



**FlexBulletin #84 – Engaging Remotes: “Soft” Skills Enable Software**

September 16, 2013

We welcome to this issue of the **FlexBulletin** many new readers. Among you are colleagues we have met on LinkedIn, older subscribers who have taken on new roles and readers from TLNT and our Co Scheduler blog. In the months ahead we hope you enjoy our unique mixture of in-depth treatment of flexibility’s most burning questions and the tools, training and superior practices that can help resolve them. To reach me or to comment on the Bulletin, please click [here](#).

+++++

**THE GROWTH OF REMOTES MAKES COLLABORATION ESSENTIAL**

There was a time, not so long ago, when one heard the phrase “Individual Contributor” said with both regularity and reverence. HiPos were ICs with that something special. It sometimes seemed that a small cohort of well-chosen and mentored ICs/HiPos would make the difference between a bleak and a promising future.

Then along came teams. ICs and HiPos didn’t go away. They just became absorbed in the tidal wave of teaming that promised to harness groups of all sizes and functions into high-performing engines of excellence. Team building, management and maintenance became the subject of an avalanche of articles and books and the object of HR, OD and managers everywhere. It became an article of organizational faith that working together, individuals could produce far more than they might in isolation.

Then, in the last decade and depending on the firm, first dozens, then hundreds and even thousands of contributors of all stripes went remote. IBM’s remote workforce alone reached 100,000 people globally. The apostles of real estate savings, willing IT supporters and the champions of telework combined to enable proven contributors to move their workplaces home – and hopefully be the HiPos and team players they had been in the office.

**COLLABORATION IN DISPERSED ENVIRONMENTS PROVES CHALLENGING**

Going remote successfully requires more than moving participants and their support systems from an onsite to an offsite desk. As experienced gardeners know, successful transplanting requires more than just digging up a thriving plant and dropping it in a new hole. Attention, nourishment, reliable light all play their part. Many companies approach the transition to remote with care and forethought, while others take a more mechanical approach. This view seems to be: if you transplant, collaboration will come.

The leader of a major initiative that aims to use remote work to save space costs and improve employee satisfaction and productivity described his approach to a reporter:

*He is betting that his employees will get more done if they are at home — or anywhere outside the office, for that matter — more often... He is betting that when they do venture into the office, they will work together better and more creatively if closed doors and high cubicles don’t get in the way. “Let’s say you don’t buy any of that,” he said. “We can show ...millions we saved in rent on [space] we don’t have anymore.”*

While the impressive savings are reported in hard currency, the projected behavior of those working at home or in the cubicle-free offices sounds at least a little magical. Is it likely that “*they will work together better and more creatively if closed doors and high cubicles don’t get in the way?*” The barriers to effective collaboration and innovation are likely to be far deeper than the shadow cast by tall furnishings.

Fortunately we are many years into this radically new way of working. The collective experience of pioneering employers has produced systematic guidance that combines reasonable space and cost reduction saving with tools, training and best practices that enhance productivity and engagement.

## **SUCCESSFUL COLLABORATION REQUIRES WEB-BASED TOOLS AND SOFTWARE**

Nurturing a transplanted workforce requires the application of a range of nutrients to allow them to take root and thrive over time. Established initiatives typically began – and new efforts will likely begin – with tools that provide modest functional guidance. At the far end of the support continuum, companies are adopting a broad range of so-called collaboration software that is designed to replace magical hopes with systematic enablers. Among the tools companies have found useful are:

**Online Navigation** – The foundation of remote success is a virtual GPS system that includes orientation to support systems, rules of the road, internal and external best practices and essential resources.

**Online Training** – Both managers and employees can benefit immensely by targeted training that underscores the essentials of success. This can be a cost-effective alternative to live training.

**Monitoring/Auto-Coaching** – Specialized software can manage any proposal/selection process, enable goal setting and ongoing assessment, track usage and create required reports.

**Collaboration Tools** – A stream of new software includes systems that strengthen results management, provide managers with versatile calendaring and enable real time document and project sharing.

## **TRUE COLLABORATION IS STRENGTHENED BY SO-CALLED “SOFT SKILLS”**

Remote work can occur – and does occur – with technical tools alone. Offsite teams can develop without intentional effort. But in the end, a higher level of interactive skill helps create more effective teams. In our work, we have developed what we call the Mutual Respect Skills. These grow out of the simple assumption that communicating, collaborating and teaming at a distance require higher levels of respect and intentional effort than may be needed when everyone is together and accepting “office norms.”

Suspending assumptions, actually listening, taking risks, giving strong feedback, challenging authority, being comfortable 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 divisive issues are on the proverbial table or when the business is stressed, jobs are insecure and the environment is hostile.

The Mutual Respect or a comparable set of collaborative skills can be taught. But in our experience, our business cultures and American business undervalue and under-teach them. This is especially true where they might be needed most: in our increasingly dispersed workforces.

I am reminded of 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.”

Doing remote work saves money. Doing it well can also cost money. But if a remote initiative seeks savings as well as satisfaction, engagement and productivity, it requires some investment. GPS, software and soft skills training should be the minimum bid for entering the new world of remote work. Done well, drawing on the available, proven tools, remote work can yield an immense payoff.

***We welcome your comments on this Bulletin. When you write, please email me at:  
[paulrupertdc@cs.com](mailto:paulrupertdc@cs.com)***

## Remote Work Tools and Training

Our firm was built on remote work, both practicing and preaching it. For more than a decade our large corporate and hospital clients have had consistent success using our online GPS and training packages. Over the next several weeks you will receive some brief email summaries of what we offer and how these tools have worked for others. Contact us to discuss options and unique terms for **Bulletin** readers.

Best regards,  
Paul Rupert

Rupert & Company  
Chevy Chase, MD  
301-873-8489  
[paulrupertdc@cs.com](mailto:paulrupertdc@cs.com)

*Rupert & Company, publisher of the **Bulletin**, is the global leader in business-beneficial flexibility.*

© 2013 Rupert & Company. All Rights Reserved