

FlexBulletin #90: True Part-Time Seeks Orphanage

By Paul Rupert

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There was a time when flexibility was all about time. Flextime, part-time, job share, compressed schedules enabled the capture of time for less work and more life outside work. When Hewlett-Packard first rolled out flextime in 1972, the term “flexibility” was used almost interchangeably – if narrowly – with flextime. The term “telecommuting” was coined in that same period, although the practice of flexibility as place was in its infancy.

Flash forward forty years and time has been put in its place. Throughout business and popular culture, flexibility is thought and spoken of as telecommuting. In several conversations with business leaders last week, they were surprised to hear that there were other flexible options beyond offsite work. Place seems to be everything. Part-time work has figured in recent narratives largely as a real or potential victim of health care reform, a status driven by benefits strategy rather than employee desire for schedule control.

According to recent research, the “winning option” – telecommuting – has led to full time employees working on average 6 hours a week more than their in-office colleagues. How is it that in our time-starved era part-time work (and its severely under-utilized cousin, job sharing) have become the orphans of flexibility?

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When You Don't See The Whole Menu, a Single Entrée Can Seem Like the Whole Meal

Many employers have offered a menu of flexible schedules or options over several decades for many reasons. The basic rationale was captured in that popular phrase, “Different strokes for different folks.” Another way of saying this is that flexibility is a diversity toolbox, in which different tools deliver a range of results to a variety of users. Thus a company's guidelines might list the following menu:

- **Flextime** A full-time schedule which combines “most hands on deck” with personal demands at the beginning or end of the day [*demands modest management skill or attention*]
- **Compressed Weeks** A full-time option which concentrates work week(s) in fewer days and provides day-long blocs of time off [*easier for hourlies, used less for exempts with long (50 hour)weeks*]
- **Telework** Allows full-time employees to work offsite occasionally, on specific days or fully; can yield real estate savings [*limited to some roles, should require strong outcome management*]
- **Regular Part-time** Voluntarily working fewer than full-time hours, usually with prorated comp and benefits [*allows time/comp trade-off for employer/employee; challenging to manage*]
- **Job Sharing** Two people share responsibilities of a full-time position, splitting compensation and benefits; part-time participants in full-time role. [*seems exotic to most managers; very rare*]
- **Phased Retirement** Reduction from full-time to full retirement (e.g., 100%>80%>60%, with prorated benefits. [*Requires end-of-career attention; easier to terminate, rehire as contractors*]

Over a strong employee's lifecycle, he or she might use flextime to deal with commute timing; part-time to continue education or for family support; some form of telework might fit with career growth; compressed work might be appealing as major projects become a way of life; and phased retirement could extend work years and allow knowledge sharing. If the company and its managers handle these well, they could offer productivity gains and cost-savings along the way.

Is this the direction we are moving? True flex with true part-time as an essential element?

2014 National Study of Employers Captures Part-time: Does it Suggest Mainstream or Orphanage?

Ellen Galinsky and her team at Families and Work Institute have conducted the [National Study of Employers](#) this year and several times in the last two decades. Unlike many unimpressive reports on this or that trend in flex, the NSE is well-constructed, rigorous and based on deep knowledge and repetition. No survey represents the whole truth; but this 2014 review of where flex is headed, especially when contrasted throughout with the 2008 version, is as good as it gets.

Amid rich detail of modest gains, stasis and decline in numerous flex metrics, the findings on part-time and job sharing emerge as disturbing. Comparing the findings from 2008's study to this year's, we find:

Reduced Time Schedule	2008	2014
Percentage allowing (at least some) employees to move from full-time to part-time work and back again while remaining in the same position or level	41%	36%
Percentage allowing (at least some) employees to share jobs	29%	18%
Percentage allowing (at least some) employees to work part year on an annual basis	27%	18%

If this decline in part-time offerings pushes these schedules further to the margins, looking at how narrowly these schedules are offered is even more eye-opening. Separating out the responses by those who allow some vs. all employees access to these part-time schedules is eye-opening.

Reduced Time Schedule	Offered Some	Offered All
Move from full-time to part-time work and back again while remaining in the same position or level	36%	6%
Share jobs	29%	1%
Work part year (i.e., work reduced time on an annual basis)	18%	2%

By way of contrast, some employees were allowed occasional work at home by 50% of employers in 2008 and 67% in 2014. Those offering this option on a regular basis grew from 23% to 38%.

Is Flex Destined to Become a Bar Menu, with Part-time as an Occasional Special?

A trend like this, encased in or perhaps deepened by the longest recession of the modern era, and determined by the actions of thousands of employers is hard to diagnose – and even more, to cure. But among the factors to consider are these:

- ✓ **Manager skill** Millions of words have been written about the need to shift to managing for results with offsite employees. Employer support and training has been decidedly mixed. But real estate savings have driven this option whether managers are equipped to manage it or not. Managing part-timers, job sharers and part-year (or so-called Flex Year) employees may be more demanding – and is certainly perceived as such by the many thousands of managers we have spoken with in trainings and focus groups. And there is no driver equal to millions in savings.

To manage part-time requires understanding the work, priorities and connections of the group work process. It demands ongoing quality planning, communication and revision. It means working within clear boundaries and not having work regularly overflow into endless hours and weeks. In short, it requires manage who manage. It can be an unforgiving challenge.

- ✓ **Full-time as Habit** The way we work is not simply a matter of choice or options. The full-time (formerly 40-hour) week is a deeply engrained habit in our workplaces. The move toward flexible scheduling began with education about different ways of working. There was great hope that when employers learned the many benefits of flexible work, they would throw off their old habits and embrace new and better ways of working.

A quick look at the menu and the FWI report is a makeshift report card on flex as education: those options that require reduced schedules are falling in favor and those that reinforce full-time and longer hours are rising. The great national anti-smoking campaigns of the last decade or so suggest the effort required to confront and break a national habit or addiction. The champions of flexibility have achieved some success; but the full-time paradigm remains quite intact.

- ✓ **March of Long Hours** The drive toward long hours has been underway for a decade. We are all familiar with the drivers, from technology to global demands to under-staffing. And the recession has added reluctance to hire, employee fear and limited training to the mix. All of this makes it harder to envision and do the math for a 60% schedule (60% of what?) or a 90-80-70% phased retirement process. In the face of confusion and potential co-worker calculation and resistance, it's easier to not undertake the challenge.

To Orphan or Adopt?

As we all know, trends develop and can be reversed. I will leave it to future **FlexBulletins** to chart training protocols and campaigns against full-time addiction that could help reverse these trends. I also believe that it is very difficult at this point to predict what will happen to our labor markets and employee insistence on part-time options when the economy (more) fully recovers.

The progress of flexibility over the four decades I have tracked it, has always been uneven. But the more flexibility's champions are aware of the unique vulnerability of part-time schedules and maintain a focus on them, the greater the chance that they will be adopted rather than abandoned going forward.

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