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Guides to a changing workplace

## **FlexBulletin #33: When Flexibility Meets Wellness**

April 30, 2010

*[In the last issue - FlexBulletin #32: Pioneering and Defining Flexibility - we used the fable of the "Blind Men and an Elephant" to highlight the danger of confusing a flexible arrangement or two with true workplace flexibility. One learns from the fable that an elephant's trunk can be a forceful thing, but the whole elephant is far more powerful. We think of "the elephant" as a fully flexible workplace, not a bit of flextime here and a little more telecommuting there. The elephantine flexible workplace supports a culture that values results over presence, a leadership that links flex to core business problem solving and managers and employees who collaborate to maximize business value and employee satisfaction. Such a workplace can support unique applications like Collaborating through Chronic Conditions, which we describe below.]*

### **Flexible schedules are the first step in a journey to wellness**

Our firm has been steeped in the creation of flexible schedules for more than two decades. For a long time, our clients' focus was almost exclusively on introducing so-called formal FWAs. Over the last several years we have worked more often with clients to develop systematic approaches to both formal and "informal flexibility." Such day-to-day control over schedules matters a great deal to a broad range of employees. Our partners in expanding this work have typically been human resource leaders in work-life, diversity and flexibility.

Together we have introduced options such as telecommuting and remote work as programs which often have limited impact on how companies manage overall. Ironically, introducing informal flexibility can prove more unsettling. It aims at consistent and repetitive practice across the broad range of managers, not just change for the few. Done thoroughly, a serious commitment to informal flexibility requires a significant shift in the way whole groups of managers and employees negotiate the time and place of work, often on short notice. Employees with cancer and chronic conditions can raise the flexibility bar even higher for companies. They are looking for the whole elephant, not just the light flexibility of a tail or an ear.

### **An initiative starts with cancer and soon migrates to chronic conditions**

Managing cancer and chronic conditions for maximum satisfaction and productivity can require unusual amounts of informal flexibility with sequential movement in and out of a number of FWAs. We first realized this several years ago when we partnered with the Cancer and Careers Foundation to diagnose what employees stricken with cancer needed from their companies to continue working while undergoing treatment. In a series of focus groups managers and employees said, unprompted, that what was needed was a flexible workplace which offered:

- Leaders who promoted the importance of those with cancer continuing to work
- Assurances of job security and ongoing development opportunities
- Extreme flexibility: rotation thru part-time, work-from-home, flextime and full-time

- Executives, HR leaders, line managers, peers who cooperated for consistency

We created the Managing through Cancer program - **FlexBulletin #10: Cancer Demands Flexibility** - to address these issues. It included a robust website which addressed employee needs and reinforced key manager skills. Through the work-life and diversity portal, several major companies became MTC Pioneers. But many more companies applauded the initiative while pointing to the elephant in the room, saying:

- This might be more powerful as a wellness-led collaboration within HR
- It needs to emphasize more than cancer - it should focus on all chronic conditions
- A highly informative website should address managers, employees, peers, caregivers
- Active interventions with all levels of managers **have to enable extreme flexibility**

### ***Collaborating through Chronic Conditions - a Wellness / Flexibility Initiative***

For decades flexibility programs and website have touted the many benefits of flexibility (retention, reduced commutes, productivity, etc.) and specific flexible arrangements (telecommuting satisfies, part-time retains, etc.) Missing from this picture has been the fact that millions of employees have a more basic need for true flexibility. They may be wrestling with the immediate pressures of cancer treatment and recovery, the gradual re-entry to work after stroke or heart attack or the gradual readjustment to reduced work capacity that comes with degenerative conditions.

Whatever the condition, the need for customized flexibility is essential. The need for overall policy, guidance and skill-building is often inadequately addressed. It is left to wellness and other HR staff to try to create supportive conditions one-on-one, without the ability to count on flexible staff or managers. It is all too easy, and not at all desirable, for managers to shrug off the requirement for different formal and informal ways of working for those in recovery or decline. It can often seem easier to consign to disability those who can and prefer to work on a flexible basis. With these challenges, setting in motion an initiative like Collaborating through Chronic Conditions calls upon the whole elephant.

This is not a narrow program, focused on the ear, the leg or the tail. It requires genuine executive engagement, HR collaboration, wellness focus, caregiver involvement, employee self-management, manager and peer support for flexibility and an abundance of knowledge and flexibility tools spread around. To work best, it requires a flexible workplace with a powerful website and ongoing training. In the end, a wellness and flexibility initiative can help companies make great strides toward a healthier workforce on many levels.

*We are convening an exciting collaboration of companies that see in their own workplaces and workforces the value of fully engaging those with chronic conditions - and supporting the managers and caregivers who enable their continued productivity. If there are wellness leaders in your firm who might find this useful, please share this Bulletin. And if you would like to join this initiative, please contact us. We would be happy to share the business case for these efforts.*

Best regards,

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