Review Article

Is There a Role for Employers to Play in Flexible Working?

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Abstract

This short paper examines the extent to which a range of organizational structure and cultural factors influence employees' engagement in Flexible-Working Arrangements (FWAs). Drawing upon a two-year panel data in Britain, the analysis reveals that, in relation to organizational structural support, enriched job design and teamwork have a negative impact on employees' engagement in flextime and job share. With regard to organizational culture factors, while perceived supervisor's support enhances employees' use of various FWAs, work-life balance policy has a positive impact on work-at-home and flextime. Overall, the findings suggest that, while management initiatives targeting a supportive culture likely enhances employees' engaging in flexibility, new measures are in need to innovate current organizational structure variables and adapt individual's preference for flexibility
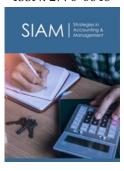
Introduction

A recent research conducted in Britain by the Chartered Institute of Personnel Development (CIPD) reveals that the benefits of new ways of working, mainly work-at-home, during Covid-19 pandemic significantly outweighs the many challenges induced [1]. A large majority of employers are considering continuing or expanding the use of work-at-home even after the pandemic is over. Although other forms of Flexible Working Arrangements (FWAs) such as flextime, job-sharing, compressed hours, reduced time working are less likely to be put into their current agenda, employers at least have learnt that home working can be as productive as traditional onsite office working if appropriate organizational support and managing initiatives are in place. This mirrors an important emerging shift among studies researching the practice of flexibility from viewing flexible working as a Human Resource Management (HRM) practice primarily targeting disadvantaged groups with such needs in workplaces Hughes & Bozionelos to implementing such as an inclusion strategy extending to the wider workforce [2]. This shift commands flexibility to be mainstreamed into contemporary organizational management systems Wu [3], instead of using it as an ad hoc approach under institutional pressure [4]. One way to facilitate such a transition, as Kossek [2] proposed, is that flexibility must be channelled into an organizational change agenda through reshaping organizational structure and organizational culture. This research refers it as Organizational Structure and Culture (OSC) framework hereinafter. The application of the OSC framework to evaluate the extent to which employers can advance the progress of employees engaging flexibility remains rare. This is partly due to that the flexibility agenda illustrated by the OSC framework violates the ideal worker norms that emphasize work devotion Blair-Loy [5] since a request for flexible schedule signals caregiving responsibilities impinge on his/her job [6,7]. Another possible reason is that a longitudinal research design with multiple respondents is rare. This research draws on a nationally representative panel data-British Workplace Employment Relations Survey (WERS) by linking the two most recent management surveys with employee surveys conducted in 2011 and 2004 respectively [8-10] and apply the OSC framework to examine the extent to which employers can facilitate employees' engagement in various FWAs through initiating changes in organizational structure and culture.

What organizational structure factors might influence employees' use of FWAs?

Organizational structure support for employees to apply for FWAs is examined from three aspects: an HRM system, teamwork and enriched job design [2]. First, an HRM

system comprising coherent HR practices is deemed important to facilitate the implementation of FWAs [2]. Practices such as training managers in new ways of performance management and in launching effective communication initiatives to better adapt to various flexible working patterns simply indicate a new managerial approach [4]. Modern HRM systems are expected to facilitate flexibility, one that likely imposes challenges on basic workplace management principles, structures and cultures [11]. Such systems address flexibility as a workforce's collective right, rather than a matter of individual choice [12].

Second, structuring a business organization around teamwork design, a firm is expected to better facilitate employees' use of FWAs. Benefiting from assembling a wider range of skills, knowledge and abilities, coupled with purposefully trained multi-skilled co-workers, teamwork can best assist workflow in the absence of an individual at work [13]. However, teamwork may also enable peer control and thus provide a form of control over workers within a team [14,15]. Wood [16] argue that teamwork puts more pressure on employees to be present and hence leads to little personal discretion. These contrasting views echo Gallie [17] mixed findings of the impact of teamwork on individuals' autonomy at work. The effect of teamwork on flexibility has yet to be established. Third, enriched job design enhances workplace flexibility through increased employees' autonomy by introducing variety into their work, discretion over how the work is done and control over the pace at which the work is carried out Wood [12]. By designing high-quality jobs that provide workers with opportunities to develop and obtain discretion and flexibility over how they execute and manage their primary tasks Arthur [18], enriched job design enhances worker responsibilities, authority and the capability to adapt to constant changes [19,20]. These changes include flexible working methods linked with a growing use of constant technological innovation ranging from work-at-home employment assisted by teleworking to flextime working.

