



FlexBulletin #45: Flex Success Stories – Powerful or Anemic?

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[America is a Storytelling Powerhouse From Hollywood to Madison Avenue, from Oprah's book club to reality TV, our culture writes, tells and broadcasts an endless stream of compelling stories that go both viral and global. So it makes sense for companies to turn to success stories or case studies to illustrate the nature and power of flexible work arrangements. Good advertising sells well. Sprinkled across guidelines, communication campaigns and training modules, these stories seek to communicate the positive impact of flexibility as a company defines it. But like stories in general – and with many commercials -- the results can be very uneven. We take a look below at ways to make success stories truly successful.]

Note: In [FlexBulletin #44: The GPS of Flex—Introducing FlexWise 2.0](#), we describe our new flexibility website which has a strengthened focus on business productivity and discipline. A full set of success stories on each of the common options illustrates a consistent, outcome-based approach to flexibility initiatives. Contact us at the phone number below to preview the site.]



SUCCESS STORIES can be seen as a tale of two profiles – on a continuum

In most organizations, a set of Flexible Work Arrangement guidelines typically contain at least a few success stories. While they will occasionally vary in format and focus, more often than not they will be consistent – internally and across companies.. Typical elements will be:

- A thumbnail sketch of the person who's on a flex arrangement
- A longer account of the reason that person sought this option and why it works
- A “no-harm” assessment indicating that tasks get done and nothing falls between the cracks
- A closing account of employee impact (satisfaction, etc.) and company gain (retention)

A (disguised) sample follows:

Dan, Senior Researcher, R&D

Dan was an unusual candidate for a telecommuting/flextime hybrid. As the manager of his son's successful rock band, he wanted to be able to focus on his passion without having it interfere with his work at the company. Dan works from home one day a week, splitting this very productive day between the “bench” and the band. He has flexibility (flextime) in his schedule that allows him to attend to band requirements and company necessities. On performance days/nights, he adjusts his normal day to accommodate travel and late nights that come with managing a rock band.

How does Doug do both jobs? His supportive manager, Mary, plays a vital role. She and Dan regularly set and review his position objectives and deliverables, resulting in Dan feeling empowered to do his job. She believes his productivity has remained unaffected and that his work with the band has added creativity in his role. Says Dan: “The company's been great. I plan to stay here a very long time. Unless the band wins a Grammy!”

EXAMINING THE NO-HARM profile and its impact on the business

Dan's is an entertaining, even inspiring story. It puts a positive face on flexibility and paints a picture of a family-friendly company. But beyond that, how does it position flexibility? Is it the business-based or business-beneficial or business-oriented strategy that many companies seek or proclaim? What exactly is it advertising? Based on this story, flexibility would seem to:

- Focus on how arrangements serve individuals primarily, rather than the company
- Settle for a "do no harm" standard, rather an insistence on business gain
- Relegate the company to the role of bystander rather than active player

This success story resembles a company benefit more than any other offering. It builds employee satisfaction, is more transaction than negotiation and is a provision that demands little in return. It is a good thing, a positive thing – but above all it does no harm, or as his manager says, "his productivity has remained unaffected." It can be quite appealing to employees. But how will leaders and managers reading this and similar stories assess the value of flexibility? Will an ad promising "no harm" compel them to become champions, advocates and users of flexible work arrangements? Let's look at another end of this continuum.

POSITIVE BUSINESS IMPACT and its power for the flexibility message

Messages usually flow from the design and practice of flexibility within the organization. More and more companies are rethinking their methods and messaging. They seek truly business-beneficial gain and strong employee satisfaction – flex as a two-way street. Their ads reflect this positioning, often including the following elements:

- A snapshot of the employee, role and background to the FWA being used
- An account of the negotiation over how work in a new schedule can be redesigned
- A description of the quantifiable business and operational gains that occur
- A summary of the impact of the new arrangement on employee, colleagues, manager, clients

A (disguised) sample follows:

Jane, Senior Manager, Food Services

Two years ago Jane's 100-mile daily commute and rising gas prices began whispering "telecommuting" in her ear. Even a day a week looked very appealing. It could be a nice payoff for her, but what was in it for the company? She developed a proposal that highlighted the impact for her of a quiet day off the firing line. She committed to finally catching up on that day with essential financial reporting, budgets and planning – much to the delight of her manager who lived for that data and loved timeliness. Her manager also saw a developmental opportunity for her direct reports who could benefit from covering for her.

While she enjoys her commute-free day, the gas savings, and the chance to bake occasionally for her children, Jane and her boss concur that the value of her flexibility to the company is:

- ✓ **Improved Productivity & Work Quality** *More and better work that really matters*
- ✓ **Enhanced Perspective** *Her "day away" gives her overview and planning & prep time*
- ✓ **Empowers Managers** *Telecommuting has reduced micromanagement, modeled flex*
- ✓ **Satisfied Client** *Her key client has appreciated her improved focus and stronger team*
- ✓ **Personal Satisfaction** *This modest schedule has "captured time" to spend with family*

This approach to flexibility, with its focus on identifying business gains and mutuality in the arrangements is more likely to engage managers and leaders. This type of ad makes clear what is expected in a good business-beneficial arrangement, and also addresses what's in it for an employee. Since this approach may be a little counter-intuitive, it will benefit from a particularly diverse and intensive ad campaign. Laying out these standards, expectations and operational gains will help change the way people think about flexibility over time.



[Reader calls] As you may recall from the last **Bulletin**, Stacey Gibson and I are contacting many of our readers to understand where you are in your own flexibility journey. The calls have been quite interesting and productive so far, and we look forward to more that include your feedback and suggestions for items to address in the **Bulletin**.

Risk and nonexempt remotes In the previous issue of the **Bulletin – FlexBulletin #42: The Pitfalls of Offsite Work** – we announced a study of how frequently nonexempt employees work offsite and whether there was litigation exposure due to poor overtime and expense tracking: **FlexPaper #1: Risks for Nonexempt Remote Employees.** (For a free copy, **click here.**)

Best regards,
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