



**FlexBulletin #85 – HP Way Now: Suspending Collaboration to Save It?**

October 29, 2013

*Is there a flex fault line in the SF Bay Area? I may see some of you this week at the SHRM WorkFlex Conference in San Francisco. I am joining Dawn Mugavero of Toyota Motor Sales in presenting the unique Co Scheduling approach to flexibility that launched in January. While this may not be an earth-shaking event itself, several recent tremors described below have struck greater Silicon Valley this year. We are happy to contribute to the conversation with our provocative presentation, “Toyota Flex Takes Turn to Collaborative Scheduling.” In the rest of this issue, we turn to the October temblors.*

+++++

**Interesting times**

If there really is a Chinese curse that translates as “May you live in interesting times”, then fans of flexibility have been cursed repeatedly this year. 2013 kicked off with the Yahoo “telecommuting ban”, the Best Buy back to the office edict and then along comes an October trifecta which featured:

- Flex pioneer HP joining the “All Hands on Deck” chorus
- San Francisco requiring employers of 20+ to consider all requests for flex without retaliation
- National advocacy groups launching a pro-flex petition in search of 1 million signers

We might ask: “Are these events related – and how?” Let’s look past the headlines.

**HP, 1<sup>st</sup> to offer Flextime in 1972 and heavy user of remote work, calls “All Hands on Deck”**

Hewlett-Packard was a major, early leader in Silicon Valley – the fabled garage-based collaboration between two great leaders that matured into a global giant known for its commitment to innovation. It was startling, but not surprising, when HP became the first major US company to introduce flextime in 1972. It soon provided a full menu of flexible schedules and became an aggressive and leading practitioner of telework and remote work. The widely respected HP Way – with its practice of Management by Walking Around – was much more about collaboration and invention than micro-management.

This pace-setting company has had a number of missteps, challenges and leadership changes in recent years. Its current CEO, Meg Whitman has caused a stir by, as some have said, taking a page out of the Yahoo playbook. The former successful eBay CEO and unsuccessful candidate for Governor of California did not announce the reining in of telecommuting with a clumsy HR memo ultimately attributed to her. Perhaps her political instincts or a more PR-prone HR group chose to float an unattributed “Q&A document” that has been quietly distributed. Subtly delivered or not, the message is clear, saying in part:

*“During this critical turnaround period, HP needs all hands on deck. We recognize that in the past, we may have asked certain employees to work from home for various reasons. We now need to build a stronger culture of engagement and collaboration and the more employees we get into the office the better company we will be.”*

No single, troubled company’s telework termination will end the trend. But this decision is troubling in two ways beyond the immediate impact on flex at HP:

1. HP is HP; it is not Yahoo with a couple hundred folks working at home. It has had thousands for years. And the seasoned Whitman is not the yet-to-be-proven Mayer. Several clients have commented on the difference. Said one: “Yahoo raised chatter; HP raises eyebrows”.

2. More disturbing is the stunning illogic at work here. I understand “flexibility” or telework to be fundamentally **collaborative and innovative scheduling**. Done well, it is not a benefit like vision care. It is a discipline built on respect between employer and employee, an ongoing collaboration in search of innovative ways to work. Do HP and others really think that unilaterally ending collaboration that matters to employees will produce enhanced collaboration in the office? That terminating innovative ways of working will inspire an orgy of innovation as perplexed employees are shoe-horned back into repainted cubicles?

What we don't know is what impact if any the actions of these high-tech leaders might be having on the thoughts, attitudes, actions or inactions of corporate decision-makers around the country regarding their own flex practices and plans. I know of one Fortune 50 company that has decided to consolidate as much of its national workforce as possible into a single site, and end all forms of offsite work. While not inspired by Yahoo, a senior leader described numerous executive conversations that spoke approvingly of Mayer's decision and were summarized as follows: “She looked out at her firm and decided that this flexibility thing had gone too far. I think that's our problem, too.” Perhaps they are a rare outlier.

### **San Francisco Supervisors answer Yahoo with the first municipal mandate on flex requests**

David Chiu is President of the SF Board of Supervisors and a candidate (and strong contender) for a seat in the California Assembly. Two strong reasons emerged for his sponsorship of the Family Friendly Work Ordinance (FFWO): family flight from San Francisco and Yahoo's stance against telework. San Francisco is facing two significant trends: its high tech development pace is turning it into a “Silicon Valley North” and its family population is declining rapidly. Chiu did not want to see his city's high tech business community turn against flexibility.

Although national efforts to require companies to accept request for flexible schedules have failed over many years, San Francisco took its inspiration from the UK, Australia and others who have promoted flexibility as a way of dealing with falling birth rates. The SF Ordinance passed the full Board unanimously on October 8, and takes effect January 1, 2014. Employers with more than 20 employees will have to accept requests for “schedule flexibility and predictability,” respond in writing with approval or rejection for enumerated business reasons and allow an internal appeal. A city agency will monitor for compliance and any illegal retaliation.

After trimming back some elements of the measure, and facing the prospect of a city-wide ballot fight, the business community chose not to oppose the measure. While the state of Vermont has passed similar legislation, it is too early to tell if other governments will join the fray. It is interesting to note that a legal analysis of the FFWO by CalSHRM's Government Affairs Director concluded:

*“Although this ordinance applies only in San Francisco, California employers with sites in San Francisco may need to modify their policies, and they should expect other municipalities and perhaps the State of California to consider similar laws in 2014.*”

### **Collaboration and Innovation take to the web in search of a million voices**

Finally, since Yahoo spoke, teleworkers, conventional media, the blogosphere and conferences sensed a threat to telework and other forms of flexibility and stoked a chorus of opposition. This fall organizers began an online effort – One Million for Work Flexibility at <http://www.workflexibility.org/> – to give voice to the grassroots supporters of flexibility.

It is not clear where it will go beyond the goal of collecting a million signatures. Although initial support is largely from advocacy groups, consultants and individuals, the stated belief is that “efforts from individuals **and** corporate headquarters are needed in order to achieve more traction for change.” That energy could focus on business or politics.

### **As the number and volume of the voices rise, there remains one source of silence**

A few tech leaders, a progressive city and a growing body of petitioners have joined the fray. Notable by its absence is another influential group: the business leaders whose companies have been proclaiming for years that they have mastered flexibility and turned its well-managed potential into increased engagement and retention, reduced real estate costs, business continuity and enhanced productivity.

We have heard this flexibility message from Working Mother and Fortune Best place to Work companies, from conference podiums, in endless business articles. Tech giants like IBM, Cisco and Dell and smaller, dispersed tech firms by the dozen; pharmaceuticals and financial services firms; and accounting and law firms as well all have good stories to tell. If business does not speak up and act, then perhaps Vermont and San Francisco's mandates, rather than business-driven flexibility will become the popular response to Yahoo and HP.

***We welcome your comments on this Bulletin. When you write, please email me at:***

***[paulrupertdc@cs.com](mailto:paulrupertdc@cs.com)***

### **Remote Work Tools and Training**

Our firm was built on telework remote work, both practicing and preaching them. For more than a decade our large corporate and hospital clients have had consistent success using our online GPS 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 unique terms for **Bulletin** readers.

Best regards,  
Paul Rupert

Rupert & Company  
Chevy Chase, MD  
301-873-8489  
[paulrupertdc@cs.com](mailto:paulrupertdc@cs.com)

*Rupert & Company, publisher of the **Bulletin**, is the global leader in business-beneficial flexibility.*

© 2013 Rupert & Company. All Rights Reserved