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Work, Employment and Flexibility

Section 1: The Context of Work (The changing nature of work and the fourth industrial revolution)

Chapter 3: The Evolution of Flexible Working Patterns

Introduction

Flexibility in organisations has emerged as a dominant discourse in recent decades, spawning multiple forms of new working arrangements loosely grouped under the term flexible working. These include, for example, variations to where, when and in what amounts work is done, and the nature of the relationship between the organisation and the individual worker, increasingly where work takes place outside of formal employment. The emergence of some of these working arrangements raise challenges for traditional notions of the workplace, the working day, what a job involves and who is an employer and an employee. Many of these arrangements have become increasingly common over this time period and have stimulated interest from governments and from employers. They have also been the subject of considerable attention from academic researchers and a significant body of evidence on their use and implementation has been built.

This chapter is concerned with examining the various working arrangements which have commonly grouped together as forms of flexible working. It looks first at their emergence and the factors that have influenced their development and growth. The discussion then moves to explore the evidence in relation to the outcomes of these working arrangements for individual workers and will assess more generally the consequences of these developments. Importantly, the use of some of these arrangements, most notably remote working, have been shaped in a major way by experiences during the Covid-19 pandemic. This will be considered and the implications for future working patterns discussed.

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Background

The discussion of flexibility in organisations has been wide ranging and rooted in a number of different perspectives, but the drive to achieve greater flexibility has been an undoubted force in shaping the way in which work is done and the operation of labour markets in the last 40 years. These various perspectives on flexibility have included flexibility of labour markets (reflected in a trend towards deregulation across many countries (Eurofound, 2023)); organisational flexibility (particularly a desire to be more agile and responsive to changes in the external environment); and flexible working arrangements and relationships. Flexible working arrangements and relationships will be the primary focus of this chapter and will examine changes to the conduct of work (e.g. location, scheduling, amount, stability) and the nature of the relationship between the employing organisation and the worker. However, even within this grouping a diverse set of arrangements and relationships exist (Lott et al, 2022) and it is important to recognise that flexible working arrangements can be introduced for a range of different reasons. These may broadly include approaches designed to manage labour in more efficient ways (e.g. matching supply and demand more closely, or improving performance), to those designed to be a more attractive employer in the labour market, by allowing employees some degree of discretion over their working arrangements in order to help them achieve a more satisfactory relationship between their work and non-work lives. These different approaches have been referred to as flexibility *of* and *for* the employee (Alis et al, 2006) and are classed as being primarily driven by the interests of the employer or the employee and as such represent different frames of reference (for a fuller discussion see Bal & Izak, 2021). For some employers assisting employees achieve a better work-life balance may also be seen as a means to be a more responsible employer by, for example, supporting families and communities.

Before examining these developments in more detail, it is worth reflecting that the idea of work being an activity that is bounded by an agreed timeframe, typically a set number of hours, which takes place at prescribed times and at a specified location is a comparatively

recent phenomenon and reflective of economic transition to greater industrialisation resulting in work being carried out away from the home and at specified times. As such, what is considered as 'normal' working arrangements is therefore often shaped by the economic and social development of a country. For example, looking at working hours, within the European Union (EU) there is variation across countries in relation to the average number of hours in a collectively agreed working week and the number of days of paid annual leave entitlement. Those countries whose memberships predates the EU enlargement in 2004 have lower average weekly working hours and higher paid annual leave entitlements than the countries that joined after this time (Eurofound, 2023).

Conventions relating to the number of hours worked, the scheduling of these hours and the practice of work being done at a workplace have been pervasive and as a result 'flexible working' is seen as a deviation from the Standard Employment Relationship (SER) (Bosch, 2004), based on a conception of work being continuous, full-time employment, with a single employer, taking place at a designated workplace and at prescribed, fixed working times.

In this chapter we examine the emergence of these different ways of working, both those which are designed to meet the needs for flexibility of the employer and the employee. Particular focus will be given to arrangements including flexible working arrangement, (where there is discretion over when work takes place, where work takes place and the amount of work contracted for); the use of annual hours contracts, temporary work, and gig/platform working contracted, outside of an employment relationship. The chapter will examine the evidence in relation to these arrangements and assess the extent to which they provide advantages and disadvantages for the individual employee. Where it is of most relevance, the chapter will examine the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic in facilitating (or constraining) these alternative ways of working.

