



[In the last FlexBulletin (reprinted below) we addressed the age-old "floodgate" question - "What if we offer flexible schedules and everyone wants them?" While decades of experience should have negated this concern, it still persists among many company leaderships. As possible explanations for this enduring skepticism, we suggested: 1) distrust of employees 2) doubt about managers and 3) faith in face time. This Bulletin will address more fully the first factor - how the distrust of employees plays out and some remedies for these challenges.]

How Employees are Distrusted Few firms are avowedly distrustful as they design their approaches to flexible schedules. Yet many display subtle forms of skepticism and caution that reduce the power and utility of well-intentioned initiatives. How does this doubt play out?

Eligibility Constraints Clearly not everyone is a good candidate for a flexible schedule. But flexibility is above all a diversity question: different people want and succeed on diverse schedules and some of these are harder than others to execute. To avoid risk, though, some companies are quick to:

- 1. Limit participants** Rather than openly define certain groups as too "high-risk" for flex, it is common in many companies to reserve flexible schedules for "appropriate" groups such as headquarters staff, exempt staff, some business units, etc. Typically left out of this circle are:
 - > *New hires and shorter tenure staff*
 - > *Mid-range performers*
 - > *Non-exempt and hourly staff*The net effect: rather than apply case-by-base decision-making to all proponents, broad exclusions occur. Are these simple design decisions or subtle disrespect?
- 2. Limit options** Every company establishes a menu of flexible work arrangements. This menu may be built to maximize flex and contribution or to express a certain skepticism of staff and minimize risk. Two examples of menu items made limited or unavailable are:
 - > *Part-time* The connectivity tools that make telecommuting possible also can make part-timers more and more accessible on their "days off." Less respect for boundaries + the endurance of dismissive headcount policies make part-time less attractive. (A future Bulletin will explore headcount's marginalizing effect.)
 - > *Compressed schedules* In our experience, no option is more embraced by employees and more routinely withheld from exempt staff than 4-day and 9-day compressed schedules. The common (though not universal) reaction to putting compressed on the menu? "Why would I give them four 10-hour days when I'm getting 5 10-hour days now?" Rather than entertain business-like negotiation of compressed schedules, compressed schedules are left of the menu.
- 3. Elevate approval** A final common sign of distrust (of both employees and managers) is the addition of one or more line-above approvals in a formal proposal process. The rationale for such approval can be to "achieve consistency", "support weak managers" and "provide valuable perspective." The effect can be to undermine the primary implementers of flexibility.

Addressing these challenges Sometimes, in organizational work as in medicine, the diagnosis suggests pretty straightforward treatment. Solutions to the above challenges seem apparent:

1. **Limit participants** It may be time to rethink each of these restrictive elements and assess whether they are experience, data or negative assumption-based. Mature initiatives can be revisited and revised. Hourly workers can be included.
2. **Limit options** Again, with broad experience and data in hand, reconsider the menu. Is there "interruption creep" in part-time? Should compressed work weeks be offered broadly? Is telecommuting too restrictive?
3. **Elevate approval** If more than the direct manager is in the loop, reconsider why. What does the approval data show as the value of bumping the approval up one or two levels?

Many organizations have made great initial steps toward a more respectful and flexible workplace. But there remains much to do. These may be some next steps or your company. Feel free to write or call to discuss any of these issues further.

Starting today we will be at the Working Mother Work-Life Congress in New York (October 27-29). We will be presenting with Abbott on their exciting approach to flexibility and remote customer service teams. We will also be facilitating a "ThinkFest" session on the exciting initiative, "Collaborating through Chronic Conditions". If you are there, please join us at our sessions or look for us at our Rupert & Company booth.

