



# Rupert & COMPANY

Guides to a changing workplace

## **FlexBulletin #28: Challenges 2009, Options 2010**

*[Here's to a more prosperous, flexible and productive New Year for companies and employees everywhere. Now is the ideal time for a brief look back at what we hoped might happen last year, and what came to pass instead, in the immensely challenging 2009. It is an even better time to look ahead and see what makes strong business sense for 2010 and where we might focus our energies. Fasten your seat belts and prepare for a ride marked by both progress and turbulence.]*

In 2009 we saw rapid terminations by the millions, an economy described as "cratering" or near the abyss and a host of contradictory analyses that painted flexibility as on the rise or in steep decline. Based on our experience with clients, prospects, conferences and companies in general, we are comfortable summarizing what we took to be key **Prospects** for last year and apparent **Outcomes** that occurred. The limitations of 2009 suggest some targets for the 2010 flex agenda

- **Prospect: Work Sharing Can Trump Layoffs**  
Outcome: A little here, a little there, but very little everywhere

We wrote a column late in 2008 ([Flex Bulletin #8 - Cutting Costs, Keeping Talent](#)) as the downsizing clouds gathered, promoting percentage reduction in everyone's employment rather than reducing a percentage of employees. Others promoted the same idea as the RIF deluge began. In the end, the use of flexible options stopped a trickle, not a flood of layoffs. The modest response in the face of great opportunity suggests that our collective view of flexibility is limited: a retention benefit for good times, not a core talent management strategy to protect human capital investments when crises occur.

- **Prospect: More Flex Will Keep "Survivors" Engaged**  
Outcome: This idea rarely took hold, with most on the defensive

It seems logical that major layoffs risk or guarantee decreased engagement. Thus continuing - or better yet, ramping up - a proven commitment tool like flexibility tool for the survivors would make enormous sense. With some rare exceptions, that is not what happened. Recent surveys show employee engagement at historically low levels. Any canvas of companies that looked for new '09 flex initiatives or strong promotion of existing ones would turn up very little. Again the power of flex as a productivity tool did not appear to be top of mind for business decision-makers. [If you and your firm were an exception, please contact me. I'd love to write up your "why" and "how".]

- **Prospect: Phased Retirement Should Thrive**  
Outcome: Demand might have soared, but supply barely moved

We wrote about the potential value of offering genuine phased retirements in [Flex Bulletin #16 - Phased Retirement \(ASAP\)](#). We defined "genuine phased retirement" as typically a percentage schedule reduction for older workers who remain regular employees with full or prorated benefits. This does not refer to the far more common practice of terminating older workers and bringing them back as contractors without benefits - and naming that "phased retirement." While the dramatic erosion of home values and retirement savings made an income-extending option like phased retirement appealing to tens of thousands of near-retirement employees, barely a handful of companies undertook such initiatives. Even with the appeal of a "Knowledge Transfer" component added, it appears that promotion of part-time for older workers was too much of a stretch in this period. The short-sighted seems once again to have triumphed over the long view.

- **Prospect: Remote Work Can Highlight Its Multiple Values**

Outcome: The purpose of this option became cost-cutting above all

As best we can tell, many of the accounts claiming growth in flexibility in 2009 were based on one practice: the moving of many thousands of employees into home offices. This ongoing trend seems to have accelerated as companies looked for every way to cut costs. While cost cutting is a valid and necessary step in a steep recession, it is not the only - and perhaps not the most valuable - outcome of a well-designed remote work strategy. As we wrote in [FlexBulletin #17 - Power of Remote Work](#), real increases in productivity, greatly enhanced employee satisfaction and superior talent acquisition and retention can all occur and even dwarf the impact of reduced real estate costs. While the data on company practices in this area is opaque, all the anecdotal information we have seen suggests that this recession only cemented the view of remote work as cost-cutter, not productivity engine.

*Seen from a bad news /good news perspective, the bad news about 2009 is that it was a difficult year for champions of flexibility, who at best held their own. The good news is that it may have created pent-up demand for more and better flexibility in 2010. And the deficits of last year point toward some remedial practices we could profitably undertake in the year ahead. Chief among these should be an intensive focus on making phased retirement a real choice for tens of thousands of retirement age workers. They need to extend their tenure and their companies need to create effective strategies for knowledge sharing. We will address these and other 2010 flexibility imperatives in our next Bulletin.*

Best regards,  
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