Evolution of Flexible Working Arrangements

Working arrangements normalised towards a model based on the SER over a long period of time and those which deviate from this have come to be labelled as 'flexible', even though in some cases there may be limited flexibility associated with them (e.g. part-time working, fixed-term or annual hours contracts). However, working arrangements which differ from the standard employment relationship have also emerged over a long period of time. In spite of the growing prominence of the flexibility debate and the proliferation of academic studies examining aspects of the implementation and outcomes of various flexible working arrangements and relationships since the turn of the 21st Century, it is important to be aware that the emergence and use of these arrangements has a history which predates this time. Academic studies examining changes to both working times and place of work began emerging from the 1970s onwards (see for example Dalton & Mesch, 1990; Dunham et al, 1987; Golembiewski et al, 1974; Kim & Campagna, 1981; Kraut,1989; Kurland & Bailey, 1999; Latack & Foster,1985; Orpen, 1981; Pierce & Newstrom, 1980; Schein et al, 1977; Shamir & Salomon, 1985; Trent et al,1994). These changes in working arrangements and the need for greater flexibility on the part of employees reflected social changes, particularly in the developed world at this time (for an overview see Kelliher & de Menezes, 2019). For example part-time employment became more prevalent in response to greater participation of women, particularly mothers, in employment and early innovations in teleworking were in some cases prompted by the problems associated with transport congestion in urban areas.

Notwithstanding the above, the 21st Century has seen more rapid expansion in working arrangements that differ from the SER in a greater range of countries across the globe. A number of factors can be identified as being influential in this shift, including developments in information and communications technology; changing workforce demographics; increasing global integration and competitive pressures (Kelliher & Richardson, 2019). The on-going role of technological developments has acted as an important catalyst for a range of different types of working. Knowledge workers whose work could be conducted via a computer and

with an internet link were no longer tied to a particular work location or working times but were enabled to work in different places and at different times. Whilst this was of particular influence in relation to the development of flexibility over working time and place of work (Messenger & Gerschwind, 2016) technological advancements also enabled the development of different types of working relationships, notably the gig and platform economies, whereby those requiring work to be carried out could be connected with those willing to undertake work by the use of an algorithm.

Greater global integration has been an important driver of changes to working patterns. For example, in order to accommodate real time communication and collaboration with others (co-workers, clients, suppliers etc) located in different time zones, a more flexible approach to the scheduling of work is required. Flexibility over working time may be needed where the working day or working week does not overlap, to participate, for example, in meetings with co-workers outside of normal working hours, and this in turn may lead to flexibility over place of work to facilitate out of hours working. More flexible approaches to the timing and location of work also offers the opportunity for employers to recruit staff drawn for a wider labour market, rather than being confined to those who are able to attend a workplace and/or work at regulated times.

Other competitive pressures which have been a significant driver of the growth in flexibility include the need to contain costs. This may turn attention to more efficient ways of managing labour. Flexible approaches can reduce costs, for example, where staff are employed on short-term, temporary contracts, since they are only employed at the times when the employer expects them to be fully occupied. Likewise contracting workers outside of a formal employment relationship, for example, as gig workers, or independent contractors offers the opportunity to reduce costs since organisations have fewer obligations to contractors without legal protection offered to employees. As a result savings can be made on related employment costs such as making pension or other social insurance payments required for employees. An alternative approach to increasing efficiency can be

through making flexible working available to employees in order to attract high calibre staff. High calibre staff who perform effectively may allow for costs to be reduced costs if they are more efficient in what they do and at the same time may offer the potential for the organisation to compete on quality as well. Offering flexible working has been seen as an increasingly important tool in attracting staff in the post Covid-19 pandemic labour market since greater numbers of staff in a wider range of jobs experienced working remotely during mandated working from home during the pandemic, with evidence suggesting that whilst not favoured by all employees, the opportunity to work remotely for some of their working time is highly valued by many employees and has become an important consideration when choosing a job for many employees. Therefore offering flexible working is likely to be important in the recruitment of staff, particularly for those with high levels of power in the labour market.

