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Clare Kelliher^a; Deirdre Anderson^a

^a Cranfield School of Management, Cranfield University, Bedfordshire, UK

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For better or for worse? An analysis of how flexible working practices influence employees' perceptions of job quality

Clare Kelliher* and Deirdre Anderson

Cranfield School of Management, Cranfield University, Bedfordshire, UK

This article is concerned with examining the relationship between flexible working practices and employee perceptions of job quality. In recent years a growing number of employers in the UK has introduced flexible working options for employees in response to increasing concerns over work–life balance and the desire to be seen as an ‘employer of choice’. At the same time there has been considerable policy debate among European Union (EU) members over job quality and the need to create not only more but better jobs. It might be expected that since flexible working affords a degree of choice to employees, it would impact positively on their perceptions of job quality. However, to date few studies have explicitly examined how flexible working can contribute to job quality. Where studies have examined outcomes relevant to aspects of job quality, the evidence is somewhat inconclusive. The research reported in this article was designed to explore how experiences of flexible working have influenced employees’ perceptions of a range of job quality dimensions. The findings show a generally strong, positive relationship between flexible working and perceptions of job quality, but also that there are perceived costs to job quality, particularly in relation to longer term opportunities for development and progression, suggesting that the relationship is more complex.

Keywords: flexible working; job quality; job satisfaction; autonomy; advancement

Introduction

This paper is concerned with examining the impact of flexible working practices on employee perceptions of job quality. In recent years many employers in the UK have introduced a range of flexible working options for employees. The Workplace Employment Relations Surveys 2004 (WERS) found a significant proportion of employers (more than 70%) offered some form of flexible working arrangements to employees and that this had increased markedly since the WERS 1998 survey (Kersley et al. 2005). This trend has been fuelled by growing concern over work–life balance (Bailyn, Rayman, Bengtson, Carre and Tierney 2001), the desire to be seen as an ‘employer of choice’ (Rau and Hyland 2002) and in the case of the UK, legislative support for parents of young, or disabled children to be able to work more flexibly. At the same time there has also been growing concern at European Union (EU) level about quality of jobs. The generation of not only more, but better quality jobs has been identified as a major objective of the EU’s employment strategy, as defined at the Lisbon summit in 2000. High quality jobs are seen as crucial to social inclusion and to strengthening a competitive economy and as such have been identified by the EU as a key future priority (European Commission 2001). It could be argued that the introduction of flexible working practices is likely to contribute to job

*Corresponding author. Email: clare.kelliher@cranfield.ac.uk

quality, since they offer employees some degree of choice over where and when they do their work, normally designed to assist them achieve a better work–life balance. This article explores the relationship between flexible working practices and job quality in the UK in more depth.

Traditionally, flexibility has been seen as a characteristic of poor quality jobs (see, for example, De Witte 1999; Nolan, Wichert and Birchell 2000; Purcell, Hogarth and Simm 1999), where employers have sought to achieve organizational flexibility by means of using ‘non-standard’ working practices, such as part-time work and temporary employment. Central to this view is the assumption that employees would prefer permanent and/or full-time jobs were they available. Much of this evidence, however, relates to so called flexibility *of* rather than flexibility *for* employees (Alis, Karsten and Leopold 2006). Flexibility *for*, or employee-friendly flexibility, alternatively provides employees with choice over the way in which they do their jobs. Hence, such flexible working practices would be expected to impact positively on an employee’s perception of their job. However, few studies have explicitly examined the link between the two. The more general evidence on the outcomes of flexible working for employees is mixed, suggesting that while there are positive outcomes, there are also some costs for employees (Cohen and Single 2001; Cooper and Kurland 2002; Lee, MacDermid, Williams, Buck and Leiba-O’Sullivan 2002; Romaine 2002). Therefore, in practice, the relationship may not be so straightforward. The costs for employees associated with working flexibly may ameliorate the impact of choice and the opportunity to achieve a more satisfactory work–life balance.

