



FlexBulletin #117 - Let's Make Flex Great Again

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No doubt that phrase sounds at least vaguely familiar. The original slogan - "Make America Great Again" - adorned the caps and T-shirts of the winning forces in what may have been America's longest and most rancorous Presidential campaign ever. Campaign slogans are seldom controversial or even stimulating. One can confirm this understatement by quickly reviewing these sample slogans from our storied past:

- "The Stakes are too High for You to Stay at Home" (LBJ)
- "Nixon's the One" (Richard Nixon)
- "Not just Peanuts" (Jimmy Carter)
- "Ross for Boss" (Ross Perot)
- "Stronger Together" (Hillary Clinton)

"Make America Great Again" stood out among slogans for several reasons. 1) It embodied a broad demand for change - not that "Ross for Boss" wasn't a compelling call to arms. 2) It conjured up a mythical and superior past. And 3) it offered a stinging critique of things as they are for those who feel left out. Like all strong, multi-level social commentary, these strengths also open it up to challenge and argument.

The arguments began right away. Who can call for things to be "great again" when they already are great? When is the when of prior greatness? Etc. The good news for you and me is that I will be skirting these global questions. I'll draw on the framework while staying firmly in my flex wheelhouse. I'll take advantage of the year-end and the changing of the leadership guard to take a backward and forward look at the proposition "Let's Make Flex Great Again."

Do the next four years argue for restoring past promise or for sticking with what is?

Things are already great This is surely a common view. A casual look at the state of today's flexible practices might suggest that things are doing just fine. The trend lines are good, usage is strong and growing and organizations of all types are adopting practices like telework and flextime. We've come a long way from the rigid old days when people arrived at and left work in lockstep, spent all their working days in offices, factories and fields and wasted far too much time driving to and from work on crowded highways.

Is this progress? You bet. But a closer look suggests that the great leap forward may be less robust than it first appears. The qualifying words are *breadth*, *depth* and *certainty*:

Breadth There was a time when flexible work referred to a broad menu of practices, shown below. Today the term flexibility has narrowed, becoming almost synonymous with telework, which is on a growth tear. Millions are working from home, but they have access to few other options.

Depth Despite there being millions of teleworkers and flex timers, the bulk of these arrangements seem to be informal in character and modest in scope. While some may be both aggressive and structured, most are not. Much of the flexibility is inflexible, with start and quit times fairly rigid and the frequency of telework quite limited.

Certainty Early in the adoption of flexible work, many companies adopted systematic or formal processes to offer opportunities. This plus their open-ended scope made the outcomes less than permanent but more than casual. There is a good deal of uncertainty in today's flex.

If "original flex" has appeal, what is the promise we might return to?

Some years ago there was a broader vision of flexibility. The notion of a greater flex was captured in the groundbreaking "handbook" of flexible work: *Creating a Flexible Workplace* by Barney Olmsted and Suzanne Smith. This 1990s hopeful overview of emerging flexibility helped shape the field for decades. Its chronicle of New Ways of Working suggests what great flex used to or might look like. Most of its forms have not fared so well.

Here's a brief scorecard on the fate of the great flex of yore. (√√√ = GREAT, √ = NOT SO MUCH)

√√√ *Flextime* One of the top 2 options, moving from near-zero in 1972 to ubiquitous today. It's an option for full-time employees working a standard week. **Flex is great!**

√√√ *Flexplace (aka "Telework, Remote Work, etc.)* From fantasy to flex favorite, telework in all its forms has seen a meteoric rise. Largely in use by full-time employees, its irony as a flexible schedule is that it often leads to longer workweeks. **Flex is great!**

√√ *Regular Part-Time* The phrase "regular part-time" embodied an early flex goal of having part-time positions receive fully prorated benefits. Recent studies of part-time suffer from several facts: 1) They combine part-time with and without benefits in the same category; 2) They include the development of millions of involuntary part-time positions during the recession; and 3) It is difficult to identify the trajectory of regular part-time within this data. Anecdotal corporate accounts suggest a downward trend. **Maybe flex is great.**

√ *Compressed Workweek (4/10, 9/80, summer hours)* This option is very popular with employees, in part because it's a way of achieving a day or more off while remaining a full-time employee. Employers have viewed it less enthusiastically, with surveys showing a 50% decrease in its use in the last 5 years. Unlike flextime and telework which sustain full-time or longer schedules, this is the first example of a perceived reduced schedule - even though each of these options constitutes a full-time schedule. **Let's make flex great again.**

√ *Job Sharing* No option has been more cited and less used than this creative way of enabling part-time conditions within full-time positions. Job sharing is unique in the universal claim of employers that they offer it, the great enthusiasm with which practitioners extol it and the rare examples of more than a few pairs existing in the same workplace. Go figure. **Let's make flex great again.**

√ *Phased & Partial Retirement* Phased retirement has also been widely heralded and unevenly offered. This is due to many factors, concerns about age discrimination and productivity impacts among them. The picture is further clouded by the imprecise use of the term "phased retirement." This often refers to the practice of retiring/rehiring older workers as contractors, not regular employees on reduced schedules. Almost no companies do true "phased" retirement, which allows reductions in annual increments such as 100-90-80-70%. **Let's make flex great again.**

√ *Work Sharing* This simple concept - managing through downturns by reducing a whole workforce's hours by, say 5%, rather than laying off a similar percentage - has proven hard to accept. Whether facing routine layoffs or the Great Recession, this powerful idea has been tried on rare occasion. While most effective within clear guidelines, companies that have done it successfully claim notable success. **Let's make flex great again.**

The flex verdict in 2016: we've made flex greater, and there remains a great deal more to do

As with life and politics, the truth about flex is seldom clear-cut. We can focus on successes to date and celebrate the status quo. Or we can take the longer view, focus on flex's original potential and dig down to make flex great again.

I have spent the past 30 years advocating for a flexible workplace, especially for its most demanding and rewarding forms. Looking toward next year, I hope we would focus on promising and neglected options such as phased retirement and compressed workweeks. Proven in a variety of settings and appealing to large populations, progress on these original flex practices would be a significant step in making flex great again.

Enjoy a Restful Holiday and a Flexible New Year!

Best regards, Paul Rupert
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