



**FlexBulletin #57: Farewell to FWAs?**

November 15, 2011

## **An Early “Happy Thanksgiving!” to You, Your Family and Friends**

Many of you downloaded a version of our “**Millennials Speak**” flexibility study from [www.rupertandcompany.com](http://www.rupertandcompany.com), saw our presentation at the [Working Mother conference](#), read a unique perspective on these millennials on our [blog](#) or saw media coverage such as Cathleen Schoultz’s [article](#) in the BNA Human Resources Report. If you’ve missed all of these, we strongly encourage you to take a look at these compelling voices on the future of flexibility.

*This study proved a tipping point in how we view the epochs of flexibility. Several trends are converging to suggest a change in how we think and talk about the flexible workplace, including:*

- *The millennial perception of flexibility not as programs, but as a freer form of self-scheduling*
- *The demand for and supply of creative flexibility to customer-facing and hourly workers*
- *The explosion of many hybrid forms of offsite work – from casual to fully home-based*
- *A growth in “informal flexibility” that straddles categories and is used by millions every day*
- *The desire of older workers for truly flexible forms of continued work + gradual retirement*

*It is our belief that the millennials may be serving as the proverbial “canaries in the coal mine” – alerting us to a serious change in conditions which we shouldn’t ignore. Perhaps it’s time to heed that alert, escape the confines of the mine and explore new veins of flexibility.*



Workplace flexibility first emerged as an energizing force in the 1970s. Over four decades it has slowly transformed the way we schedule our work and locate our workspaces. We have gone through distinct “geologic layers” in this exploratory journey, mining its business and personal potential at each stage:

- **Promising Finds (Organic flex)** – one-off solutions to business and personal challenges
- **Test Shafts (AWAs)** – systematic pursuit of programs that address specific problems
- **Opening New Fields (Full menu)** – identifying a broader range of problem-solvers
- **Choosing “Producers” (FWAs)** – inadvertently turning flex into a form of neo-rigidity
- **Going Wildcatting – (Collaborative Scheduling)** – spreading *intensive flexible behavior*

The forces that drove us to new ways of working are pushing us toward the quality collaboration required of the next era.

### **PROMISING FINDS – The First Telltale Signs Of Flexibility**

No one had mined the depths and riches of flexibility in the 1970s. The activity that was going on occurred mostly on the surface. We were trying one-off, frequently promising experiments:

- People were allowed to reduce their hours
- Random pioneers successfully shared a job
- Other individuals compressed their schedules or flexed their start and quit times

In short, the search began for a better way to combine talent, task and time for greater satisfaction and contribution. The success of such innovation was clear but contained. And this relentless scratching at the surface continues to this day in small firms, among hourly workers, and in rigid industries – promising, creative, but often succeeding despite limited support throughout these organizations. Deeper digging was, and is essential.

### **TEST SHAFTS – Alternative Work Arrangements (AWAs)**

In 1972 Hewlett-Packard introduced a formal flextime program in the US – the first of hundreds to follow. For the next 15 years, promising flexibility finds were drilled, mined and shaped into ALTERNATIVE Work Arrangements. These were a modest step toward flexibility, not a leap. They were as contained and manageable as a mine shaft. Among their defining characteristics:

- They were *alternatives*, neither mainstream options nor as rock solid as 9-to-5
- These were *arrangements*, not quite set in stone, but seldom very flexible either
- In the end, they had a reserved, second class feel about them

These limitations were the price of incremental change. For nearly a decade these pilot holes created fissures in the old ways of working. Thousands of American workers and their managers got their first taste of flextime and compressed schedules – and they discovered the good news: these movements of thousands happened with few explosions, fires or cave-ins.

### **OPENING NEW FIELDS – Envisioning the Flexible Workplace**

New Ways to Work's Barney Olmsted and Suzanne Smith captured the more expansive, more flexible version of flexibility with the 1989 publication of their pioneering work, *Creating a Flexible Workplace*." It gathered in one definitive guidebook a broader and more forceful view of flexibility.

