



FlexBulletin #120 – Flexibility’s Future: It’s Time for Straight Talk

By Paul Rupert

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There’s been lots of loose talk and light action on flexible work, while true flexibility has suffered

Three decades promoting “fair flexibility” In 1986 colleagues Barney Olmsted and Suzanne Smith asked me to join them at New Ways to Work, the original flex think tank, in a national campaign to promote “equitable flexibility.” It was one part response to the promising emergence of Job Sharing, Part-time, Telecommuting – and possibly Phased Retirement – as **scheduling flexibility** in a range of corporations steeped in industrial habits.

And it was another part defense against the growing popularity of the “contingent workforce.” This strategy of creating a ring of benefit-less part-time, temporary and contract workers surrounding a core of “regular employees” offered companies **staffing flexibility** – but it was flexibility at the expense of employees. (The DNA of these practices seems emergent on steroids in today’s “Gig economy.”)

I saw the potential “flexibility” work with companies as a great opportunity to apply all I’d learned in my own innovative organizations about healthy management to advocate and work for a fuller and fairer way to redesign work. I thought I could contribute to the principles of mutual respect, an insistence on ongoing negotiations over time and an approach marked by greater fluidity in what were unnecessarily rigid workplaces. In short, I saw flexibility as a powerful way to offer individuals greater control of their time and their lives and to offer companies and the larger society a toolkit to help address social challenges such as mind-numbing commuting, more just retirement and the marginalization of part-time workers.

Shouldn’t we be celebrating our success? The entry point and first step was the now familiar menu of Flexible Work Arrangements. And I have helped introduce them to more than 100 companies over 30 years. On one level we can declare “job well done.” As at least some tolerance or support for informal flextime and telework has become nearly ubiquitous, progress seems self-evident.

But my greater disappointment is that most companies have failed to recognize that this limited menu is just the tip of the iceberg. They rarely supported the innovative and risk-taking designs that could transform the way we work. And even less frequently would they support intensive training in conciliating differences between managers and employees and within teams that would lay the groundwork for broader flexible scheduling and staffing initiatives.

Indeed, just a few weeks ago I was invited by a diversity champion to meet with a senior HR executive in a major global organization. She was planning a bold “transformation process” and we met to discuss the possible role of flexibility in such an effort. She opened by saying that although she took the meeting, she was a bit puzzled about what we would discuss since they had a form of compressed work week in place that she thought worked well. Her stunning words: “Is there more to flexible work than that?”

IT’S TIME TO “GO NUCLEAR” Yes, *four decades after H-P introduced flextime in Palo Alto*, there should be far more to flexibility than that. And perhaps as the darkest and most indifferent days of the Great Recession recede, we have a chance to reimagine and turbocharge our approach to flexibility. As “normal unemployment rates return”, flex as recruitment and retention benefit is being dusted off. Rather than clear the dust, we should harness flexibility as the change agent it could be.

The conditions of today's workforce and workplace demand bold action. A few indicators:

- Older workers seek the continued contribution, ongoing earnings and increasingly vital health insurance in place of arbitrary retirement ages; few companies embrace phased retirement.
- While random and uneven informal telework and flextime gain ascendancy, proven but "challenging" options such as compressed schedules and job sharing decline in use.
- The so-called sharing/gig economy offers millions the trade-off of greater flexibility for increased financial insecurity and few or no social benefits such as health insurance and pensions.
- Cities record lengthier commutes year-over-year, yet few use proven strategies of collectively promoting flextime/telework/and compressed schedules to dramatically reduce traffic.

It's time for more of us to push for broader and deeper flexibility

Since the last FlexBulletin appeared in February, our team has spent its time rethinking the new leadership and business climate, the organizational possibilities and necessities and how we can best focus our time and talents on realizing the higher flexibility goals envisioned decades ago. We plan to continue meeting clients where they are and developing ever more expansive flexibility systems.