Background

Job quality has been central to the EU’s employment strategy in recent years and consequently has received much attention in policy and academic debates (see, for example, European Commission 2001, 2002; Rubery and Grimshaw 2001; Clark 2005; Handel 2005). However, despite this, a consensus on what constitutes job quality has not fully emerged. The European Commission (2001) has identified ten dimensions of job quality, including both objective and subjective elements. These cover: intrinsic job quality; skills, life-long learning and career development; gender equality; health and safety at work; inclusion and access to the labour market; work organization and work–life balance; flexibility and security; social dialogue and worker involvement; diversity and non-discrimination; and overall work performance. In the academic literature authors have tended to deal with the concept of job quality in slightly different ways. Rubery and Grimshaw (2001) have grouped different facets of job quality into three broad dimensions: those of employment relations and protection; time and work autonomy; and skills and careers. Clark (2005) notes that the analysis of job quality has typically focused on objective aspects such as financial rewards, hours of work and job security. However, he argues that the subjective experience of workers is also important, and that other aspects such as job content, autonomy and relations at work should also be included. Handel (2005) also argues for subjective measures to be taken into account and examined workers’ perceptions of job quality along four dimensions; material rewards, intrinsic rewards (interest, autonomy), other working conditions (stress, workload, danger) and the quality of workplace interpersonal relations.

Flexible working has tended to be used as an umbrella-term to encompass a wide variety of activities, including, for example, practices such as remote working (from home, other company premises, etc.), reduced hours, different hours (either agreed, non-standard hours, or discretion over working hours on a day-by-day basis) and compressed working time where employees work their contractual hours over a fewer number of days than

is normal (e.g. a 9 day fortnight). While these practices represent different ways of working, the essential common theme here is the choice offered to employees regarding the way in which they work. A number of other terms has also been used to describe these different working patterns. Frank and Lowe (2003), for example, use the term 'alternative work arrangements' to describe working patterns which offer temporal or spatial flexibility, including full-time hours worked at times to suit the individual, compressed work weeks, and part-time and seasonal work. Fallon (1997) describes similar work patterns as 'alternative work schedules' and the phrase 'distributed work arrangements' has been used to describe working in alternative locations (Belanger and Collins 1998). Notwithstanding these issues of terminology, a number of researchers has attempted to examine the outcomes of various flexible working practices on employees. Although little explicit attention has been given to the relationship with job quality *per se*, studies have examined outcomes relevant to some aspects of job quality, namely job satisfaction, stress and opportunities for learning and progression. These will be examined in turn.

At a general level it might be anticipated that access to flexible working arrangements will have a positive impact on job satisfaction. Greater autonomy and control over the completion of work have been found to have a positive effect on job satisfaction (Igbaria and Guimaraes 1999; Hyman and Summers 2004). In a meta-analysis carried out by Baltes, Briggs, Huff, Wright and Neuman (1999), flexi-time and compressed working were found overall to have a positive effect on job satisfaction. However, findings on the impact of remote working on job satisfaction have been more varied. The lack of social interaction has been found in some studies to lead to feelings of isolation and to impact negatively on job satisfaction (Igbaria and Guimaraes 1999), whereas, in others, job satisfaction has been found to be higher for remote workers (Baruch 2000).

If flexible working offers choices to employees which help them achieve a more satisfactory work-life balance, one might expect it to have the effect of reducing stress levels. However, it may also be the case that flexible working creates feelings of stress and anxiety itself. For example, if an individual nominally works reduced hours, but ends up with the same workload as a full-timer, coping with this may be a cause of stress. While stress in the workplace has been extensively studied, there is relatively little empirical research which specifically links stress and flexible working. Some work suggests that job stress is lower among those who spend more time working remotely (Raghuram and Wiesenfeld 2004), but others report that remote workers show more signs of mental ill health than office based workers (Mann and Holdsworth 2003). Tietze and Musson (2005) found evidence of some remote workers experiencing stress associated with the self-organization required of such work, especially where being at home created new demands on them. Linked in part to stress, Baltes et al.'s (1999) meta-analysis showed that flexi-time had a positive effect on absenteeism, whereas compressed working time had no effect.

