



SHOULD EMPLOYEES HAVE UNLIMITED FREEDOM?

WHY ORGANIZATIONS SHOULD WORRY ABOUT RESULTS, NOT CLOCKS

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In this day and age of hyper connectivity and changing values, it's a wonder that many of us still work in an office during a fixed window of hours.

Of course for airports, hospitals, shipping companies, retail stores and many other organizations, to run efficiently, they need to have strict schedules and their workforce has to be there or bad things can happen.

But what about for the huge number of people working in the knowledge-based economy where their outputs don't rely on physical presence?

Many business leaders are stuck with the notion that organizations cannot succeed unless people are being watched and told what to do by managers. But it turns out by giving employees unlimited freedom, organizations can often achieve better results. There is a lot more room for giving employees discretion over when, where and how to do their work than most business leaders are prepared to acknowledge.

Flexible working systems like ROWE, which stands for [Results Only Work Environment](#), have been grabbing a lot of attention over the last few years.

And for good reason. Who wouldn't want unlimited vacation or to work from the beach?

A number of high-profile companies have adopted similar policies and continue to swear by them. Unilever has an agile working environment. Gap's headquarters uses ROWE principles. Netflix implements many elements of ROWE with great success.

More demand for flexibility

In the old days "flexible" work was usually for women who wanted to make money, be active outside the home and who needed to take care of children.

This can still be the case but new concepts like ROWE are for everybody, not just moms. Families are changing.

The internet and other technology has made it possible to perform certain types of work from anywhere. Many organizations now have to manage teams in different time zones who aren't at the office at the same time anyway.

In addition, the younger generation entering the workforce now doesn't expect to spend all of their time in an office. But they are connected at all times, so they think they should be able to work where and when they choose.

For these and many more reasons, demand for less rigid working structures have been on the rise for some time now.

Principal characteristics

Many of these trends are not new but the traditional responses by many large organizations to this increasing complexity in the workforce has been to add even more levels of hierarchy and bureaucracy to their structures to deal with it.

But in a ROWE working environment each person is free to do whatever they want, whenever they want – as long as the work gets done. They are 100% autonomous and 100% accountable in equal measures.

People working under a ROWE system can deliver higher productivity because they spend less time commuting, save money on travel and office space. They are absent less, and have higher morale because they can manage their own time. This all adds up to a lot less burnout too.

The amount of time you put into achieving the results is not important, where and when you do the work is irrelevant, producing high-quality output on time is.

If a staff member is not in the office on a Tuesday afternoon but delivers excellent work on a project on Sunday evening well before the Tuesday deadline what does it matter? Likewise, if they need two hours or 20 days to finish what needs to be done, it shouldn't make any difference.

In a successfully implemented ROWE environment, managers manage the work and not what time their staff come and go or where they do their job from.

ROWE also can level the playing field to a certain extent between men and women. Nowadays it's still more likely that women are the ones with "flexible" hours or who work part time. But once everyone has the same flexibility and the focus is only on results, those who aren't present full time are no-longer treated as second class work citizens.

Drawbacks

Some of the main disadvantages of people not working in a central location on a fixed schedule have to do with social factors.

Employees who no longer have to go to the office have less physical interaction with others. Some people can become lonely or isolated if they only collaborate with colleagues through machines.

The perception of others can often be negative. Teams who are not physically seen as present in the office may be thought to be lazy or under-performing.

But as long as people who are "ROWEing" have a certain amount of contact with their colleagues, they can maintain the good workplace relationships they need to perform well. [An article in the Journal of Applied Psychology](#) on a large amount of data puts the magic number at two and a half days per week.

Hostility and scepticism of ROWE can be overcome by a culture change which focuses on results and not time spent.

Key ingredients

The three key ingredients necessary to make flexible policies work are buy in from the top, going step by step, and changing the culture.

While ROWE could make us all work better and more efficiently, it is important to implement it at the right pace.

During the course of my work helping organizations to adopt the ROWE principles, I take a step by step approach. The best way to start is to begin with one unit in order to learn what works and what doesn't in a particular organization and make necessary improvements before moving on.

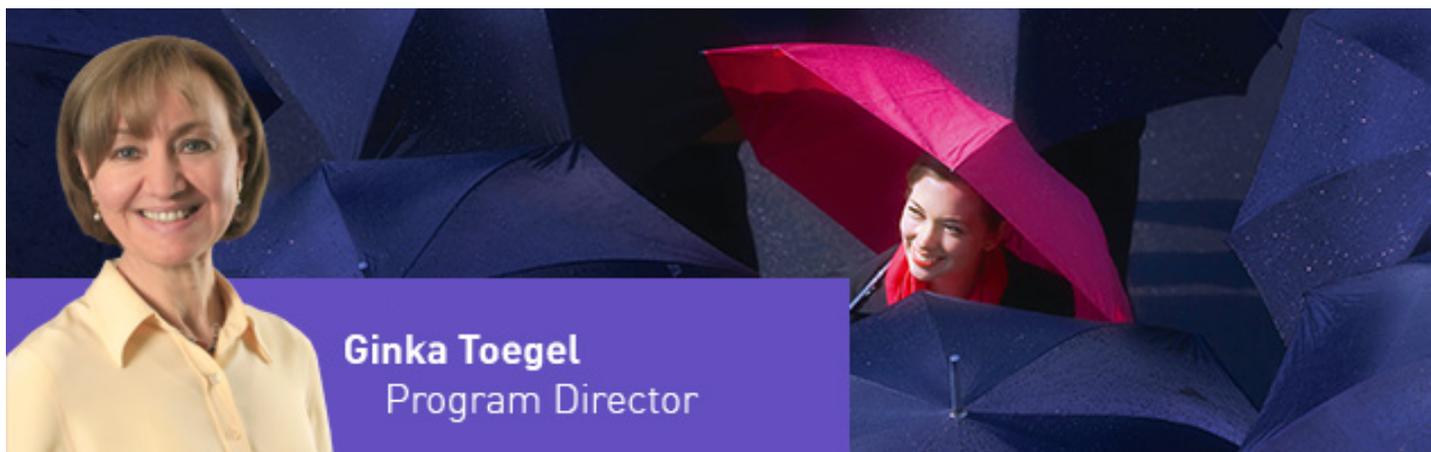
ROWE works the best if it has support from above in an organization. Teams responsible for implementing ROWE need to make the case with the top management and demonstrate success.

Also for flexible systems to work, teams have to change their culture. Part of this involves negotiating how they will deal with the downsides of ROWE. Many problems arise when one team or individual is ROWEing and others are not, for example. It is important for teams to decide in detail together how they want to work and how they will handle some of the problems that they will eventually face in advance. In the beginning a lot of effort in managing perceptions and the external environment is required.

So ROWE can't be built in a day and a lot of scepticism has to be overcome before it can work. But if you take the time to negotiate and implement ROWE properly, your organization can be less complex with more satisfied and loyal personnel dedicated to getting results.

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