanding consulting firm (in primitive 1992 we exchanged documents by FedEx!); 12 years managing my all-remote firm; and 25 years consulting on workplace flexibility to large companies (although not Yahoo or Best Buy.)

Clarifying, accomplishing and assessing outcomes and deliverables may be done unevenly, but can be done – and taught. Working without interruption or through longer days or weeks can increase productivity. And of course the personal benefits of offsite work are matched these days only by growing real estate savings.

## **Collaborative Behavior Comes from Skills, not Water Coolers or Home Offices**

When it comes to collaboration, innovation and the sustained sessions that can spawn and sustain them, “all hands on deck” can, at its worst, look like a demolition derby. Collaboration requires productive interactions. Underdeveloped interactive skills play a far more important role when you are trying to question, reinvent or save a faltering company or product line. True and useful collaboration demands a distinct skillset – what I call the [Mutual Respect skills](#).

Suspending assumptions, actually listening, taking risks, giving strong feedback, challenging authority, resolving conflicts along the way – these are not easy things to do on the phone or in the conference room. And they are not made easier when the business is stressed, jobs are insecure and the environment is hostile. But this is the situation in which Yahoo's and Best Buy's vaunted collaboration is to occur.

The Mutual Respect or a comparable set of collaborative skills can be taught. But in my experience, American culture and American business undervalue and under-teach them. Working offsite or in challenging times argues for highlighting and deepening these skills. Far too often, we do the opposite.

## **Cutting Corners or Committing to Collaboration?**

The recent stampede to full-time remote work as an office space/cost reduction strategy is a case in point. I recall a conversation a decade ago with a large, early adopter tech client about training for their soon-to-be-remote managers and employees. Suggesting that interactive skills training might be in order, I was told: “You misunderstand. This is a cost reduction strategy, not a cost incurring strategy. There's no budget for frills like soft skills training.”

It doesn't have to be that way. The conversation ignited by Yahoo has focused largely on one form of flexibility: telecommuting for mostly exempt staff. But collaboration is essential for all forms of flexibility with all categories of employees. My firm spent several years introducing flexible work for more than a thousand unionized RNs into a dozen New York hospitals.

This proved to be a crash course in collaboration. These competent, hard-working bedside nurses were hardly candidates for telecommuting. But they could achieve desirable control over their schedules by having schedule control delegated from Nurse Managers through what came to be called *Team Self-Scheduling*. Conflict resolution and high-impact communication skills were vital to make this work.

In our live training of more than a thousand RNs and Nurse Managers, we asked if any had received targeted training in conflict resolution at some point in their education or service. In these extraordinarily diverse, highly stressed hospitals in Brooklyn, the Bronx and Queens, only two people recalled such training! One assumes – or at least hopes -- that resource rich companies do a better job.

The good news is that the training occurred, the desired collaborative behaviors emerged, and the flexible design worked. The skills are not acquired by osmosis or by wishing for them. They can be taught if leaders recognize that they are needed and both managers and employees acquire them. Under these conditions location can matter less or perhaps not at all.

Without such skills, water cooler chat, hallway encounters or online tools may lead to interaction. Just don't count on them to create the collaboration that turns a business around or sustains its creative growth.

***We welcome your comments on this **Bulletin** or **Blog**. When you write, please email me at:  
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