



## **FlexBulletin #95: Is Uber the Designated Driver of Flex?**

February 10, 2015

*The San Francisco Bay Area has long been a crucible of flexible and alternative ways of working.*

- *In 1972 Palo Alto's H-P became the first major company to introduce flextime for its workforce*
- *That year New Ways to Work (SF) began 3 decades of national flexible work advocacy*
- *Regional phone company Pacific Bell led the charge for telecommuting across California*
- *The 1989 earthquake closed the Bay Bridge, spotlighting flex as the way to keep workers working*
- *Major companies (Bank of America, Bechtel, PG&E) kept flexible work when the bridge recovered*

*I know this tide of Bay Area flexibility because I rode it. I helped build a fully flexible Silicon Valley start-up in the 70s. I was at New Ways to Work promoting corporate flexibility locally and nationally when the earthquake struck. Inspired by the rapid change that followed, I followed the flex migration East in 1992. I joined others helping hundreds of companies adopt Flexible Work Arrangements. While the recession may have slowed the rate of adoption of flexible work, growth continues.*

*But in Bay Area workplaces in general - and in technology in particular - the tide may be turning. Some employers continue to offer mutually beneficial flexible schedules. Many others seem to be eliminating or avoiding flexibility all together or developing a very different approach. This re-thinking of flexibility can have significant impact on the rest of the country as technology becomes the industry of the future.*

*For that reason, we've developed a nonprofit research and advocacy organization - Collaboration@Work - in San Francisco to drive collaborative flexibility. The last section of this [Bulletin](#) provides a brief description and links to our websites. But let's start with an example being touted as the "new flexibility" of Bay Area companies: Uber, the ride-sharing innovator.*

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### **It's rare to hear cab drivers "singing to their tractors"**

If you're a parent of teenagers who warns relentlessly of drinking and driving, you probably learned of San Francisco-based Uber from your kids who consider it their designated driver. Other customers fueling its rapid growth globally and nationally include Smartphone addicts, citizens of social media and millions of people tired of taxi service. These millions of users are driving the disruption of older cab services.

But what drives the drivers in this unconventional industry that includes Lyft, Sidecar and others? A closer look at the "pros" and "cons" on a range of employee reviews of these firms reveals a consistent one-word pro: *flexibility*. Yes, flexibility as in "total control of my schedule", "fantastic work-life balance" and "the ability to turn work on and off as I choose."

Scan enough of these reviews (there are hundreds and hundreds on job sites and elsewhere) and you are struck by the sheer number and the implied or explicit *flex*clamation point on most of them. Those who studied the history of Stalin's Soviet Union might recall the ubiquitous posters of happy peasants singing to their tractors. Perhaps we will soon see posters of Uber drivers singing to their apps. There are of course a range of cons, from contractor status to net pay to wear-and-tear on cars to bad ratings from drunk passengers. The cons are lengthy and all over the map. But the power of the perceived flexibility seems to offset them.

## What Uber's model suggests about the draw of flexibility

For several decades company leaders, work-life advocates and researchers have debated how much employees value flexibility. Company and public surveys have sought to understand which practices tended to recruit and retain the best and brightest: compensation, benefits, flexible work and others. Further, there is an ongoing attempt to discern which forms of flexibility are most desirable. Flex has become a highly rated draw, but in our experience the singing has not broken out.

Uber flex may simply be a different kind of flex. We have on occasion referred to Flexible Work Arrangements as "neo-rigidity." Another way to describe these practices is flexibility with an asterisk. In a range of focus groups with people on FWAs, they will give a positive review ending with a strong "But..." "I love working from home, but I can only do it one day a week." "I like working from home, but I would love to do a compressed workweek." "I really appreciate the part-time option, but I pay a career price."

Buts are rare among Uber drivers. Driving is what they do - their work, their task. The app controls how they do it: sign on and they're working, sign off and they're not. They design, control, modify and rethink their schedule as they wish. Want a compressed schedule? Do four 10-hour days on any days you wish. Do your own part-time schedule. No work from home, but be home as much as you wish. Equally important, you can customize a work day around doctor's appointments, school or earning.

## What ride-sharing services might teach us about flexibility in other companies

If more flexible flexibility is part of what is drawing hundreds and hundreds of thousands of college-educated people to drive strangers around in their own late-model cars, then it might be worth thinking about how to integrate the app-based on/off switch into domains beyond driving. Let's start with a phrase that has been used thousands of times in articles, journals, PowerPoints, etc. over the years: "We have moved from the industrial to the information/digital age."

That move has been neither surgical nor completed. Our flexibility still contains a good chunk of the industrial, assembly line thinking. We see work as a continuous process that starts around 9 and goes to 5 - or stretches from 8-7, or...It's still the continuous, the linear day with clear beginning and end, that matters. An Uber driver can blow up that assumption. App on = at work; App off = elsewhere. The endless stream of passengers, traffic, of work continues.

Could this relationship be true of legions of office workers? We are not suggesting here that current employees become contractors; indeed, Uber et al. are currently being sued to reclassify their drivers as employees. The intriguing question is: can many current employees in finance, marketing, the media, etc. imagine our work to be a constant stream into which we dip in and out, performing tasks on-site and off-site based on the logic of the work and other requirements in our lives?

Perhaps one day greater self-scheduling will be the norm. If so, we may have Uber and its innovative ideas to thank for the ride.

*[Before closing, we would be remiss not to mention the many issues swirling around Uber in particular which have cast a bit of a cloud over this ride-sharer in particular. We are not unaware, and share criticism of the concerns about sexual assault, inadequate liability insurance, breaches of privacy and deceptive marketing that have surfaced. They need to be addressed. None of them, though, is an outgrowth of the model we described above.]*

**We welcome your comments on this Bulletin. When you write, please email me at: [paulrupertdc@cs.com](mailto:paulrupertdc@cs.com)**

Collaboration@WorkMultiplying Value through Where, When & How We Work

**C@W is a San Francisco-based nonprofit research and advocacy organization committed to the identification, enhancement and promotion of flexible and collaborative ways of working. It seeks to learn from innovative forms of flexibility, assess their effectiveness and develop superior forms of training. It will support and evaluate San Francisco's new Right to Request flexibility law. Our website is at:**

**[www.CollaborationAtWork.org](http://www.CollaborationAtWork.org)**

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