



FlexBulletin #38: Stretch Goals for Productivity

October 20, 2010

[In the last issue of the Bulletin – [FlexBulletin #37: Proposal Form as “Productivity Promise”](#) – we set out to describe how disciplined and effective use of the common proposal form could yield measurable increases in productivity. But a funny thing happened on the way to Exhibit A. As one does, I approached the idea of filling out a productivity-driven form as sort of a role play. I imagined myself the creative and committed employee, putting pen to paper in praise of productivity – to a manager who saw things much as I did. Only as I started writing, I found myself grappling with the challenge that many, if not most, managers – and many HR leaders as well – do not really think flexibility can be a genuine tool.

So those of you who read Bulletin #37 – and those who might click to it now – saw instead of a gold mine of productivity tips a mine field of skepticism. I have heard from a number of you that you enjoyed the piece. You thought it was a useful corrective to the easy assumption that we could simply reposition flex from retention tool to productivity vehicle. I agree that there is a great attitudinal shift to be made, and I sketched some of the challenges. But in the end, as happened with the first forms of flexibility, we cannot wait for worldviews to realign before we build new ways to work. It’s good to know and map the minefields, but we need to build more productive flexibility with the tools at hand – and in face of the assumptions that exist

*And at least for the moment, the most serviceable tool at hand is the ubiquitous **FWA Proposal Form**. (You can review our comments on the Proposal Process and Form in [FlexBulletin #36: Productive Flex One Deal at a Time](#). An excerpt from that **Bulletin** on the form itself is at the end of this piece.) Typically the first two questions on this form offer an opportunity to identify the potential productivity of a redesigned flexible work arrangement. Those questions are, more or less:*

- 1. In what ways might this proposed way of working allow you to maintain or improve your individual performance or contribution? [Or in brief, how can I work better?]*
- 2. How might this way of working improve the way you and your team deliver services to our internal and external clients? [Or, how can I serve customers better?]*



Do You “Improve Contribution” by Not Resigning or by Redesigning Your Work?

The two lead questions on the form recognize that different roles provide varied opportunities to increase contribution. Some arrangements for some people enhance personal productivity while others offer improved customer service. Some offer both. Unfortunately, in reviewing thousands of these proposal forms over the years and hundred just this year, I found that far too many describe neither outcome. Here are some sample telecommuting responses to Question 1 in what I would call the “minimalist school”:

- *“I will be able to get more done because I won’t have so many interruptions.”*

- *“I should have more energy when I’m working since I won’t be commuting.”*
- *“I should be able to take on projects that require long-term attention.”*
- *“I will continue my contribution by not resigning, which I’d have to do otherwise.”*

Now all these statements may be true: believed by those who made them and accepted by those who approved the proposal. But do they really represent potential productivity gains? Let’s examine two common claims and see.

“I will be able to get more done because I won’t have so many interruptions.”

Leaving aside the vague and random nature of this very frequent assertion, will it turn out to really happen and to really matter? Surely there will be few or no cases on your telecommuting days of people wandering up to your cube and regaling you with critiques of last night’s *Dancing with the Stars*. And in the early days of relatively electronics-free telecommuting, just being out of the office may have delivered isolation – and focus. But with the advent of today’s all-the-time-everywhere access, interruptions are ubiquitous as well. It is tough to envision, let alone quantify, productivity through isolation.

“I will continue my contribution by not resigning, which I’d have to do otherwise.”

This is a tricky claim. There is little doubt that retention in the aggregate has been a major goal – and will continue to be a desired outcome -- of most flexibility initiatives. But is it an appropriate argument for one person’s arrangement being accepted? Leaving aside whether this is a fact – “Without telecommuting I simply cannot continue in this job” – or an idle threat, is this reply responsive to Question 1? The least that can be said is that this is an argument to maintain the status quo, not to enhance productivity. And while one can approve dozens or even hundreds of proposals that maintain contribution, they end up delivering little in the way of enhanced productivity.

There Are Degrees of Redesigning Work – and the Demanding Ones May be Best

If these most common responses to Question 1 seem to fall short in the productivity sweepstakes, are there ways of thinking about this question that can lead to more productive flexibility rather than more easy answers? We believe the answer is an emphatic yes. Unfortunately, brilliant productivity examples do not abound. In our view achieving these outcomes requires a good deal of discipline and these elements:

- Intensive diagnosis of how one’s job adds value and could add more such gain
- A willingness to rethink the way a job is configured and to experiment boldly
- A relentless search for ways to combine talent, time and place in unique ways

Here are a few examples of productivity-enhancing replies to Question 1. To begin a discussion that will flow into the next **Bulletin**, we’ll open with strong (and real) examples from five commonly-proposed options. Again, these focus on how an individual option will allow an individual to increase his or her overall contribution to the organization in at least one dimension..