In relation to opportunities for learning and progression, the evidence is less positive for flexible workers. Cooper and Kurland (2002) found that remote workers had concerns over the lack of development opportunities offered to them, including informal learning and mentoring from colleagues. In terms of progression, Frank and Lowe (2003) found that flexible workers were perceived to have lower long-term career potential, although in contrast, McCloskey and Igbaria (2003) found no direct or indirect effect on career prospects. A number of studies has identified the costs to career progression specifically for part-time workers (Need, Steijn and Guisthuizen 2005; Sigala 2005). Cohen and Single (2001) found that working reduced hours for professional staff meant that they were less able to spend time on skill development and bringing in new business – factors deemed important for career success. Similarly, Edwards and Robinson (2004) found that nurses

who worked reduced hours had reduced responsibility and fewer opportunities to learn new skills. In an earlier study, Edwards and Robinson (1999) also found evidence of part-time police officers being under-utilized and at risk of skill erosion.

Thus, in spite of an accumulating body of research, the evidence on employees' experiences of flexible working and how it impacts on various aspects of their conception of their jobs is inconclusive and somewhat ambiguous (Igbaria and Guimaraes 1999). This may, at least in part, be due to the problems of definition in this field referred to earlier (Baruch 2001). While flexible working practices all involve some degree of choice, it seems likely that the way in which they might impact on the subjective aspects of job quality would differ. Furthermore, McCloskey and Igbaria (1998) note the rather mixed samples which have been used in some studies (some have included part- and full-time employees, clerical and professional workers together and sometimes self-employed workers have been included) and suggest that this places limitations on any conclusions which can be drawn and the extent to which the findings can be generalized.

Faced with this lack of clarity from existing evidence and few attempts to draw together the findings relating to different aspects of job quality, this study attempts to shed some further light on the relationship between flexible working practices and employee perceptions of job quality. Our concern here is to focus on a range of outcomes of flexible working closely related to dimensions of job quality. First, and most obviously, autonomy is central to the notion of flexibility and has been identified by several authors as an aspect of job quality (Rubery and Grimshaw 2001; Clark 2005). Autonomy includes the ability to control one's own time and location in a way that meets individual needs and is closely aligned to the ability to achieve a satisfactory work-balance. Second, flexible working practices have been shown, albeit with mixed results, to have an impact on other dimensions of job quality such as job satisfaction, levels of stress and opportunities for learning and advancement. Additionally, this article will examine the impact of flexible working on aspects such as workload and intensity.

Since this study was concerned with subjective aspects of job quality, it was important to capture the experiences and perceptions of flexible workers themselves. Significantly, this study also included, in addition to those who have formalized arrangements for flexible working, employees who worked flexibly on an informal basis. This was seen to be important since, as Healy (2004) observes, much flexibility is informal. However, by the very nature of their arrangements, those who work flexibly on an informal basis may be difficult to identify and have not been specifically included in many other studies.

Methods

The research reported here forms part of a wider study designed to examine the implementation of flexible working practices across a number of organizations. A case study approach was chosen in order to allow observations to be evaluated in context (Robson 1995). The research is based on an in-depth case study of one organization, which had offered a range of flexible working practices to employees for several years. This meant that employees' perceptions, based on their practical experiences of flexible working over time, could be examined. Data were collected by two main methods: a series of semi-structured interviews and a staff survey. Some internal company records and documentation were also accessed.

Nineteen semi-structured interviews were conducted with a cross-section of flexible workers. Interviews were carried out in the workplace during working time. The interview questions were designed to gain an insight into individual experiences of working flexibly

and how it affected their perceptions of a number of aspects of their jobs. Interviews were audio recorded with the permission of participants and subsequently transcribed. The data were analysed using thematic content analysis and categorization techniques using the nVivo software package.

The questionnaire was web-based and a hypertext link was sent via email to all UK based staff. The questionnaire asked, first, a range of questions about their working arrangements and biographical details. Second, it examined a range of attitudes or feelings towards the organization which have been linked to discretionary behaviour (Purcell, Kinnie, Hutchinson, Rayton and Swart 2003). Existing measures of job satisfaction (Schneider, Hanges, Brent Smith and Salvaggio 2003), career preference and career self-management (King 2003), stress (Rose 2005) and organizational commitment (Cook and Wall 1980) were used. Finally, flexible workers were asked specifically about the effect of their working pattern on their work-life balance, stress levels, participation in teamwork, and the quantity and quality of their work.

