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Guides to a changing workplace

FlexBulletin #32: Pioneering and Defining Flexibility

April 14, 2010

[As we slowly emerge from the recent recession, renewed interest in flexibility seems to be growing apace with the healing economy. But the rate of adoption of new ways of working is surely slowed by the persistently high unemployment rate, a level that is projected to continue through year-end. It is not immediately apparent how flexibility could help address that problem; and yet, properly conceived, it could. The fact that flexibility has come to be seen in increasingly narrow ways, and only loosely connected to larger social issues like unemployment, gives rise to this Bulletin.]

Recalling a fable: "Blind Men and an Elephant" More and more these days I find myself thinking of flexibility as the proverbial elephant. Not the giant, powerful beast streaking through the jungle version, but the mysterious object touched by a group of people who can't see it, perceiving it to be a collection of diverse body parts rather than an elegant and impressive mammal. I was first introduced to this notion in a children's fable of my youth called *Blind Men and an Elephant*. (I have attached the original fable at the end of this Bulletin in case you have not seen it.) It seems these days that distinct forms of flexibility - the trunk, the leg, the tail - are being trumpeted as if each were the whole elephant.

A few examples of this trend are seeing flexibility:

- > as primarily a work-family accommodation featuring options such as part-time and flextime
- > as exclusively a space-saving strategy that utilizes telecommuting and remote work
- > or occasionally as an environment allowing people to just work where and when they want

The pioneers' vision was more sweeping: they saw the whole elephant Of course "flexibility" is all these things - and much more. But flexible schedules, offsite work and more self-directed workplaces are widespread enough these days that it is hard to remember that there was a time when these practices barely existed. And when pioneering thinkers could envision a powerful set of tools in a grand design. In the early 1970s, two visionary and dogged researchers and advocates named Barney Olmsted and Suzanne Smith recognized that the nature of work had to change to better accommodate a variety of personal and family changes that were beginning to sweep the nation.

From the influential think tank New Ways to Work (NWW), based first in Palo Alto and then in San Francisco, they wrote, spoke and taught the principles of the flexible workplace for three decades. Their laser-like intensity - couched in a gentle and persuasive tone - shone through their *Creating a Flexible Workplace* books and an endless stream of writings that promoted an ambitious role for flexibility to policymakers, corporate leaders and what became an army of change agents. I joined them for five years directing a national flexibility advocacy project, and learned from them every day.

The principles of New Ways to Work seemed strong, clear and integrated and they still provide guidance. Among them were:

- > Redesigning schedules can lower unemployment and strengthen family life
- > Options like work sharing (cutting % of hours, not people) can cushion recession
- > Diversity determines how people work best, and there should be many, many options

A menu of options flowed from these principles, from nascent practice inside companies and from some European experience. This menu, formed in the 1980s, has largely shaped the practice of today's corporate flexibility offerings. But as practices have been mainstreamed, the strongest options have become flextime, part-time and telecommuting. These options have been among the easiest to implement. The more "visionary" options are seen far less often. It is rare to see the whole elephant, and even some parts, such as:

> **Phased & Partial Retirement** - using forms of part-time as a way to spread and lengthen employment for a large demographic [*this option disappeared and is just now returning*]

> **Job Sharing** - a tool to upgrade part-time opportunities to enable substantial access to full-time positions that are not viable for part-time schedules [*Note: Despite NWW's decades of advocacy for this option, and superb outcomes in many places, this option remains very rare.*]

> **V-time** - a program to institutionalize short-term (6 months to 1 year) part-time opportunities where ongoing part-time cannot work [*a creative option that has essentially disappeared*]

> **Work Sharing** - spreading small percentage schedule reductions over the whole workforce rather than cutting staff in a downturn. [*Used by some companies and supported in a limited fashion by state and federal unemployment and other policies.*] (Note: As the recession gained ground in late 2008 and 2009 we raised the possibility of using work sharing to preserve employment. Our colleagues Kathie Lingle, Cali Yost and my former colleagues at WFD also advocated this course with some response. There remains massive work to be done before the next downturn.)

In these challenging times, I believe that we are better served by the broader forms of flexibility first envisioned by Barney and Suzanne some decades ago. They require bold and insightful action, a willingness to tackle the thinking and policy barriers that block the four options above and a comprehensive vision for the future of work in America. Settling for the simpler options or seeming change divorced from broader gains, may deliver a leg or a tail - but it won't get us the kind of powerful elephant that our workplaces, our economy and our society need.

Best regards,
Paul Rupert
President
Rupert & Company
Chevy Chase, MD
301-873-8489
Paul@RupertAndCompany.com

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Blind Men and an Elephant

By American poet John Godfrey Saxe (1816-1887), based on a fable, which was told in India many years ago.

It was six men of Indostan
To learning much inclined,
Who went to see the Elephant
(Though all of them were blind),
That each by observation
Might satisfy his mind.

The First approached the Elephant,
And happening to fall
Against his broad and sturdy side,
At once began to bawl:
"God bless me! but the Elephant
Is very like a wall!"

The Second, feeling of the tusk,
Cried, "Ho! what have we here
So very round and smooth and sharp?
To me 'tis mighty clear
This wonder of an Elephant
Is very like a spear!"

The Third approached the animal,
And happening to take
The squirming trunk within his hands,
Thus boldly up and spake:
"I see," quoth he, "the Elephant
Is very like a snake!"

The Fourth reached out an eager hand,
And felt about the knee.
"What most this wondrous beast is like
Is mighty plain," quoth he;
"Tis clear enough the Elephant
Is very like a tree!"

The Fifth, who chanced to touch the ear,
Said: "E'en the blindest man
Can tell what this resembles most;
Deny the fact who can
This marvel of an Elephant
Is very like a fan!"

The Sixth no sooner had begun
About the beast to grope,
Than, seizing on the swinging tail
That fell within his scope,
"I see," quoth he, "the Elephant
Is very like a rope!"

And so these men of Indostan
Disputed loud and long,
Each in his own opinion
Exceeding stiff and strong,
Though each was partly in the right,
And all were in the wrong!

Moral:

So oft in theologic wars,
The disputants, I ween,
Rail on in utter ignorance
Of what each other mean,
And prate about an Elephant
Not one of them has seen!