At the same time we are diversifying our work to broader advocacy for and use of *true flexibility* to target pressing social problems. I suspended my Bulletin writing until now – and will resume regular issues going forward – including in them updates on our retooling, organizing and writing in four distinct areas:

Formal/informal Flex Systems It's time to take the bureaucracy out of more challenging flex options and the anarchy out of so-called "informal arrangements." Fifteen years ago we developed what became the dominant model in the field: online guidelines, request process, training and monitoring system. With modest updates, this approach has served the cause of formal flexible schedules. Recently, the explosive growth of so-called informal flexibility – the one-off use of telework and flextime – leaves more challenging options at risk and staff and potential recruits trying to understand a vague version of flexibility.

We are and will continue working with innovative clients who are creating the next generation flexibility systems. These simplify the process of proposing and implementing classic options along with hybrid and customized schedules. They also incorporate transparency for and registration of informal practices so organizations can clarify their true state of flexibility to both internal and external audiences.

Phased Retirement The launch of our RespectfulExits [www.RespectfulExits.com] website marks the first step in a multi-faceted campaign to rethink outdated retirement policies and practices and create mutually respectful and beneficial ways to address new realities for both enthusiastic older workers and knowledge-dependent organizations. You will see us in many settings from conferences, media work and consulting to the writing of **our blog** [<https://respectfulexit.com/blog/>] and the forthcoming book, *Respectful Exits: Making Phased Retirement Work*.

In our early days at New Ways to Work, we tried to include Phased Retirement on what became the standard flex menu. That effort never gained traction for a variety of reasons, including under-valuation of older workers and skepticism of part-time work. In 2017, we need to insist that there be creative and more respectful options for the *10,000 Boomers a day that move toward and through retirement*. As political "leaders" consider putting health insurance costs for those 50-64 in the crosshairs, and conversations intensify about reducing Medicare and Social Security benefits, it's time for the rhetoric about the private sector "doing its part" to become a re-engineered reality for older workers.

Exodus Prevention in the SF Bay Area The San Francisco Bay Area is choking on its own toxins: endless commutes, skyrocketing housing costs and decreased livability in a fading "great place to live." A major cause is young tech giants insisting that work can only happen with all hands on deck in the same place at the same time. A recent set of credible surveys and read-outs from job search boards show that as many as 40% of Bay Area residents (and almost 50% of Millennials) are actively planning to leave the area within the next 2-3 years.

Our regionally based business/government collaboration project advocates systemic use of the flex toolkit to stem this outgoing tide. Integrated offering of flextime, compressed schedules and telework by all employers across the region can – and should – be strongly promoted and supported. Such a campaign can go a long way toward minimizing commute time, enabling greater access to outlying and more affordable housing and help "make the Bay Area Livable again."

Leading Through Mutual Respect We have always seen mutually respectful behavior among companies, managers and employees as the animating force behind the various forms of fair flexibility. In major engagements we have developed a standard-setting and training process that modifies habits and builds collaborative behavior. The Mutual Respect approach is described **here.** [<http://www.rupertandcompany.com/skill.htm>]

There always seems to be a corporate *training du jour* – diversity, sexual harassment, now bias – that tries to change some aspect of disrespectful behavior. Yet the level of disrespect gets worse daily. Above all other priorities, in the years ahead we are dedicating ourselves to promoting and delivering powerful initiatives that seek and deliver fundamental behavioral and habit change. We are in a period marked by one Presidential candidate calling voters “a basket of deplorables” and the other wallowing in ad hominem Twitter and rally attacks. Striving for Mutual Respect may seem like a task worthy of Sisyphus, but if we don’t all pull together and help push the boulder up the mountain, the boulder will surely crush us all in the long run.

We preach Mutual Respect at home, in schools, through religions and in mission and value statements. In these divisive times, it needs to be the guiding behavior in the workplace and within the workforce. It’s well past time to walk the talk.

LET’S MAKE FLEX GREAT AGAIN BY BEING BOLD, IMAGINATIVE RISK-TAKERS.

The times demand nothing less.

[I welcome inquiries or comments at my email address: paulrupertdc@cs.com]

Best regards,
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