Findings

This organization is a software company which, at the time of the research, employed over 2000 staff in the UK. Flexible working options had been offered to employees for several years. The primary motivation for introducing a formal policy and request procedure for flexible working was to improve their competitive position in the labour market. There was also a view that as a software company they should be in the forefront of this type of working. In this organization flexible working was presented as something that was available to all employees. It was not positioned as being primarily a family-friendly policy aimed at parents with caring responsibilities. In addition to those with caring responsibilities, respondents in this study chose to work flexibly for a variety of other reasons, including reducing long commute times, to accommodate partners' working arrangements and, especially in the case of those working compressed time, as a stress antidote allowing them to perform household and personal business at quieter times.

Three hundred and sixty-five completed questionnaires were received, representing a response rate of 17.3%. 68% of respondents were male and 32% were female. The majority was married, or living with a partner (84%) and 47.2% had caring responsibilities for dependants. Just under 90% of the respondents identified themselves as flexible workers. Since only just over 10% of respondents did not work flexibly, we have not broken down the survey results by flexible and non-flexible workers; rather we report on the survey results for flexible workers ($n = 326$).

Remote working was by far the most common form of flexible working. In practice, remote working arrangements were largely informal (73.9%), at the discretion of the individual (93%) and irregular (68.2%), typically being one day or less per week (65.1%). Less than a third (30.7%) reported working remotely according to a regular pattern. Flexi-time was also common with two-thirds of respondents reporting that they exercised discretion over their start and finish times. However, only just over 25% worked staggered hours (agreed, non-standard working times). Reduced hours working was not common in this organization, with only 5% reporting that they worked part-time. The low incidence of reduced hours probably reflects the thinking behind the introduction of flexible working in this organization – which was partially driven by a desire to help employees manage long working hours, rather than to tackle long hours *per se*.

Interestingly, only 18% of flexible workers who responded to the survey indicated that they had a formal arrangement to allow them to work flexibly. The vast majority (82%)

described their flexible working arrangement as informal. This high degree of informality associated with flexible working in this organization may, at least partially, be related to the low incidence of reduced hours or part-time working, since this is the only form of flexible working which clearly requires a new contractual arrangement. However, as indicated above, this informality was reflected in the control over time and place of work exercised by remote workers and those who worked flexi-time. The inclusion of those without formal arrangements is significant and is a distinguishing feature of this study.

The survey responses painted a picture of long working hours and long commute times. Work times above contractual hours were common with 80% indicating that they regularly worked more than five hours over their contractual hours each week. Commute times were also significant: 30% of workers indicated that they had a commute time of between thirty minutes and one hour, with another 30% having commute times of between one to two hours daily. The majority (85%) of flexible workers indicated that they were married or living with a partner, however only 50% indicated that they had caring responsibilities for dependants. This result shows that in this organization at least half of all flexible workers had chosen to work like this for reasons other than caring responsibilities. (It is of course possible that those with caring responsibilities had chosen to work flexibly for other reasons too.)

Control and autonomy

At a general level we found that participants had responded positively to being able to work flexibly and to the increased control it gave to them over their lives. One respondent who worked remotely on two days a week commented, 'just that flexibility to be able to manage your life. I think it's a huge benefit'. The ability to control and manage their own work gave employees a general sense of empowerment:

[Flexible working] probably gives people a sense that the company is looking after them and hence hopefully a sense of a better well-being. A sense that they feel they do have a certain degree of empowerment about where they work and when they work, within business restrictions of course. (Remote worker)

More specifically employees highly valued the opportunity to organize their day as they chose. One remote worker explained:

I think the flexibility is not so much home versus work in terms of location. I think it's the ability to, if you like, push stuff around and reorganize dynamically, because if you feel that you're in control of the eight hours of that day and you can choose where and how you are going to use that time, then you just get a great feeling of really feeling in charge of your life, as opposed to having your life run by someone else and I think that's vitally important.

Taking this flexibility further, some respondents talked about managing their entire day in a different way when they worked flexibly, sometimes taking time out of the normal working day to go, for example, to the gym or the supermarket and then resume work later in the evening. Being able to work flexibly, particularly remotely, meant that many respondents felt they had more autonomy in the way in which they carried out their work. Being able to have time to think and reflect was seen to be important. One remote worker commented:

It's that thinking time. I think that when you're sitting at your desk and you're just kind of sitting there for maybe ten, 15 minutes and you're very conscious that your manager's sitting right next to you watching you, ... because you don't want to be appearing like you're not doing your work, but when you've got that time at home just to kind of sit and think and ... look at everything that's going on, you can reflect a little bit.

