



FlexBulletin #116 - Work-Life: Heading for Balance or Bust?

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A major driver of work-life change started with a small group, risk and persistence

I spent many exciting days of research and advocacy at New Ways to Work in San Francisco in the late 1980s. None remains as vivid in my memory as a small gathering of the principals with the noted Bay Area-based husband-and-wife research team of Milton Moskowitz and Carol Townsend.

Their mission: searching for the country's Best Companies for Working Mothers, which Working Mother magazine planned to publish in a list. While the list would ultimately become a powerful national arbiter of how companies treated employees, that impact seemed far away on that day. Two questions accounted for this skepticism.

This idea of list-as-behavior-changer was a far from proven notion. Could a modestly known publication use positive publicity and a bit of shame to change decades of corporate habits? Not clear. More challenging, could enough companies be found to comprise such a best practices list. In that room that day, through a lens of flexible work, we sought nominees for the list.

Traveling around the country, Milt and Carol did not find 100 companies that first year. But they found 30 for the 1986 issue of Working Mother, 40 in 1987 and 50 in 1988. The list eventually grew to 100 and its impact evolved. The categories for inclusion on the list mirrored and inspired what came to be called the work-life agenda: from child care supports and flexible work arrangements to resource and referral services and lactation rooms.

As the phrase "work-life balance" endures dispute, efforts to promote it seem to be stalling

Since the turn of the century, companies have undertaken a broad range of such programs, competed annually - and energetically - for a place on The List and kept an eye on the horizon for what's next. One of those sightings has been years' worth of intense debate over what to call "work-life *balance*." Is the right word "balance" or "integration" or "fit" or anything else besides balance? [Whatever those in the field might say, in our focus groups with thousands of employees over the years, the term they regularly use is "work-life balance."] More importantly, all this attempted re-branding may reflect a shift away from the supportive *work-life programs* that marked the last two decades.

This transition was captured quite clearly at last week's Work-Life Congress in New York. Working Mother magazine sponsors this celebration of the latest "100 Best Companies for Working Mothers" list with a two-day conference that has generally featured work-life best practices by Working Mother winners. I've attended for decades as a flexibility advocate, this year being no exception. In years past, one heard panel discussions rehearsing multi-year winners' leading experience in the contest categories of telecommuting, back-up child care, women's advancement, paid leave and more.

For the last several years, including 2016's event, one could see change reflected in the conference title. The hint of 2013 - "Reshaping the Work Life Revolution" - had become this year's "TIME.SPACE. WORKPLACE." Not a generic title, but far from an anthem to work-life, balanced or otherwise. The conference continued to highlight the 100 Best list, celebrate the companies at a gala dinner and include some predictable work-life topics such as parental leave and new millennial dads.

We were pleased to bring the Flexibility agenda to the table

You can Google the full agenda at "Work Life Congress 2016" and see an ambitious agenda that covers matters of diversity, open offices, many forms of wellness, employee coaching, data applications and more. The result is a stimulating range of experiences and the promise of even more to come in 2017. As companies replace a work-life focus with wellness, reconfigure the physical workplace and encourage self-improvement regimens for individuals over costly programs, conferences need to adapt to stay relevant.

At the same time, we saw the need to maintain at least some focus on the one work-life priority that regularly tops any list of preferences: flexible work. Happily the conference organizers welcomed the idea of our putting together three sessions on flexibility. We did 2-hour tutorials that proved highly successful. They were:

Normalizing Phased Retirement -- *Kim Smit, Senior HR Program Manager, Herman Miller, Inc.*

Kim held her group in rapt attention describing the development of Herman Miller's unique approach of fully integrating "FlexRetirement" into its work-life flexibility menu. The approach has proven itself with strong usage over more than 5 years. The session was highly rated.

Multi-function, Multi-Level Flex -- *Amy Rabinowitz, Manager, Work-life & Recognition, Sloan-Kettering*

Amy kept two dozen attendees engrossed in her account of how the renowned cancer center had enrolled more than 1,000 people in flexible schedules across many functions and roles in this critical facility. (Disclosure: MSKCC has been our client for more than a decade.) The group engaged in detailed questions of implementation and troubleshooting and considered the session highly valuable.

New Frontiers of Flex & Caregiving - *Debra Schafer, CEO, Education Navigation*

Debra's group discovered and discussed the parental flexibility needs of those with a range of caregiver responsibilities. These ranged from normal parenting to those with special needs.

These clear flexibility sessions were well-received and well-attended. They demonstrated to the conference organizers that whatever modifier you choose to use with work-life, as long as there are work-life needs there needs to be flexibility.

There may be a dream deferred, but there should not be a dream denied

As I walked through and spoke at the various conference sessions, I could not help but think back to my early and long-term relationship with Milt Moskowitz and Carol Townsend who, as we saw, were among those who started it all. When we first met - and for years after - we shared a deep commitment to workplace flexibility.

A centerpiece of that interest: Phased Retirement. Long before the flexibility menu hardened and narrowed, we just assumed companies would end up offering options for all of us. I think they would have been surprised to hear at the conference, as I did for two days, person after person commenting that they were glad we were discussing phased retirement which their companies might need, but didn't have.

Milt and Carol passed without that dream coming true. Some 30 years after we first discussed it, their vision of full flexibility remains alive. And small step that it was, it was gratifying to see the issue of Phased Retirement raise its head at the Work-Life Congress last week.

Best regards, Paul Rupert

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