Changing demographics and attitudes to work have also contributed to growing demand for flexible working arrangements (Kelliher et al, 2019). Working parents may need flexibility over timing of work to balance child-care commitments with work, as do those with other caring and non-work commitments. Reference is often made to the value that younger workers place on work-life balance, rejecting the model of the so-called 'ideal worker' norm (Acker,1990) and as a result seek flexible working arrangements, however there is also evidence that other groups, such as older workers (Loretto & Vickerstaff, 2015) valuing being able to work in more flexible ways.

Changing attitudes and orientations towards work observed following the experience of the Covid-19 pandemic, have also stimulated interest in flexible working as a means to achieve a better work-life balance. In some countries there is evidence that individuals, particularly those over 50 years old, want to reduce their work commitments and in some cases withdraw from the labour market. This trend, combined with the labour shortages experienced as economies recovered after the pandemic, prompted employers and sometimes governments to consider approaches to retain these workers in employment and

to encourage those who had withdrawn from work to return. For example, the availability of part-time working opportunities may be attractive to those who want to remain in employment but with a reduced commitment, allowing them to pursue activities in their non-work lives. In addition to opportunities to reduce the number of hours they work, other forms of flexible working may be attractive to employees who wish to shift their focus towards their non-work life. For example, remote working may make work more attractive (by reducing the time and costs associated with commuting to work), and flexibility over when the working hours are scheduled, can also facilitate a better fit of work and non-work commitments.

Individual Focused Flexible Working

Many of the early trends in different working arrangements and relationships that have emerged were based on the influential model of the flexible firm developed by John Atkinson (Atkinson 1985). This proposed how organisations could achieve greater flexibility by deploying staff in different ways (numerical, spatial and functional flexibility) and developing different types of relationships with those carrying out work of varying centrality to the organisation's purpose.

Since the publication of this model these arrangements have been the focus of extensive research. Below, consideration is given to the evidence which examines the implications of these different arrangements for employees, with a particular focus on employee discretion over the scheduling, location and contracted hours of work; employer driven approaches that are sometimes termed precarious forms of work, such as short-term, temporary and zero hours contracts and freelance work contracted outside of employment; and arrangements that may combine elements of both such as annual hours contracts.

Allowing employees discretion over their working arrangements has been extensively researched, both in terms of the outcomes for employers and for employees (for an overview of research conducted the pre Covid-19 pandemic see Kelliher & de Menezes, 2019). Notwithstanding some of the challenges associated with assessing these findings as a body

of evidence due to differences in the definitions of the various types of flexible working arrangements and the measures used in studies (e.g. availability, perceived availability, use), (Kelliher & de Menezes, 2019; Lott et al, 2022), overall the evidence points to a number of positive outcomes for employees, who, rather than other workers, have been the subject of most studies. These include mainly positive associations with job satisfaction (for a meta-analysis see Kroll et al, 2017); employee well-being including stress, work-family conflict, work-life balance, physical and psychological health outcomes (for overviews see Allen et al 2013; Allen et al, 2015; Anderson et al, 2015; Bessa & Tomlinson, 2017; Kroll, et al 2017; Masuda et al, 2012); organisational commitment (Chen & Fulmer, 2018; de Menezes & Kelliher, 2017; Ross & Ali, 2017) and performance or related indicators (de Menezes & Kelliher, 2017; Kroll et al, 2017; Peretz et al, 2018). There is also evidence to show that the nature of the outcome is influenced by the nature of work, the types of flexible working arrangement and national context amongst other factors.

