REAL PEOPLE—FLEXIBLE ORGANIZATIONS

In 2008, almost 20% of workers have some flexible workplace options. Yet the growth of these has been very slow and their promise remains just that - a possibility, not a reality for many who are interested. In 1997, when I first wrote this article for a national conference less than 2% of US workers actually worked in any flexible work arrangement. But the talk was there and the federal government was pushing organizations to do more so as to reduce commuting and energy demands and include more workers with disabilities in the workforce. And so I updated this article to help you consider such options.

By now you have heard of the many variants on flexibility in the workplace: tele-commuting, remote work centers, compressed work weeks, flex-schedules, nomadic workers, hoteling, on-shoring, and virtual organizations. Each requires some forethought and planning to be successful. Not all jobs are candidates for the same types of flexibility, neither are all employees.

Flexible workplace's advantages include:

- Attract talented employees from more sources, including those with disabilities or in non-local areas
- Many employees see as a valuable option
- Employee productivity improvements range from 20-60% in studies
- Energy savings (personal and organizational)
- Environmental benefits (reduced traffic, lower energy usage)
- Work-life balance aspects
- Improved customer service potential
- Reduced office costs
- Can reduce stress of commuting, work interruptions

And, disadvantages include:

- Company security issues
- Company privacy issues
- Individual privacy issues
- Loss of creativity in some areas
- Some workers can become isolated or alienated
- Untrained, unprepared managers lose effectiveness, fear the changes
- Work can expand into other areas of life, become 'on' all 24 hours a day

Business theorists and organization scientists have described implications of the global, networked, digital economy. They see the office as a system, not a place, and work roles changing into networks or other new relationships that are much more fluid than in the past.

There are two critical aspects of any form of flexible work: people and information. One advantage of the 'traditional office' was the collocation of people of differing skills and knowledge with those who directed the work and with the resources to do the work. Work could be easily directed or redirected as needed. Information was relatively readily available. Informal communications and information flows provided support. Trust developed among workers as daily relationships grew.

Additionally, traditional ways of working provide significant benefits to many. Informal relationships provide support and assistance for employees to do their work. Individuals learn who they can trust through direct observation. Informal interactions may enhance learning, creativity and innovation. Many people develop friends through their workplace. The new worker fresh from schooling learns work habits, tolerance, and how to be a team worker. Organizations thrive by creating a sense of belonging which meets deep human needs to belong. And, for many, the office remains a source of status and recognition. For some, it also provides respite from personal problems.

With flexible work, organizations face critical issues and concerns about people and information that either do not exist or, more commonly, are not recognized as so critical within a traditional office.

Today, there is relative agreement on the compelling reasons for organizations to implement flexible work plans. Most organizations believe they must focus on customer satisfaction and talent management. This demands in-depth knowledge of the marketplace, an ability to create products or services which exceed customers' expectations, superb customer service, and the ability to find and retain the talent needed to make the organization succeed ; all tied up with a cost-effective bow.

Flexible work offers a range of benefits which can help achieve these goals. These include:

- closeness to the market-makers for advance information on new concepts or issues
- closeness to the customers to provide quicker, more responsive service
- extended hours of customer service
- extended hours of work within each 24 hour period
- ability to recruit and retain the best 'high performance' employees
- ability to withstand disasters, such as fires, terrorist actions, or natural catastrophes.

However, organizations face several challenges to obtaining these benefits. These include:

- information must be able to be shared rapidly and easily all across the organization and its employees
- information must be able to be used anywhere
- the underlying culture must support flexible work requirements for effective information flow and for management by results, not face time
- management must be trained in remote management and must practice flexible work options.
- trust becomes an increasingly critical element in employee relationships.

Earlier I noted the wide disparity between existing flexible work programs and their actual use. Organizations have many models of mobile work already, especially in sales and 'field rep' staffs. Yet, when it comes to flexible work, many organizations still see this as a special privilege to be granted to a favored employee or to assist a valued employee with a temporary family or medical problem. Managers plus those whose work is location specific wonder if the person is really working or feel aggrieved at not having options others have. Employees also fear a loss of effectiveness as they are cut off from information sources and a loss of promotion or career-enhancing opportunities from a lack of 'face time'. Worse yet, many organizations have not significantly changed work processes or developed effective performance management processes to support flexible work.

How you can move to becoming a more flexible organization overall as a way to achieve your short- or long -term goals?

An organization considering implementing flexible work needs to look at it as an integral part of their overall strategy. Flexible work is chosen as a way to operate because it directly supports the achievement of important goals.

