

FlexBulletin #83 – Honoring MLK and Labor Day

September 4, 2013

"I say to you today, my friends, that in spite of the difficulties and frustrations of the moment, I still have a dream. It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream...I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: "We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal."

-- Martin Luther King, Jr., March on Washington, 1963

The Speech That Raised the Dream of...Work

Usually I write about flexibility as flexible or collaborative schedules. In a few paragraphs I will.

But this was a rare week in which we got to reflect on a momentous march 50 years ago and to see again on YouTube and diverse devices Dr. King's gripping speech for "jobs and freedom." These flickering images were followed closely by the scattered elements of Labor Day – the one day devoted each year to those of us who labor in our offices, factories and fields. Trillions of electrons and barrels of columnists' ink celebrated and dissected the meaning of it all.

Some of the most attentive commentary pointed out that The Dream was not only about social integration, about lunch counters and access to equal schools. It was about work – about the unequal distribution of jobs and the uneven pain of unemployment. They acknowledged that the march was a coalition of many interests, including civil rights but encompassing and then spawning a host of causes from unions and women's emancipation to a changing workplace. It was indeed "The March on Jobs and Freedom." It was in its own way a momentous, national labor day.

Was "The Dream" a Dream of Work-as-it-Was?

I have spent my working life alongside colleagues who participated in and/or were inspired by those great movements. None of these visionaries and pioneers I knew thought themselves to be Dr. King in their respective domains. And yet 50 years later, looking back on the forces his speech unleashed and the call so many heeded, in some minor or major sense, they all continued the march for jobs and freedom.

The earliest pioneers of flexibility in the workplace looked at this whole issue more broadly than we do today. Their focus was on **freedom to work** as well as **choice in how we work**. They were as concerned with general and equal access to all the benefits of work as they were with greater personal control over one's schedule. They saw a role for business and public policy in creating the opportunity to work, just as both could be designed to promote social acceptance and mobility. They saw flexibility as a creative tool to achieve multiple objectives.

Some Dreamed of Work-as-it-Could Be

When I first met Suzanne Smith and Barney Olmsted, the co-founders of San Francisco's pioneering flexibility think tank New Ways to Work, their roots in the civil rights and women's movements were clear. They brought to the emerging field a very social view of flexibility.

It was from their persuasive "preaching" that I came to understand how new ways of individuals working done on a broad scale could alter the terrain of employment. They believed that many equities could be achieved by moving away from the assumption that all work is best done on a full-time, full-year basis from date of hire to day of retirement. One could achieve maximum employment by spreading the *supply of work* across the *uneven demands* of the workforce.

Twenty-five years ago, we imagined a future of work which could include:

- Wide use of 80 or 90% part-time work to "spread" decent jobs across a larger workforce
- Active promotion of job sharing to create jobs and enhance skill building and mentoring
- Facilitation of large-scale Phased Retirement to spread employment and transfer knowledge
- Utilization of work sharing (reducing percentage of schedule rather than workforce) in downturns
- Extensive use of telework and compressed schedules to reduce travel and access remote labor

Dreams Serve to Inspire, Not Expire

Dreams have the advantage of a wide-open future in front of them. Anniversaries at 50 or 25 years usually confront a different and narrower reality. And so it is here. The nearly universal theme among commentators summarizing the then and now of Dr. King's speech was: "We've made tremendous progress..." [we have a black president] "but we still have a long way to go." [12.6 percent black unemployment] In fact, black unemployment is roughly double the white rate and has been so since the 1963 March.

Clearly the vision of a social approach to flexibility has not gained traction. Thus that more intensive approach to flexibility has not been able to help reduce unemployment all around. The flexibility we have achieved, the greater control over the time and place of work, has made some gains and is worth celebrating on this Labor Day.

As with any social change, even narrow or limited progress has its forward and backward motion. Uneven compensation occurs across the workforce – the so-called income gap grows or shrinks. And the length of the average work week varies as well. We observe this Labor Day at a time of persistently high unemployment, a decade of flat incomes, and longer hours at work – but dramatic growth in the Telework form of flexibility. In this arena, too, we could say: "We've made tremendous progress, but we still have a long way to go."

Perhaps champions of flexibility would do well to look back at the pioneers of equality and new ways of working, take a deep breath and rededicate ourselves to the broader vision that inspired them. Tomorrow and in years to come we can forge ahead energetically with the flexible opportunities that present themselves and infuse our efforts with yesteryear's dreams.

We welcome your comments on this Bulletin. When you write, please email me at:
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Telework Tools and Training

As my mother seemed to say almost every day: *"If it's worth doing, it's worth doing well."* As each of our organizations move toward its flexible future, it is vital to have the best possible outcome with each building block.

For more than a decade our large corporate and hospital clients have had consistent telework success using our online guideline and training packages. Over the next several weeks you will receive some brief email summaries of what we offer and how these tools have worked for others. Contact us to discuss options and very favorable terms.

Best regards,
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