In many ways it is not surprising that arrangements designed to assist employees should deliver positive outcomes for them. However, perhaps more surprisingly there is also evidence of negative outcomes from employees. These include work intensification through working extended hours when working remotely (Kelliher & Anderson, 2010; Schöllbauer et al 2023); flexibility stigmas associated with perceptions about the commitment and performance of flexible workers (Leslie et al, 2012, Chung & van der Lippe, 2020) and career penalties associated with lower visibility in the workplace (Gascoigne & Kelliher, 2018; Golden & Eddleston, 2020; Richardson & Kelliher, 2015). Those who work in different locations or at different times may also experience feelings of social exclusion and may find it harder to keep staff in touch with their team, especially where flexible working is less common. Similarly employees who work at different times and locations may miss the opportunity for social interaction at work and may experience loneliness and isolation as was reported during the Covid-19 pandemic.

In addition to the above, researchers have identified what has been termed a flexibility or autonomy paradox (Cañibano, 2019; Cheung, 2022; Mazmanian et al, 2013). This is where employees respond to the freedom afforded to them through flexible working by working longer hours, beyond the normal demands of the job and representing what may be a form of self-exploitation (Cheung, 2022; Fleming, 2022). This occurrence has been explained in a number of ways including by reference to social exchange (Blau, 1964) and gift exchange (Akerlof, 1982) theories, where employees feel the need to respond to what has been made available to them with increased effort (de Menezes & Kelliher, 2017; Kelliher & Anderson, 2010).

Mandated working from home during the covid-19 pandemic undoubtedly influenced the way in which flexible working, particularly remote working, is viewed. From previously having been largely restricted to professional knowledge workers, it rapidly became much more widespread and used in a more diverse range of jobs. This meant that not only did a more diverse range of workers experience flexible working, but many more managers gained experience of managing flexible workers. One outcome was to increase demand for flexible working and many employers responded to this by introducing hybrid working arrangements where employees can opt to split their working time between being present in the workplace and working remotely. It also provided managers with more insight into how remote working could work in practice and there is some evidence that the 'great working from home experiment' challenged staff who work remotely. However, at this point in time it is hard to assess what the longer-term impact of the pandemic will be for flexible working. It is important to reflect on the relevance of the experiences in the pandemic to future ways of working. Whilst there are lessons to be learned from remote working becoming more widespread that can inform the future design and management of work, particularly relating to aspects of physical remoteness, it is important to recognise that the relational aspects were very different (Anderson & Kelliher, 2020). Much of the extant research that shows positive outcomes of flexible working both for employers and for employees has been based

on a situation where some degree of discretion over working arrangements was open to the employee. During the Covid-19 pandemic working from home was not as a result of the employee being able to exercise choice, but rather an intervention on the part of governments, and not a party to the employment relationship. This places limits in being able to translate the findings from studies conducted during this period of time into future remote working.

Organisation-focused Flexible Working

Flexible working arrangements which fit in this category are generally designed to improve efficiency in the way in which labour is managed and enable organisational agility and the ability to respond to changes in the environment. Importantly also this approach to flexibility is sometimes operationalised outside of an employment relationship with the organisation contracting with freelance workers in a variety of ways including gig and platform working. At a general level it might be expected that since they are designed for organisational purposes, the outcomes would be negative for workers, or at least that any advantages for workers would be likely to be outweighed by the disadvantages for them. The insecurity of income associated with temporary employment and with arrangements such as zero hours contracts is a clear disadvantage, as is the lack of legal protection given to employees that those who are contracted to work outside of employment lack. However, on the other hand these types of arrangement can also offer flexibility to employees, which may be valued by some and depending upon their individual circumstances (CIPD 2015). For example, those on zero hours contracts are able, at least in theory, to accept or decline work. However, in practice, this may not represent a free choice if they believe that declining will influence whether they are offered work in the future. Similarly temporary contracts may offer the opportunity to work at periods of time that suit the individual and not at times that do not. However, in order to be able to exercise this kind of choice the individual needs to be confident that work will be available when wanted.

The outcomes of these forms of flexible working have also been subject to investigation by researchers. Attention has been paid in particular to the consequences for health and well-being. In a review of evidence on the relationship between job insecurity and health Green (2020) found a detrimental effect of job insecurity on both mental and physical health. Likewise studies that examined specific forms of precarious employment have also found links to negative health outcomes. Temporary employment has been linked to negative mental health outcomes and that this is accentuated by a move from a permanent to a temporary contract (Moscone et al 2016). Dawson et al (2015), whilst noting that those in temporary employment have poorer mental health than those in permanent employment, argue that there may be an element of selection into temporary employment from those with poor mental health. Other forms of precarious employment such zero hours contracts and health outcomes have also been investigated and show a link with long-term health conditions, particularly mental health conditions (Farina et. al. 2023). They have also been found to be associated with lower pay (Koumenta & Williams 2019).

