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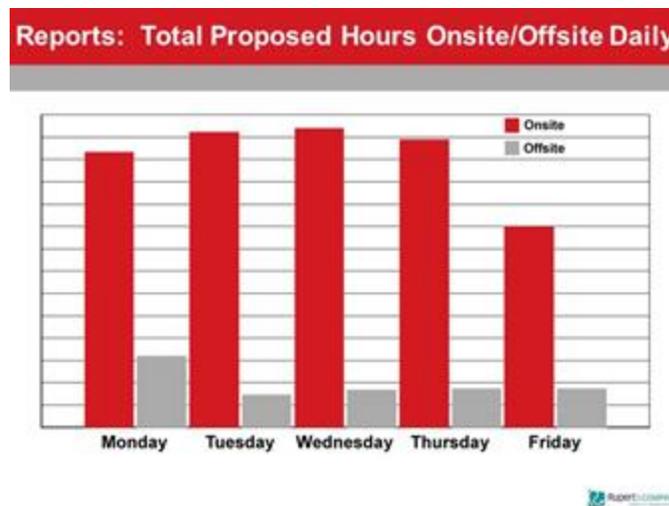
Guides to a changing workplace

FlexBulletin #93: Google Doubles Down on Busing

October 13, 2014

Dear Michele,

We'll explain this graphic below. It captures one small element in the larger, unfolding saga of accountability in offsite work. And as the new school year unfolds, telework - or opposition to it - is making headlines from the Potomac River to San Francisco Bay.



In last week's [FlexBulletin #92: When a Fed Telework Giant Stumbles](#), we chronicled the missteps and misfortunes in one of the Federal Government's premier telework programs, the US Patent and Trade Office. We identified possible causes and solutions and reported that, with some outside help, the practice would likely improve and continue to deliver its many claimed benefits. Among these were the processing of an explosion of patent and trademark applications, many generated by the hyper-growth of tech in Silicon Valley and elsewhere.

The SF Bay Area offers quite a different narrative on the flexible work front. Google, one of the most admired companies in the world, seems to be addressing 21st century gridlock with a 1950's approach to its company town, Mountain View. And up the choked freeway in San Francisco, high-flying web innovator Reddit ("the front page of the internet") has one-upped Yahoo with its "Move to SF or Move on" edict to long-time remote employees.

What is going on?

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Google is a font of innovation and commercial success: master of search and advertising, purveyor of maps and email, promoter of Google glass and the driverless car. With an eye on the future and an addiction to deep problem-solving, we've come to expect innovation and breakthrough ideas in all areas - except one.

Google has never embraced new ways of scheduling and collaborating such as telework. It buses many, many hundreds of employees every day from distant San Francisco and Oakland to its Googleplex HQ and places a great premium on the same time/same place organization of work. Its former first female employee, Marissa Mayer, made her mark as Yahoo's new CEO by allegedly Googling "telecommuters" and as some wags have it, getting the result "terminate."

So I get that Google is skeptical of telecommuting and does not likely include it in its broad problem-solving quiver. Nonetheless, [a recent headline in the San Jose Mercury News](#) took me by surprise. It read:

Google offers free electric shuttles for pilot program

At first blush, it sounds generous. It sounds environmentally sensitive. The pilot part sounds experimental. In short, it sounds very Google. A deeper read reveals the "Who? What? and Where?" According to the article:

MOUNTAIN VIEW -- Google is proposing to fund four electric shuttles that will provide free community transportation in a two-year pilot program that could be extended. "We're thrilled to be working with the City of Mountain View [Google's HQ] to provide neighbors a new -- and green -- way to get around town," Google's transportation manager, Kevin Mathy, said in a statement. Google is the largest employer in Mountain View, with more than 20,000 employees at its campus on Amphitheatre Parkway and other buildings...Google's presence in the city keeps growing; the company has bought 24 properties since 2011. The shuttles in Mountain View follow community concern about increased traffic generated by the expansion..."It's really about picking up a prescription, heading to the park, hopping downtown for lunch and catching an early matinee," said Mayor Chris Clark in a statement.

