



FlexBulletin #99: Global, Local Millennials Say "Flex Already!"

May 27, 2015

The late Dane Piet Hein left us one of the enduring and vexing truths of all time: "TTT: When you feel how depressingly slowly you climb, it's well to remember that Things Take Time." Three pieces of data bring this adage to mind:

1. *After the longest recovery in 50 years, the employee quit rate returns to pre-recession levels*
2. *Global EY survey: "Workers around the world want the option to work flexibly - without penalty."*
3. *Large US Millennial workforce is beginning to act on flex preferences from our 2011 study*

*As readers of the **Bulletin** know, we have addressed several themes in the past five years. These include the avalanche of opinion about Millennial attitudes toward flexibility, the status and trajectory of flexible work across the country and the return of recruitment and retention pressures as the fertilizer of flex.*

As we glimpse what may be a rebalancing of labor markets from all-employer to mixed employer/employee leverage, a review of past and present research might help in designing new ways of working that can satisfy both employers and the new workforce.

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The quit rate grows as better opportunities appear, leaving vacancies in their wake

For many years, we have been mired in a so-called buyer's market for talent. With high unemployment and employees reluctant to risk leaving their jobs, companies have had little incentive to increase comp and benefits and embark on serious flexibility projects. Flexibility has always served to attract and retain; when neither is a high priority, flex fades as well.

Perhaps change is in the air - and showing up on the ground as well. According to [SHRM](#):

"Some 2.8 million people quit their jobs in March 2015, up slightly from 2.7 million in February and the most in seven years, according to a new report from the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS)...The report showed that the quits rate is back to pre-recession levels."

With the steady trend lines in hiring over the last several years, the slack demand for flexibility and the plateaued provision of quality work options may be coming to a close. And if that pull is not enough, the once modest Millennial demographic is becoming the workforce - and it has begun pushing on its own.

Millennials rank ability "to work flexibly and still be on track for promotion" after pay, benefits

No doubt all of us have read many, many accounts of what Millennials do and don't want in the way of flexible work. While few stand out in the pile, a recent EY global study - both in content and perhaps timing - is well worth reviewing. It has been widely linked, cited, blogged and referenced. Aside from a few cases of breathless hyperbole and unfortunate cherry-picking, the wide sharing of these basic revelations should prove valuable.

["Work-life Challenges across generations"](#) looks at the issues of managing work-life balance in three generations across eight countries. The robust findings broken out by the countries and generations offer rich detail, and make generalizations difficult. Having studied it carefully, I feel comfortable summarizing the following key findings:

- Nearly half of respondents report working longer hours in last 5 years, including Millennials
- US Millennials (78%) are far more likely than Boomers to have working spouses (47%)
- One in 10 US workers say they have "suffered a negative consequence as a result of having a flexible work schedule;" rate for Millennials is one in 6
- After pay and benefits, the top things employees say are very important in a potential job are:
 - "Being able to work flexibly and still be on track for promotion"
 - "Working with colleagues, including my boss, who support my efforts to work flexibly"
 - "The ability to work flexibly informally when needed"
 - "Receiving paid parental leave" and
 - "Not working overtime"
- Top 5 reasons people quit jobs include excessive overtime and boss unsupportive of flex

Focus groups reinforce these findings and suggest solutions

Survey findings can be dismissed, or taken with a grain of salt. Fortunately, we have conducted focus/design groups on flexible and supportive workplaces for our clients for two decades. We are in the middle of one diagnose-and-design set for a US client now in a traditional industry. Like the survey, these groups include Millennials who are parents and non-parents, managers and employees.

The findings track the survey results very closely. The focus on time is top-of-mind, with a desire for flexibility (informal, flextime and telecommuting), enhanced time off, reduced overtime and childcare supports. Interestingly, although there is consistency and firmness in the requests, the suggested changes from these groups are quite modest. This may reflect realism about the environment or the lingering effects of the recession. But wise employers would engage in this process with an eye to reaping significant value from limited investments - and to getting ahead of the exodus that might occur without such changes.

What Millennials told us in late 2011 is playing out today

Finally, we conducted a major focus group study with nine clients in 2011 to explore Millennial attitudes toward flexibility. The 205 participants in the 1.5 hour groups gave a rich view of what they wanted - or thought they would want - as they aged and formed families. ***"Millennials Speak: A New Generation Seeks Focus, Flexibility and Feedback"*** The full report summarizes the way in which this cohort wished to be managed, including its expectations re: flexibility. Those hopes seem to stand in sharp contrast to the reality the EY survey describes. The report's recommendations follow:

Recommendations The millennials described a diverse and ambitious agenda for change. No doubt different cohorts within complex organizations will have different priorities, different paths to a more flexible workplace. These recommendations likely apply in most settings.

- **The time has come to fully enable managers to manage flexibly**
The decades-old mantra "flex depends on my manager" has run its course
- **Companies need to insist on clear work requirements and quality feedback**
Millennials will not endure 60-hour weeks for no reason or get stale feedback annually
- **Study your millennials thoroughly and let positive needs push change**
Avoid the tendency to assume that this cohort just needs assimilation
- **Redesign your flexibility system around key principles rather than menus**
Use the millennial anchor of "as long as the work gets done" for many forms of flex
- **Embrace flexibility as a better way of working and engaging staff**
As newcomers to the workplace, millennials should partner in work redesign

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We welcome your comments on this Bulletin. When you write, please email me at:
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Millennial Diagnose-and-Design Groups



As the talent pendulum swings, it may be time to talk with your Millennials about time. Our proven, tightly focused conference call-based groups are a reliable and economical way to take the pulse of your workforce and collaborate with them on solutions that address their needs in a feasible, affordable fashion. Flexibility, PTO, work redesign and topics of your and their choosing can be on the table.

It's time for retention!

Best regards,
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