In a more general sense, employees responded positively to being treated in a more 'adult' way by their employer, who allowed them to exercise some choice over when and where they conducted their work and judged them on their achievements and outputs, rather than the time spent in the workplace. As one respondent who worked a compressed fortnight remarked:

I think with (company name), they treat you as adults and trust you, because you have work to do and it's your responsibility to get it done ... and if it suits you better to work later, or to do it in different hours, or ... to just come in late, but work late or do something then they know that as long as you deliver on your work, it doesn't really matter.

One person, working a reduced-hours contract, also expressed appreciation of the general attitude towards flexibility:

I would hate to do a nine to five job and to be faced forever with the knowledge that as soon as you come in 20 minutes late someone's going to stick their head up and go 'Why are you late?'

Job satisfaction

In relation to job satisfaction both the interview and the questionnaire data painted a positive picture. Overall, flexible workers in this organization reported high levels of job satisfaction. The questionnaire results showed that nearly 78% of flexible workers were satisfied or very satisfied with overall job satisfaction. Over 84% were satisfied or very satisfied with both job fulfilment and with their work group. In addition, approximately two-thirds of flexible workers were satisfied or very satisfied with empowerment, work facilitation and security.

From the interview data there was considerable evidence that employees found being able to work flexibly had impacted positively on their levels of job satisfaction. For some of those working reduced hours, this working pattern enabled them to continue with a job they enjoyed. One job sharer explained:

I have not had to lose status, I have not had to take drastic cuts in the level of work that I'm doing, it's still as challenging as it was before I went on maternity leave. I still get involved in, you know, fairly serious, high-level business discussions and decisions and I still find the work challenging and enjoying, so I still want to get out of bed in the morning and come to work.

Others reported that being able to work remotely enabled them to do their jobs more effectively, which contributed to their levels of satisfaction. One employee, who felt benefit from remote working remarked:

I think when I work from home, I really get the chance to kind of take a step back and really look at my clients and look at the campaigns that are running, and just maybe take 10 or 15 minutes to kind of sit there and think. ... I have actually managed to focus a little bit more on the actual campaigns and say 'Why is that campaign not working? What is happening?'

While not directly related to job quality *per se*, our findings show positive results in relation to organizational commitment. Employees valued highly the opportunity to work flexibly and many reported that being able to work in such a way engendered positive feelings towards the company and considerations about future employment.

Stress

The evidence on how flexible working impacted on stress levels was more mixed. In the main respondents viewed flexible working as a means of reducing stress. The survey results showed that 59% of flexible workers indicated that working flexibly had had a positive effect on the level of stress they experienced at work. However 9% indicated that

it had a negative effect on the stress levels experienced, with the remaining 32% reporting no effect. In the interviews some explanation of how flexible working influenced stress levels was provided. A number of remote workers indicated that just being away from the day-to-day demands of the office reduced stress, while others reported that not having to commute relieved stress. For example:

I think it's a bit of a pressure valve isn't it? Just if you take yourself out of the office environment, for me personally it just kind of allows me to remove myself from all of those different people, different stimuli and different demands and so on. So it's just, it clears my head a bit I think.

Some interviewees described informal compressed working arrangements whereby extra time worked over a period of a month resulted in a day off in lieu. They highlighted the benefits of additional 'personal time' outside of weekends, or the chance to take a break after a particularly busy period in the office:

Mostly if I take a compressed day it's just to give me my own time. ... So it's just like, have a late start in the day, just put my feet up and watch TV, so it's just my own time, or maybe co-ordinate it with a delivery or whatever at home type thing.

However, some respondents also indicated that flexible working could itself be a source of stress. One manager suggested that the actual experience of working reduced hours could be stressful for employees:

I would hazard a guess that most part-timers walk away with the emotional flexibility, a feeling that I don't have to be online or in the office on this day, but I don't think they ever escape the psychological commitment of having a five day-a-week job.

Furthermore the view was expressed that for remote workers to move some types of work away from the office into the home environment was undesirable and a source of stress:

I don't want to associate my back room with the stresses of work. ... I negotiate in my job so having to have a row with somebody in your home – the first time I did it was, I hung up and then I thought I don't want to have people talking to me like that in my own house.