- **Job Share** *“By sharing the role we will bring to the position the up-to-date methodology that comes from my part-time teaching and the organizational creativity that comes from my partner’s work in another state-of-the art facility*
- **Part-Time** *“Rigorously reviewing, questioning and rethinking the actual value created in my original full-time position led us to develop a 60% part-time position that would contribute 80% of the value of my original position.*

- **Compressed Work Week** “Given intensive and unavoidable customer and colleague contact pressures around the country, four long days Monday through Thursday offer the most efficient path to quality customer service.”
- **Telecommuting** “As a busy manager with many staff and pressing administrative tasks, I will use a single weekly telecommuting day to reliably perform critical long-range planning, financial reporting and staff development planning that will otherwise be done less effectively and with negative team and client impact.
- **Remote Work** “As a remote recruiter I will bring to the organization my broad range of local contacts and networks and will not have to waste time with relocation and learning whole new forms of recruiting assets that others have already mastered.

[These more business-beneficial approaches to flexible schedules do not occur randomly. They grow out of environments in which many factors combine to build a disciplined search for productivity improvement. They include senior leader goal-setting, strong HR coaching, clear and thorough employee and manager training, and a relentless monitoring and quality improvement process that insists on raising the bar on productive flexibility.]

*We will continue this discussion, and further analyze these examples, in the next **Bulletin.**]*



[Excerpt from Bulletin 37]

The challenging climate: rarely thinking of blending productivity and flexibility

As in many aspects of life, attitude may not be everything – but it’s a major thing. We should start our thinking about flex & productivity by looking at how we look at success in flexibility. We urge long-shot Olympic athletes to believe they can establish world records. We encourage the young and disadvantaged to believe that they can enter the college of their dreams. We are long on dreams, visions and stretch goals in our companies. But do we as leaders and coaches strongly assert that by working flexibly we can be very successful, unusually productive, rapidly promoted and widely praised winners in our workplaces? Can we win the flexibility gold medal in our firm? Is there one?

Probably not. In fact, as you read that flex success list, did you chuckle a bit? Did someone come to mind – a senior leader, a manager you’d encountered – who thought something like this:

- True productivity occurs when a smoothly running team is constantly interacting
- The only way to fully respond to customers is with all hands on deck, and available
- The only way to assess real star power is to see your talent “on the hoof”
- With a solid team in front of you, you don’t need metrics to know who’s producing

When you hold these fairly traditional views, it seems almost unthinkable to envision flexibility co-existing with productivity. And if it’s hard to imagine the process, it’s quite challenging to envision a productivity-oriented process or form – or outcome.

A chilling environment: considering flexibility and productivity unlikely

Of course not all managers and leaders think this way – exactly. But shades of this thinking do occur pretty broadly in organizations, and they can be quite destructive of people seeing flexibility as a productivity tool. This moderate skepticism can look like this – a sort of damning with faint praise:

- It’s amazing that people are able to collaborate when they’re dispersed

- It's great that some customers turn out to be as flexible as we are
 - Flexibility is a great thing early in a career, but to move up you have to move on
 - It's great to have metrics for flexible work, but you can't compare apples and oranges
- While the traditionalist may see little prospect for flexibility at all, the skeptic more likely sees the prospect for just a little flexibility. And that exceptional flexibility is an unlikely candidate to be paired with productivity.

The dismissive environment: not envisioning flexibility meeting productivity

In our inventory of the ways we never get to using productivity tools for flexible arrangements, perhaps the most benign and pervasive are forms of pigeon-holing:

- Flexibility is an employee benefit, somewhat of a cross between PTO and healthcare
- Whether stated or not, it's an accommodation to meet family needs
- Offsite work is a trade-off: company savings vs. employee space donation

These very different ways to position flexibility all have one thing in common: they place it many, many miles away from any notion of enhanced productivity. The question is never asked nor answered.

[Author's note: I generally write these Bulletins in a fairly disciplined and straightforward manner, usually with a rough overview. So it was with this one. Except that as I wrote, it took off in a direction quite its own. I can see quite clearly why that happened. I had intended – as the two questions from the form at the top indicated – to plunge into the mechanics of the proposal form, to show how a well-developed form could project and set in motion an impressive productivity process. But that tack was premature. In fact, one of the reasons the productivity potential is not realized in our organizations is that there is a large attitudinal barrier that keeps us and our leaders and peers and employees from ever going there. I think that fact needed to be acknowledged. It is one reason we and many of our clients have been spending more time working with senior leaders to shape attitudes toward flexibility. And it is something we will address this fall in more detail

In the meantime, I will write another Bulletin in the next week, doing what I had promised to do in this one – describing ways to leverage the proposal form for productivity-oriented flexibility.]

Best regards,
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