It sounds pretty neighborly, with a PR+ for Google and the occasional free ride for the good citizens of Mountain View. That is, unless this narrative is less than the whole story. Let's dig a bit.

Mountain View is in the heart of Silicon Valley, and was once a quiet Peninsula suburb. It grew to a population of some 30,000 by 1960 with the first wave of silicon-fueled tech growth and to 75,000 this year with its abundance of tech companies of which Google is the most prominent. Job growth has been explosive in the city, with most of those jobs being filled by people who drive or take Google or similar buses into town daily. Google's current employment throughout Mountain View is over 20,000, with 2,000 of those employed actually living in town.

Mountain View City Council candidate Lenny Siegel has been a longtime advocate of more balanced provision of housing and jobs. He estimates:

In 2014, Mountain View's excess of jobs over employed residents reached an estimated 48,000. This enormous and growing excess of housing demand over supply is the root cause of skyrocketing rents and home prices in Mountain View. Because insufficient housing is available near concentrations of employment, such as the North Bayshore area (where Google is headquartered), cars and buses are clogging both local roads and freeways.

So a slightly different version of the electric bus narrative would be this: Google and other high-tech employers insist on importing by car ad bus tens of thousands of day laborers into a small city rather than using workforce management tools such as telecommuting, remote work and compressed schedules. This leads to growing traffic congestion and gridlock, making it hard for overwhelmed local residents to

"pick up a prescription, head to the park, hop downtown for lunch and catch an early matinee."

Just as vehicles of the last century (tour buses) haul people from the inconveniently placed housing of San Francisco, smaller electric buses reminiscent of retirement villages move people around Mountain View from unfortunately placed housing to amenities made inaccessible by unnecessary traffic. Perhaps the headline of this revised narrative should be:

Google contributes to gridlock, donates buses to fix it

It doesn't have to be this way. As I said above, I, like millions of Americans, am an admirer of Google. It is a great engine of change and invention. There is something quite ironic in its leading role in creating the **driverless** car, a seemingly dangerous and almost unimaginable technical feat. *(And in this context, I'm not sure the effort will offer any great relief for the people of Mountain View.)*

But imagine what could happen if Google applied its resources, clout and prowess to an equally pressing challenge: the **supervisor-less home office**. From the federal government in the east to California's creative shores, offsite work has delivered relief from commutes, weather emergencies and family disruption. Silicon Valley has delivered dozens of communication and collaboration tools.

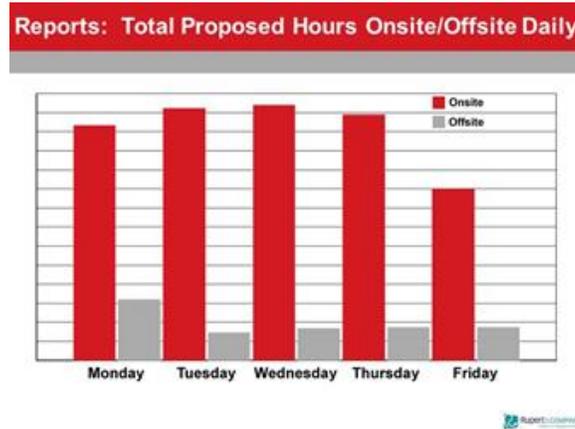
But skepticism remains, and perhaps it should be put to work. Perhaps the time has come for Google to join an effort to master supervisor-less work. It could be better to give back to the people of Mountain View their streets and their time and to give back commute time to Google and other employees than to add a few buses with drivers to the growing gridlock.

Note: Google is hardly alone in its attitudes and practices. Reddit, the self-styled "front page of the internet" recently gave its remote employees outside its San Francisco headquarters the ultimatum of moving to HQ or taking a severance package. See details in our [Co Scheduler](#) blog.

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While abundant communication and collaboration tools exist to support remote work, our [Flexar Monitoring System](#) provides some of the basic management elements needed for telework success. Contact us to discuss how this system and related online tools can strengthen your telework initiatives.

The report screen below is one of many graphics that help assess disposition and coverage of offsite employees.



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

Best regards,
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