Work–life balance

Given the choices they had made, it is perhaps not surprising that the vast majority of flexible workers indicated that being able to achieve a satisfactory work–life balance was important to them. The majority (95%) of flexible workers indicated that having a sense of balance between work commitments and home life was important. In most cases (80.5%), flexible working had had a positive impact on their work–life balance. Many interviewees described their work–life balance in positive terms. For example: 'I've got a good, high level job. I've got the time to spend with my children' (job share). 'It's a complete harmony that I get. ... I just have complete flexibility and what flexibility brings for me is freedom' (remote worker).

Interviewees described the ways in which working flexibly allowed them to balance their work and life commitments. As one employee who worked flexitime explained:

The majority of times I would have dinner with my kids at home. I can construct my day in such a way that I can be home, have dinner with the kids; they go to bed, I carry on working.

In practice though, it was acknowledged by some respondents that the boundaries between work and non-work time could become blurred and that they found themselves logging on to their computers and checking emails late in the evening and at weekends. In response to questions about how flexible working had impacted on the quantity of work they did, many respondents reported that by being able to work remotely they were able to achieve more

as they were more focused and less distracted, effectively amounting to a quantitative intensification of work (French, Caplan and Van Harrison 1984). Those that had reduced their hours also talked about working more intensely during the time that they were at work:

I think I'm probably a bit more focused about work in the office than I was as a full-timer ... I probably take shorter lunch breaks, I probably don't eat lunch in the canteen as much as I used to.

Opportunities for advancement

Evidence regarding the impact of flexible working on individual careers and opportunities for future advancement was rather less positive. The interviews revealed that remote workers were conscious of the significance of visibility (to senior managers) when working towards a promotion. One remote worker remarked:

If you are on a kind of mission to sort of build your profile within the business and connect with all the right people, it would be difficult if you're out of the office for two days a week.

Almost by definition, flexible workers may be less visible in organizations than those who work according to a traditional pattern. In recognition of this, 64% of flexible workers reported that, at least to some extent, they push to be involved in high profile projects. However, not all interviewees shared this view. In contrast, a remote worker commented:

I don't know that it has any impact. I mean, I guess if I'm allowed to work from home and have a bit of quiet time, I'll feel like I can do better quality work and I work in a more planned and controlled way and I'm more in charge of my own destiny. It probably enables me to be more effective which, in itself, might lead to career progression.

For those working less than full-time hours, a less positive picture emerged. Job sharing allowed partners to divide a role in such a way that they could each use their strengths and make the most of opportunities to develop skills and experience. However, such roles were still perceived to be full-time, so a particular opportunity could effectively be closed to an individual if there was no suitably skilled partner available. A reduced-hours worker reported:

(The manager) said 'I'm very happy to have you as a part timer, but I need to work out what to do about the other half of the job' and until he could find somebody else who he was equally happy with to do the other half of the job, because it was effectively a job share, then it wasn't possible.

Among those who worked reduced hours there was also a view that they were disadvantaged in the performance review process and that this in turn would be likely to impact on opportunities for advancement:

It's harder to achieve the things that are seen as being of particular merit when it comes to the review process. It's much harder, I feel, to achieve a high review grade because, effectively, your impact is being measured against the impact of people who are working full-time and so it is far more likely that their impact will be greater. That said, it's a very nebulous thing.

Even though some flexible workers had progressed in their careers while working in this way, the demands of more senior roles were perceived to be inhibitors to advancement. For example:

I think there are business requirements and business needs that cannot move. I think that I would lose a level of flexibility moving onto (a more senior position), which I don't choose to want to do at the moment, but having said all of that, I received a promotion last year ... so I don't believe that it necessarily impacts your career in that sense.

The evidence that emerged regarding training opportunities and informal learning was also mixed. On a reduced-hours contract, the emphasis on performance and delivery of results could lead to a lack of training opportunities, as there was simply no time available for individuals to access them. On a more positive note, there was a sense that the rotation of staff's 'remote days' ensured that people still benefited from the informal learning that takes place through everyday conversations with colleagues. The sense of belonging to a team and the associated camaraderie did not seem to be lost:

We've got a good amount of people in the office to strike up a conversation, to get learning from and you know, interact better so there isn't a problem team wise because we're all covered and then we don't miss really important team meetings. You're not missing anything because we have to be in on those certain days so you're always getting information for everyone.

