

FlexBulletin #79: Darwin - Time to Evolve Flexibility

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"In the long history of humankind (and animal kind, too) those who learned to collaborate and improvise most effectively have prevailed." – Charles Darwin

Evolution is everywhere; should we resist? As a country we seem to prefer "revolution" in product advertising and evolution in social change. And today it seems that evolution is breaking out all over. President Obama and a host of politicians have "evolved" on marriage equality (formerly "gay marriage"); unlikely allies have evolved on immigration from "self-deportation" to a path to citizenship; and after Sandy Hook, public opinion on background checks evolved from gridlock to 90% support.

Workplace flexibility is evolving rapidly as well. For the last year the **Bulletin** has been pointing to signs that a significant shift is underway in how we describe and implement what we call "flexibility." (See #56-**How to Do "Millennial Flex"** & #57-**Farewell to FWAs?**) Then Yahoo and Best Buy set off a national reaction and vigorous discussion on the state of flexibility by suspending its use. These firms were portrayed in a monsoon of commentary as swimming against the evolutionary tide. Our recent blogs and bulletins (www.rupertandcompany.com) have contributed to the ensuing national conversation a version of Darwin's observation:

"...those who learned to collaborate and improvise most effectively have prevailed."

We have argued simply that the essence of flexibility is managers and individual employees or teams collaborating to create mutually beneficial schedules. This essential power of the first generation of flexibility is developing through what amounts to a natural selection process. As we show below, we are in the midst of a natural development in which flexibility programs are rapidly giving way to the next generation: embedded flexibility practice or **collaborative scheduling**.

The Continuing Evolution of "Flexibility" For decades the generic definition of flexibility for employees has been "greater control over where, when and how they do their work." Since the beginning of time and work, some individuals have doubtless negotiated schedule changes with their supervisors. In our modern and radically different economy, dramatic changes in work process, workforce, commuting and technology have led to large numbers of people wanting greater schedule control. Seeking change, not anarchy, companies and employees turned to programs to enable enhanced control. They included:

- *1970s on – Flextime for "all"* Companies blended choice and fairness by offering the same limited option(s) to whole groups or divisions. Different schedules, but in lockstep.
- *1980s on – Alternative Work Arrangements* Somewhat marginalized as "alternatives", the advance in this approach was a (limited) program of individual schedule changes, with strong eligibility hurdles
- *1990s on – Flexible Work Arrangements* This dominant step on the evolutionary ladder marked the shift to broader menus of options, individually proposed schedules and broader acceptance

Why Collaborative Scheduling Emerges Now As I said in the last **Bulletin** [link] on the language of flexibility, the term "telecommuting" was coined in 1973 and "FWAs" have been with us for a generation. Powerful in their day, these and other forms of programmatic flex and language no longer define the goals of a truly robust and business-beneficial approach to sharing control of schedules.

Collaborative Scheduling (or Co Scheduling) represents the next evolutionary stage. It is a comprehensive, more effective framework for what we now call "flexibility", "flexible work arrangements", "flex" and formal vs. informal flex. A growing number of employers and employees tell us that the approach of limited programmatic flex no longer encompasses,

describes or energizes the practices that are now becoming common or are needed by large and diverse groups in the workforce. These groups include:

- millions of hourly workers who find the FWA framework off-putting or not relevant;
- millennials (as seen in our robust focus group [study](#) [link]) who are looking for consistent management and control over their time, not "rigid" options; and
- older workers looking for reduced schedules into retirement who are seldom included in FWAs

How “natural selection” is driving FWAs into Collaborative Scheduling The beauty of evolution is that it incorporates the strengths of predecessors with innovations that assure greater success in the future. Old and new forms can exist side by side, but eventually superior practices prevail. One can contrast old and new practices in optimizing where, when and how people work:

Flexible Work Arrangements represent a range of programs offering a modest menu of choices that:

- create a limited form of flexibility resembling “neo-rigidity” – better than 9-to-5, but lacking fluidity
- resemble a benefit offering with some assurance of certainty, and an implied business benefit
- depend on manager receptivity, typically not requiring or offering skill training
- suffer the negative opinions millions attach to Rorschach words such as "telecommuting," "part-time"

Collaborative Scheduling is embedded in a core function of organizations (scheduling) and:

- treats all forms of successful flexibility to date as appropriate guides to negotiable schedules for all
- sets a collaborative and mutually respectful standard for designing and optimizing how work is done
- creates not an “arrangement”, but a process for continual monitoring and modifying of schedules
- insists the goal of collaboration is inventing schedules that engage employees and build contribution
- requires and provides collaborative skills to overcome manager resistance and employee entitlement
- uses descriptive language such as collaborative scheduling to embody the objective

It is adapting to change that determines selection In the end, collaborative scheduling is not an end, a stand-alone programmatic noun like compressed workweek or telecommuting. *Scheduling* is an ongoing activity and *collaborative* is a way of behaving. For the last two decades, as we sought to enhance flexible arrangements in numerous organizations, many of us complained that managers lacked the essential skills to negotiate new and better ways of working. Company leaders would agree that too many of their managers were under-skilled and under-trained. But programs could and would proceed regardless.

Collaborative scheduling challenges that habit. It picks up where old style flexibility leaves off. Building on great progress to date, it will master the challenges of embedded practice, universal coverage and targeted training. And it will leave behind the kind of voluntary programs that a Yahoo or a Best Buy leadership can wipe out with a memo – replacing them with truly transformed cultures.

Among the many factors that drove us to collaborative scheduling were the views of clients who are struggling to integrate greater control of schedules in challenging hourly environments. FWAs did not speak to them. A particularly impressive advocate is Stefanie Loader, Managing Director of Rio Tinto’s Northparkes Mines in Australia. The only woman mine leader in a heavily male and very conservative environment, Stefanie values flexibility as a better way to get work done and to bring more women into an inclusive workforce. In a recent presentation she said the following (including a generous comment about us):

*I want us to boldly step back and redesign work to be flexible, and then collaborate to determine the suitable schedule for that work to be done. Once we have established what and how, we need to be able to monitor the design and the schedule to ensure they are working and agree as employer and employee what successful delivery of the work and operating to the schedule looks like. This approach to flexibility is termed by Paul Rupert of the US **collaborative scheduling**.*

This consultative, collaborative approach to flexibility and scheduling approach scares managers – it sounds like a lot of work, thinking about work differently, putting in place objectives and measures for not only the quality of the work, but the schedule. And agreeing up front what to do if it doesn’t work.

She believes that leadership, training and support can overcome these challenges. If collaborative scheduling doesn’t work, there will be little flexibility and very few women in mining operations. In such demanding settings, collaborative scheduling may not be another option. It could well be the only option.

“It is not the strongest of the species that survives, nor the most intelligent that survives. It is the one that is the most adaptable to change.” – Charles Darwin

We welcome your comments on this Bulletin. When you write, please email me at:
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Collaborative Scheduling Resources

To learn more about our approach to Co Scheduling, you might:

- ✓ Visit our website (www.rupertandcompany.com) to see our methodology, blogs and online tools
- ✓ Like us on our Rupert and Company Facebook page
- ✓ Accept our forthcoming request to connect with us on LinkedIn
- ✓ Call or write me to discuss how you can apply your inner Darwin to the challenges ahead

Best regards,
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