They described not a small number of rigid regimens, a few test shafts -- but a promising field of nine distinct problem-solving options that had been proven in practice and could be implemented by managers and employees in a wide variety of settings. In addition to today's common options, they envisioned and encouraged::

- **Work Sharing** – reducing number of hours worked rather than workers in place of layoffs
- **V-Time** – a form of temporary part-time schedule offered to a broad range of positions
- **Phased & Partial Retirement** – systematic phase down at various rates toward retirement
- **Leave Time** – Creative uses of unpaid time off to build and extend flexibility

A generation of corporate flexibility champions drew on this level-headed manifesto to open up the next form of flexibility, to open the wells of innovation in workplaces across the country – and partial success did occur. But escaping the constraints of narrow, programmatic approaches to flex was not to prove an easy matter. The language and mindset of “alternatives” gave way slowly.

### **CHOOSING “PRODUCERS” – The shift to FWAs trades steady progress for limits**

In the 1990s AWAs gave way to the more compelling Flexible Work Arrangements (FWAs) which thousands of us promote today. Millions of American workers enjoy the stream of flexible arrangements: flextime, telework, compressed schedules, part-time and job sharing. Not all gushers, focused on productive groups like headquarters and exempt staffs, these options have helped forge the shift in corporate and consulting thinking toward greater flexibility. But their limits have begun to show:

- They remain programs, distinct, limited – as much neo-rigidity as true flexibility
- The true gusher – telework – seems an embodiment of flex, yet is off-limits to millions
- Programs – like mines, wells and silos – do not lend themselves to hybrids and crossovers
- The focus on options rather than process – on individual manager openness rather than on systemic skills – confines progress to a fraction of the possible.

Building on the richness and energy of flexibility unearthed to date, perhaps the time has come to expand the search for new sources of its rewards: engagement, energy, contribution, productivity, and satisfaction with work. It may be time to promote flex not as an arrangement, a program, an outcome – but as a far more effective way of working together across the boards that deepens and transcends flexibility.

### **GONE WILDCATting – The future of robust flexibility lies in Collaborative Scheduling**

In our early oil and mineral state of Pennsylvania, once established oil fields or deep mines were established and proven, a great wave of wildcatting – aggressive drilling and mining in nearby areas where easy strikes were possible but not guaranteed – swept across the state. We are approaching the era of flex wildcatting in the shadow of proven, but limited programs.

In the end, flexibility plateaus if it's only about program. In our workplaces, flexibility requires ongoing, culture-challenging, innovative ways of behaving – not just during a proposal process or an enthusiastic or grudging approval. **Flexibility is ongoing collaboration.** It requires:

- The capacity of managers and employees to envision mutually beneficial flexibility and regularly redesign it as it unfolds
- The ongoing ability to schedule/reschedule/unschedule work with colleagues
- The skill to plan with certainty, then turn on a dime, to satisfy customers and self
- The creation of vital skill sets that include profiles like the millennials described:
  - “doesn’t micro manage”
  - “openly communicates”
  - “is accessible for counseling and questions”
  - “trusts me”
  - “provides regular feedback”
  - “shows that s/he wants me to succeed”
  - “is encouraging and respectful”

The wildcatting, and potentially explosive phase of these new ways of working will be defined by collaborative scheduling. It is grounded in skill and values, buoyed by previous successes and open for innovative exploration by a broad range of employees in virtually all industries. In future **FlexBulletins**, we will explore the skills of collaboration, a prototype guidance system that captures proven and potential scheduling destinations and the emerging tools and automated coaching that can greatly improve the odds of wildcats striking gushers.

**Exploration → AWAs → FWAs → Collaborative Scheduling: Navigating the New Frontier**

*A reader told us “**I just found out that you do consulting, guidelines and training.**” We do. As we build out the tools and techniques of flexibility, including The Collaborative Scheduling toolkit, we would welcome discussing your organization’s trajectory and plans.*

*We also would be happy to brief decision-makers in your organization on the compelling findings of the **Millennial Speaks** flexibility study. Go to our website to preview our many tools, services and delighted customer comments:*

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*Rupert & Company, publisher of the **Bulletin**, is the global leader in creating business-beneficial Flexible Work Arrangements.*