Discussion and conclusions

In this study we attempted to examine the outcomes of flexible working on a number of dimensions of job quality and as a result present a more holistic perspective on the relationship than those studies which have taken a narrower approach (Cohen and Single 2001; Cooper and Kurland 2002; Mann and Holdsworth 2003). The approach adopted was designed to gain an insight into the actual experiences of flexible workers, in order to understand how flexible working impacts on different aspects job quality. Furthermore, given the prevalence of informal flexible working (Healy 2004), the study did not confine itself to flexible workers who had a formalized arrangement. The intention was to allow a more conclusive picture to emerge, than the sometimes conflicting results of previous studies (Igaría and Guimares 1999; Baruch 2000; Mann and Holdsworth 2003; Raghuram and Wiesenfeld 2004).

In summary, our results show that flexible working practices had a strong, positive impact on employees' perceptions of job quality. However, there were some variations according to different dimensions of job quality. There was strong evidence that control and autonomy were enhanced by the opportunity to work flexibly. For remote workers, in particular, autonomy was very real in this case, with over 90% reporting that it was at their own discretion. Along similar lines, flexible working was reported to have a positive effect on work-life balance by more than 80% of flexible workers. Although our survey data did not allow us to compare the levels of job satisfaction of flexible workers with non-flexible workers, the interview data demonstrates that flexible working was seen to impact positively on job satisfaction. The results for stress and opportunities for learning and advancement were, however, rather more mixed. While the majority reported that flexible working reduced stress, just under a third reported no effect and 9% indicated that it had a negative effect. The interview data shows that the positive effects brought about by flexible working can be ameliorated by the pressures generated by certain types of flexible working, in particular reduced hours. The one dimension of job quality where flexible working was largely seen to have had a detrimental effect was opportunities for learning and advancement. Flexible workers, almost by definition, tend to have lower visibility in an organization and this, together with their perceived disadvantage in their performance review and development process, were seen as impediments.

In comparison to previous work, our results show a generally stronger, more positive relationship between flexible working and job quality. However, these results need to be seen in context and may raise some of the issues discussed earlier in relation to the problems of definition. In this case study flexibly working was characterized by a high

degree of informality. Our respondents reported exercising considerable personal discretion over their working patterns on an on-going basis. This ability to exercise choice may help explain the more positive picture presented here than shown in other studies. For example, being able to choose when and how frequently to work remotely represents a rather different set of circumstances from working remotely on a permanent basis, or according to a set arrangement. It is noteworthy that in our study the less positive associations tended to stem from those who worked reduced hours and who consequently had changed contractual arrangements, which limited the degree of discretion they could exercise, at least in relation to the number of hours worked. In this organization, employees who worked remotely were also well-supported in terms of the technology that they were provided with (laptop computers, internet access, mobile phones), which meant that the experience was in many ways not too dissimilar to being at the workplace. Furthermore, it may be the case that employees who work in an information technology environment may be more disposed towards technology-enabled working.

The findings reported here are based on a single case study and as a result the ability to generalize from them may be limited. This case study represents a situation where the most common form of flexible working was remote working and where employees were able to exercise considerable choice. It may be that studies of organizations, where different forms of flexible working are more prevalent, or where there is less discretion open to employees, would yield different results.

Our initial contention was that the element of choice offered to employees over where and when they worked would have a positive impact on their perceptions of the quality of their jobs. Taking the interview and survey results together, our findings generally support this contention. However, the positive association was not evident in all of the dimensions of job quality we examined. Flexible working was seen as both alleviating and generating stress and was generally seen to have a negative impact on opportunities for learning and advancement. This would suggest that the relationship between flexible working and job quality is a more complex one than originally contended and that certain outcomes of flexible working may mitigate the positive impact of an enhanced degree of choice. The results of this study, along with others (Edwards and Robinson 1999, 2004; Frank and Lowe 2003; Need et al. 2005), suggest that the costs to job quality are primarily associated with the longer term, in relation opportunities for individual development. As such, this represents a challenge for both policy makers concerned with promoting work-life balance and practitioners aiming to become 'employers of choice'.

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