What organizational culture factors might influence employees' use of FWAs

An organizational culture that embraces the value of Work-Life Balance (WLB) would "support and value the integration of employees' work and private lives" Thompson [21] and thus influences employees' perceptions about the acceptability or potential consequences associated with utilizing work-family benefits. Three frequently cited cultural aspects are discussed: WLB policies and practices, supervisor support and internal labour market [2,22]. WLB policies and practices are concerned with the general support individuals expect from their employers [23]. The introduction of these policies and practices showcases employers' intention to endorse the value of a supportive organizational culture to help meet employees' needs both at work and at home [22,24,25]. Empirical research findings support this view [26]. This is because employees perceive the provision of WLB policies and practices as signalling organizations' care and support for employees' well-being [27-29]. Perceived support would then enhance employees'

experience of greater control in both spheres and thus would be their justification of the potential benefits of engaging in FWAs.

Second, supervisor's support is deemed essential in assisting in the effective implementation of FWAs [2]. Perlow [30] and Thompson [21] argue that supervisors play a key role in effecting WLB policies and programmes in that they can either encourage employees to participate or discourage employees from participating in such programmes; they can also reinforce the cultural norms that undermine employees' efforts to integrate their work and family lives. The perception of a supportive organizational culture largely resides in how employees perceive their supervisors' attitude, values and stance towards WLB [23,31]. Kelly [26] report that employees are more likely to achieve a positive work-life interference if they perceive their supervisors understand their responsibilities outside work. It is therefore important for organizations to develop strategies to install positive work-family interference, as well as strategies to reduce negative interference [6,29]. The last organizational culture factor is internal promotion opportunities, whereby preference is given to internal candidates when there is a vacancy. An internal labour market signals employers' support for career advancement for current employees regardless of their prior engagement in FWAs. Any perceived career hindrance as a result of practicing FWAs may hinder employees from further engaging in FWAs [32,33]. Perlow [30] reports that employees are concerned about possible negative career consequences associated with using flexible-working/ family-friendly practices. Research indeed shows that employees who participated in FWAs are negatively affected in terms of their career progression [34,21,35].

Measures

Dependent variables

The dependent variables are measured in two ways. In line with the Flexible Working Regulation 2014 in Britain, five commonly used flexible working patterns are employed in this study: flextime, job sharing (sharing a full-time job with someone else), working at or from home during normal working hours, the chance to reduce working hours (for example, from full-time to part-time), and working in compressed hours (working the same number of hours per week across fewer days). Flexible working patterns are measured as dichotomous variables in WERS data, where 1 refers to "I have used this arrangement" and 0 if otherwise.

Independent variables

There are two categories of independent variables. One category reflects organizational structure support: the HRM system, teamwork and enriched job design. The organizational culture support category features three variables: WLB policies and practices, supervisor support, and internal labour market. These variables are constructed using questions from the management questionnaire and the construction is consistent with prior studies of the HRM system using the WERS data [36,16,37].

Controls

To account for any confounding effect, the analysis also controlled for a range of variables that may also explain the relationship under study. The controls entail the following: workplace characteristics (workplace size, industry sectors, family ownership, and single establishment) (see Byron), demographic factors (proportion of managers/professionals and of female employees) (Byron), contextual/institutional factors (equal opportunities, union recognition, HR specialists, employers' attitude to WLB and IiP recognition) Goodstein [38] & Milner [12], financial performance and extra working hours Dex [39] and recession [40,41].

Analysis procedure

First difference modelling (which is the fixed effect estimation for two-wave panel data), known as a valuable method with substantial advantages for obtaining causal effects compared to other conventional two-wave panel models Liker [42], was adopted to account for time-constant unobserved variables that can influence how FWAs were adopted, thereby overcoming endogeneity issues associated with panel data analysis [43-45].

Findings

This study set out to investigate whether a range of Organizational Structure and Culture Factors (OSC) affect employees' engagement in FWAs. With regard to organizational structure factors, the findings are mixed. While employees are likely to use flexi-time arrangement (b=0.033, p-value <0.01) when an HRM system is in place, other workplaces introduce enriched job design witness a negative effect on employees' use of flextime (b=-0.052, p-value <0.05) and job share (b=-0.042, p-value <0.05). The introduction of teamwork also discourages employees' engagement with compressed hours. Turning to the organizational culture factors, supervisor's support has a significant and positive impact on all five FWAs (all with a p-value<0.001). Work-life balance policy also displays a positive impact on the choice of work-at-home (b=0.120, p-value <0.001) and flextime (b=0.135, p-value <0.01). Overall, the research findings would appear to suggest that future management initiatives can target organizational change related to specific aspects of organizational culture to support and promote employees' engaging in FWAs. However, the negative effect of teamwork and enriched job design on various FWAs would seem to suggest that employers need to explore new measures to innovate their current organizational structure so as to accommodate the ever fast changing needs for different work patterns and fulfil personal preferences over where and when to work [1,3]. Given supervisor's understanding and support to employees' responsibility outside their work plays an essential role in influencing individual employee's choice of work pattern, a revisit of the function of line managers at various management levels particularly with respect to their involvement in job design, teamwork, and career progression should be set up in the research agenda to study their role in adapting current organizational structure to employees' needs for flexibility [46].

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