

FlexBulletin #88 – Is “Google Busing” a Flexible Option?

By Paul Rupert

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As I said in my recent Bulletin ([“Ask4Flex.org” – Turning a Mandate into a Mission](#)), the San Francisco Bay Area is rife with novel flexibility issues and activity. I have been there actually and virtually much of the last two months. Spending time there is a bit of “Back to the Future” – high growth, high tech, low unemployment (4-5%) and the challenges that come with these. It is a different economy.

Silicon Valley’s Google is high visibility for many reasons. But search “Google and San Francisco” on Google and the top of the list features a series of articles on the “Battle of the Buses.” Despite its focus on the future and endless innovation, Google and its 40+ partners in Silicon Valley don’t “move the work to the workers” via telecommuting. They have built a sleek fleet of private buses to move thousands of their workers to work – and keep them wired on the way.

Is this busing the high tech leaders’ new form of telecommuting? Might it be time for the region that brought us the tools of work-from-home to practice what it purveys? Should we expect innovative leadership on these issues from Yahoos and Google who have recently led the retreat from or resistance to flexible work? The answer may start at the bus stops of San Francisco’s low-tech Mission district.

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Giving New Meaning to “Meet me at the Bus Stop”

A December 20, 2013 Reuters article by Alexei Oreskovic was one of the most descriptive among first a trickle, then a continuing stream, of articles describing the SF Bay Area’s “Battle of the Buses:”

“Protesters blocked buses said to be operated by Google, Inc. and Apple, Inc. in San Francisco and Oakland on Friday, the latest sign of a growing backlash against the booming tech industry’s impact, especially on access to affordable housing in the region.

About 40 protesters surrounded a corporate bus in the Mission district as it was picking up employees for the morning commute, preventing it from leaving for about 30 minutes...

Protesters unfurled a banner that read “Eviction Free San Francisco” and distributed flyers titled “San Francisco: A tale of two cities.”

Affordable Housing, not Access to Bus Stops, is the Underlying Problem

The private shuttles currently use 200 public bus stops to load and unload thousands of passengers from three dozen technology and other companies. They make 4,500 daily round trips. The reason: well-compensated tech employees are eager to work for Google, Yahoo and Facebook in the pricey and somewhat bland suburbs of Mountain View and Redwood City.

But living there is a different matter. An old wartime tune caught this dilemma: “How you going to keep them down on the farm after they’ve seen Par-ee?” The urban magnets of San Francisco, Berkeley and Oakland have drawn many thousands of these well-paid renters and buyers into already expensive housing markets.

The buses build and serve this employee diaspora. The most affordable San Francisco neighborhoods are in the southern part of the city and closest to Silicon Valley. The bus stop tensions have been greatest there but are being resolved as I write by the city, the companies and the municipal and private bus groups. The narrow conflict seems on its fee-based way to resolution – at least for now.

Could Telework be Part of the Solution?

The broader conflict remains and threatens some of the high-flying success of this area. San Francisco’s monthly rents have increased almost 50% in the last year. The city’s own economy is growing rapidly and new jobs are being created at an impressive rate. The underlying issues of housing shortages, transportation limits and moving the work and workers are growing as well.

Those of us who are committed to flexibility might look at this issue and wonder why the Valley firms would not see the wisdom of getting people out of the buses and enable them to work offsite. If the old Bay Area phone company, Pacific Bell, could argue for telecommuting and “moving the work to the workers” *twenty-five years ago*, surely the more organizationally agile and technically sophisticated denizens of Silicon Valley could do so.

The Challenge of the Three-Legged Stool: Housing, Transit – and Flexible Work

There is a unique irony here. It would be possible to reduce or eliminate the buses and increase the number of teleworkers. It could be good for the environment and employee satisfaction. But the current company barriers to telework combined with the hassle of daily busing imposes some limits on the volume of entrants to the urban housing market. Thousands of new teleworkers could turn out to be bad news for rents and renters. Ironically, Marissa Mayer and Yahoo’s “telecommuting ban” created an uproar among telework supporters, but might have offered modest easing of the urban housing market.

Work from home only works if you have a home. In the supercharged full employment economy of the Bay Area, whether the job growth is in Silicon Valley or in San Francisco’s fast-developing tech sector, there is increasing pressure on the housing supply. That in turn builds pressure on transportation and creates some novel opportunities for the creative application of flexible work as a significant tool in this process.

While there may be planning among traditional agencies in housing and transportation with some business input, where is the model for such planning and collaboration to include flexible work options? Or can any Valley employer decide to just end its bus service the way it started it? Is it OK for any San Francisco employer to add thousands of jobs with or without the flexibility that would allow many new hires to work as distant remotes? Are all individual flexible work decisions, regardless of impact, based solely on an employee request and a manager decision? Or is it time for greater collaboration on this potentially social tool – to include flexibility as a key factor in the larger problem-solving process?

Toward True Collaborative Scheduling: Saving Space, Right to Request, Reassignment

Several trends have emerged recently that point toward a more social and intentional use of flexibility rather than an assumption that all flex is one-off. Among these trends:

- Voluntary telework has morphed into savings-driven and company determined remote work
In this case the goals are private, but the company has blended flex with a targeted purpose
- San Francisco and Vermont have passed Right to Request laws, mandating company behavior
These modest caregiver support laws could evolve into broader and deeper social mandates
- Opportunity and recovery-based job insecurities have made transfers, reassignments acceptable
Companies can ask or demand employment conditions they would have avoided previously

In this period, in this region of the country we might see one aspect of the next generation of flexibility – not just collaborative scheduling of specific arrangements, but collaborative application of flexibility as a tool of social advancement. Perhaps in the face of severe challenges, the region that is producing world-class online collaboration tools will slowly bring a collaborative use of flexibility online as well.

We welcome your comments on this Bulletin. When you write, please email me at:
paulrupertdc@cs.com

**Our continuing emphasis on Collaborative or Co Scheduling
as the future of flexibility can be seen on our firm’s website: <http://rupertandcompany.com>**

Our public service site in support of San Francisco’s Right to Request law is: <http://Ask4flex.org>

Our companion site in support of online tools for San Francisco businesses is: <http://Ask4Flex.com>

Best regards,
Paul Rupert

Rupert & Company
Chevy Chase, MD
301-873-8489
paulrupertdc@cs.com

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