Best regards,
Paul Rupert
President
Rupert & Company
Chevy Chase, MD

301-873-8489

paul@rupert-co.com

© 2009 by Rupert & Company. All rights reserved

FlexBulletin #24: Still Fearing "Floodgates"

[In response to our late summer reader appeal for feedback and suggested topics for future issues, we heard many appreciative comments about the value of the first year's FlexBulletin. Today we resume twice-a-month publication of the FlexBulletin, Volume 2, starting with a topic brought up by several of you. This concerned a phenomenon as old, persistent and pervasive as the quest for flexibility itself. We kick off year 2 with the "floodgate" question:]

"How do you put to rest the challenge 'What if everyone wants a flexible schedule?'"

I recall hearing this "floodgate" question repeatedly in my earliest consulting days. I came across it again and again this summer, working with clients, speaking with prospective clients and reviewing 30 years of flex experience for a book-in-progress. It leapt out repeatedly from my library of US and European flexibility books and periodicals dating from the late 1970s.

No mention was more striking than the booklet written by our New Ways to Work EquiFlex Project in the late 1980s and published in 1991. Our Corporate Committee included early flex advocates from major national employers. As part of our strategy to promote wider use of flexibility, we published *"Flexibility:*

Compelling Strategies for a Competitive Workplace." Its purpose was to highlight the positive power of flexibility and debunk disabling myths. Its "Facts & Fallacies" section included this seemingly persuasive argument:

"Fallacy: *Flexibility has a domino effect. If we let a few employees job share or change starting time, everyone will want to.*

Fact: *No organization which has used voluntary work-time options has reported a flood of requests for change. The fact is, most people prefer a full-time job and a regular schedule, and they cannot afford to significantly reduce their work time. Some employees really do need flexibility to function well in their jobs, however, and surveys show that flexible options are popular with almost everyone. Besides, organizational policy always gives managers control over whether or not to use or allow flexible work arrangements."*

The simple, updated summary of this 1991 argument against fear of floodgates is:

- **No one** has ever seen a flood of requests upon launch - no company, no option, nowhere
- **Most people** prefer or are bound to "a full-time job and a regular schedule" - period
- **Most employees** appreciate having flexibility available and some use it - a small percentage
- **Managers always** have control over the levels of use - they can prevent any flood

Sitting at my Apple II computer 20 years ago, these arguments seemed decisive. Experience has confirmed them. Surely more experience would eliminate this concern by 1995 or 2000. While we've seen generations of Macs, iPods and iPhones march across the landscape, the floodgate question remains the most predictable in any engagement and the most distorting in any rollout. Is there attitude at work that trumps decades of data? I would suggest these possibilities:

- **Distrust of Employees** There seems to be some underlying disrespect of employees based on the fear that given the choice of work or leisure, engagement or withdrawal, most of them would choose convenience over contribution. If this is the case, a flex flood is always imminent. Such fears can easily overcome data, no matter how compelling.
- **Doubt about Managers** Most leaders will openly salute the strength of their line managements while privately expressing concern about their ability to hold the line against employee excess. If the gate-keepers can't hold the flood, who can?
- **Faith in Face-time** Limited progress has been made in true goal refinement and outcome management, but control for contribution rather than presence is not universal. When leaders question the system's ability to control inputs, they won't trade "all hands on deck" for a highly fluid workplace. You'll never have a flood if the most you allow is a trickle.

If these attitudes - skepticism of employees and managers alongside faith in face-time - account at least in part for the persistent fear of the floodgate, and if such views have persisted for two decades, changing them will not be easy. In the next issue, we will explore a reality-based strategy for speeding up the progress.

Fall conference season has started and I would encourage you to join us for several sessions in October and November. At the Working Mother Work-Life Congress in New York on October 27-29, we will be presenting with Abbott on their exciting approach to flexibility and remote customer service teams. We will also be facilitating a "ThinkFest" session on "Collaborating through Cancer and Chronic Conditions". You can join our sessions or look for us at our Rupert & Company booth. On November 6, Credit Suisse is hosting a Working Mother Town Hall focused on flexibility. We are facilitating a workshop with Sodexo highlighting its great initiatives on formal and informal flexibility and its uniquely effective approach to remote work. Hope to see you there.