



FlexBulletin #36: Productive Flex One Deal at a Time

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[In our early August issue of the Bulletin – [FlexBulletin #35: Can Retention Still Drive Flexibility?](#) – we took the unusual tack of highlighting a lengthy New York Times article which seemed to suggest that the “traditional” drivers of recruitment and retention might be losing their edge. A number of you seemed to share this view and the corollary that it might be time to focus more strongly on productivity as the leading reason for advancing the flexibility agenda. And while many initiatives mention productivity as a value, it is our view that productivity often receives more mention than true attention.

In this Bulletin we will begin a focus on what a genuine emphasis on productivity might look like. In other words, how would one approach Flexible Work Arrangements and their typical elements to enhance the focus on outcomes? What are we assuming and taking for granted that we should reexamine and redesign?

But first, let me quickly clarify a housekeeping matter raised by several of you about the purpose of our two publications – the FlexBulletin and the FlexBlog. As defined and displayed on our new website (www.rupertandcompany.com)

- *“The Flex Bulletin chronicles the state of the art in Flexible Work Arrangements – their purpose, power and potential. This journal for champions will keep you on the flexibility cutting edge.”*
- *“The FlexBlog tracks the state of flexibility as it touches our economy and our way of working. Its goal is to help you better chart your company’s course.”*

Both can be accessed from our website, and you can subscribe to the blog there as well. This week’s blog is [Will Flexibility be a Double Dipper?](#)]



Is flexibility a productivity tool or a nice thing to offer?

So how does one make the case that widespread flexibility creates measurable gains in productivity? We believe that if you canvassed the great majority of company leaders and managers, with or without a multiple choice list, to the extent they were aware of and valued flexibility they would say it is:

- an employee benefit, helping employees balance work and family needs
- an employee satisfier, allowing people to work from home once in a while
- a retention tool, part of a basket of best-place-to-work practices
- a way to save real estate costs (moving up the charts quickly)

We suspect that few senior decision-makers would automatically put productivity on that list. As practitioners we might. But for expansive, healthy and dynamic flexibility to occur, what ultimately counts is what company decision-makers believe to be true. Touting productivity as a flexibility outcome is not enough. What matters is:

- Clear goal-setting, with positive outcomes that matter to the business
- The achievement through flexible scheduling and staffing of unique outcomes
- Credible metrics and a reliable assessment process to capture gains
- A systematic means for summarizing and sharing advances in productivity

Revisiting the broadly used FWA proposal / productivity form

So how does one go about this? We will focus on just one enabler for this process – and happily one that is ready to hand for almost every **Bulletin** reader. This is a tool many of you have worked with – and it is possibly being under-utilized right now dozens or hundreds of times a day. The “Flexible Work Arrangement Proposal Form,” with only modest edits, has been adopted by many hundreds of companies over the last decade.

This 7-9 question form was an early attempt to provide a clear mechanism for bringing consistency to the process of proposing and accepting FWAs. Its value included:

- Anchoring the flexibility dialog in a “business-based”, not ad hoc process
- Eliminating personal reason or motivation from the decision process
- Exploring how one’s proposed arrangement could increase personal effectiveness
- Identifying how different ways of working could add value (i.e. productivity) to the firm

In the mid-1990s our Flexibility Consulting Practice at WFD Consulting popularized an early prototype of this form developed by Kimetha Firpo when she was at Chicago’s Harris Bank. We didn’t copyright it and the form spread rapidly as a tool of choice for companies moving from family reasons to business reasons for FWA decision-making.

What do the proposal forms propose – and reveal?

Looked at from a design perspective, this form would seem to provide a healthy framework for charting flexibility’s possible productivity gains. Paired with a decent evaluative process, each individual FWA could project gains, capture data and apply metrics. Managers could oversee this process. Thus each proposal could address how one could “work better” and “serve clients or the firm better,” and this process could be integrated into the standard or a separate performance review.

So, how are these forms being used in fact? Are they fulfilling their productivity potential? In my consultative role, I have reviewed many, many thousands of FWA proposal forms in dozens of companies. No doubt many of you have seen your own stack of completed forms. The vast majority of these have shown:

- Limited thoughtful attention to the “effectiveness” and “value” questions
- Little back-and-forth between employees and managers exploring these issues
- Rare attention to metrics or an evaluative process that would tell a useful tale

This is a disappointing fact. If one envisions hundreds of more productive ways of working being rolled up into a compelling productivity story – only one aspect of productivity, but an interesting aspect nonetheless – then our experience suggests that we are missing out on a key opportunity in the challenging times ahead. Happily we have had a number of client experiences of late which suggest ways to transform the proposal process.

Next Issue: *Turning the FWA proposal process into a true productivity vehicle*

Best regards,
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