



Flexibility = Retention A recent article in the Washington Post asked if the current recession was "pushing some companies to eschew flexible job policies." The reporter offered this summary: "[Many managers] tend to view options such as flex time and telecommuting as retention tools, experts say, and in recessions, fear of unemployment is just as effective."

The last phrase may be a bit over the top; but there is little question that retention is not priority one in today's C-suite. What caught my eye in this article was the first part of the quote: "managers tend to view options such as flex time and telecommuting as retention tools." Indeed, at the top of all the laundry lists in virtually every flexibility business case I have seen, retention seems to sit in the #1 slot. Has retention always been the primer driver of flexibility? Should it be? What are the consequences for flexibility of this view - especially in hard times?

Ambitious Beginnings I joined the flexibility think tank New Ways to Work in 1986. As the name New Ways to Work would suggest, we took a broad view of the role flexibility could play in transforming the way organizations ran and people contributed to companies. Over many years we developed a range of bulleted lists. Few of them highlighted retention. The following list appeared in the second edition of the organization's defining book, *Creating a Flexible Workplace*. It said: "Flexibility is seen as a way to:

- Help each employee achieve his or her full potential
- Help managers reallocate labor supply as necessary
- Build employee commitment to the organization, recognizing that this is an important cornerstone of growth and profitability"

In that view, which I continue to hold, the goal of flexibility is at its heart building a culture of mutual respect. It assumes that companies commit to the development of employees over the life cycle and in turn those employees are deeply engaged in growing the business. Working from this platform, innovations from remote work to phased retirement to work sharing can enrich the organization and its employees.

Narrowing in the Stretch Many people may still hold a broader view of flexibility. But in the decade-and-a-half since the "mutual respect" view of flexibility was outlined, many of us have been engaged in the corporate mainstreaming of flexibility: it has come in as programs called "alternative work arrangements," "flexible schedules" and "flexible work arrangements." A typical business case has evolved, including:

- Retention of talented employees
- Recruitment of superior talent
- Reduced space costs
- Enhanced productivity

Lessons of the Recession There is little data that can tell us how flexibility is faring in companies. We do know anecdotally that there is some contraction in existing offerings and new rollouts. We also know that despite some hope for the use of broader flexibility tools such as work sharing to avoid layoffs, this practice has been very limited. It seems abundantly clear that there was little preparation for such wider

business thinking and behavior, little aggressive use of flexibility to address the full range of pressing business problems. If this is true, perhaps it's time to begin thinking of how to reposition flexibility post-recession.

A 60-second Pulse Check *We can speak more cogently about next steps if we have a better view of what is going on with flexibility in the midst of this recession. We need your help. As a loyal Bulletin reader please take 60 seconds and [click here](#) to fill out a brief survey that will help overcome the data deficit. We will share the results in the next issue.*

Best regards,
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