From this perspective, the organization can then develop the forms which meet its needs. For success, flexible work requires that organizational structures, work processes, information flow, and job design all be built to support it. The organizational design issues do not simply support a flexible work plan. Many of them also, if well-designed, will improve the effectiveness of the total organization rather than be special to the flexible work employees.

It may be that it is the recognition of the need to review and revise the organization's structures and behaviors that is what keeps flexible work efforts small. The real and hard work of linking organizational strategy to daily activities is often given more lip service than elbow grease.

Most studies indicate managers are the biggest, but not the only, problem in

flexible work. Managers are accused of resisting the loss of presence on a daily basis and of unwillingness to do the planning inherent in working with people in multiple locations. Yet, most organizations do not have the processes or structure in place to manage flexible work effectively.

- Managers are not trained on communications skills or performance planning and management.

- Compensation systems call for merit pay yet reward employees for time worked and willingness to do work that is often not important to organizational goals. Availability of information is chaotic and localized rather than open and multi-channel.

- Communications and systems may not effectively support people outside the major locations.

- Risk avoidance may be more important than risk identification and management.

- In larger organizations, the flexible work procedures are often quite detailed and flexible work employee contracts spell out everything in great detail.

In all these situations, a manager would be a fool to encourage flexible work options since they could undercut unit success.

New forms of organizational structure are appearing - and disappearing - across a wide range of organizations. Structured as teams, spider webs, changing coalitions, symphony orchestra, or basketball team; the issues of flexible work in an organization remain much the same. Organizations must evaluate their entire organization carefully to design effective systems. This review includes:

- the organization's culture and any underlying cultural difficulties,
- the tasks which the organization wishes to do,
- organizational structures and work processes,
- information needs and flow,
- communications needs and flow,
- work flow, work design and job design,
- technical support and training needed for flexible work,
- hidden costs in keep employees feeling connected, and
- technology and its impact on the organization.

There really are no secrets to management success in flexible work - they are the same practices and efforts good managers use anywhere. Managers who

wish to support flexible work need good project management skills. They must learn how to communicate precisely over various channels and to consistently follow up.

Flexible work is easiest to implement for positions with the following characteristics:

- discrete tasks or projects are common
- major work requirements can be scheduled in advance or anticipated
- results are specific deliverables or measurable
- work includes information or documents which can be transmitted
- electronically, or
- there is a substantial telephone communications component.

Managers and employees interested in flexible work need to address what work is appropriately done in such options and how other work will be done. They need to assess the individual's ability to work effectively in a flexible work plan. Some organizations hire for this. Work plans and performance management must be based on defined objectives and standards. Most successful flexible work and virtual organizations run on multi-channel communications with lots of individual attention including regularly scheduled face-to-face meetings, in person or virtual. Organizational concerns must be addressed including: legal issues such as employment, safety, and zoning laws; liability and workers compensation insurance; remote access and systems security.

The network as organization structure is similar to the network as computing technology. While all members of the network will share a purpose and common views or goals, there is independence. Members must be able to achieve on their own and to benefit from the network. Links are multiple and extensive. Those members who bring unique perspectives and abilities emerge as leaders. Such a networked organizational structure assumes flexible work rather than adds it on to an existing organization. While it also sees people and information as the critical keys to success in transforming the organization to meet future challenges, it focuses more on value added than on cost savings.

In a networked economy, success often depends on an intense collaboration of knowledge workers. Organizations must provide their members with the ability to share information rapidly and easily so that it can be used anywhere. They must be able to recognize and use all the knowledge within the organization and provide a climate which makes on-going learning the norm. Developing relationships and trust is key in these organization structures also.
The changing nature of work presents many new opportunities and challenges. Few organizations are prepared for these.

- What happens as the workforce becomes distributed across geographic,

cultural, and time barriers?

- How will organizations plan for and cope with the demands for open systems in all areas so as to minimize the disruptions of technology changes or power/system outages?

- How will organizations create conditions conducive to "trust" among employees?

- If successful organizations must address life-long learning and retraining and the quality of work-life, how will they do so?

- If we are already seeing negative health effects from current levels of multitasking, what is likely to happen in more complex interconnections?

- As career paths change from an 'interstate highway' into 'rambling footpaths', how do organizations assist individuals in the trek?

You must create a vision of the future and one of the current reality. From these two, you can create a gap analysis and design a plan to move to the new vision. And then you will have to continually recheck and adjust your course as the vision changes as the world changes.

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