Employees on annual hours contracts are also subject to variation in the number of hours they work, however, the total number of hours worked over a year is set in advance. As a result they represent a situation where over the course of a year an employee will work an agreed number of hours, but the distribution of the hours will not be evenly spread throughout the year. Instead employers will vary the time worked in line with business patterns. Normally an arrangement of this nature is operated in a framework which stipulates details such as the maximum number of hours that can be worked in a working day or week and minimum notice periods for any additional variations to working time. This type of arrangement is based on the premise that the employer's demand for labour is not stable but subject to fluctuations and that there will be times when they will want employees to work more hours than is normal in a contracted week, but that at other times the hours in a normal contracted week will be too much time for what is required. Being able to vary this and accommodate peaks and troughs in demand allows employers to use labour more

efficiently and can reduce the need to pay overtime, or hire additional staff to cover peak periods. There are some differences in how these annual hours schemes operate. In some cases the annual working pattern is fixed in advance (Bailey et. al. 2018), whereas in others changes to time worked may be scheduled throughout the year. As a result employees on annual hours contracts do not face insecurity in relation to income, but on-going variations to their working time may make planning their non-work lives more difficult.

The outcomes of working in this way are likely to differ for employees depending upon the way in which the scheme is set up. Times when a high number of hours are worked may result in fatigue and strain and be challenging for employees' overall well-being, particularly if it is sustained over a long period and where there is limited time for recovery between work periods. It is also likely to make achieving a satisfactory work-life balance problematic at these times. However, when employees are working fewer hours, this may allow for a better work-life balance to be achieved, particularly if these times fit well with employee's non-work commitments (e.g. school holiday for parents). UK research carried out for the Agile Futures Forum (Cannon, 2017) showed that employees used periods when they were not working to undertake a variety of non-work activities including travelling, concentrated focus on sport and leisure activities, home renovations, pursuing education and spending more time with family (more intensive parenting) and extended family. Although the patten of annual hours arrangements may sometimes, at least face-value, seen to be unattractive, employees may judge these arrangements as more attractive and easier to manage with their non-working lives than more conventional working arrangements.

A notable feature of these types of arrangements is the focus on counting hours worked and linking this to effective management of labour. This is likely to work well in circumstances where the type of work lends itself to being measured in hours needed to perform a task, but may be more difficult to operate where there is variation in the amount of time taken to complete work tasks, determined by factors such as complexity of the issue being dealt with and differences in expectations from colleagues or customers in a service environment. In

which case a focus only on hours worked may lead to staff having to work at a high level of intensity to complete the work.

With annual hours arrangements where there is regular variation to hours worked throughout the year, a further feature which may determine the nature of the outcomes for employees is whether they, or the employer have discretion over when working hours can be reduced, or time off work taken to balance periods where a higher number of hours were work and the employee is 'in credit'. If employees are able to exercise discretion, or at least express preferences, this may have a positive impact on work-life balance and satisfaction.

Conclusions and Observations

Flexible working arrangements have become increasingly prevalent in many countries over the past four decades, influenced by factors such as advancements in technology, greater global integration, more intense competitive pressures and changing workforce demographics and attitudes to work. A variety of different working arrangements have been grouped under this term, but they can be broadly grouped into those that are primarily designed to support employees achieve a better work-life balance and those that are driven by employers as a mean to manage labour more efficiently and allow organisations to be more agile and able to respond to changes in their environment. However, notably even within these groupings the range of practices is diverse.

The outcomes of these working arrangements for both employers and employees have been extensively studied by researchers. An appraisal of this research allows us to make an assessment of how beneficial specific arrangements have been for individual workers. For those that are designed to support employees there is good evidence of positive outcomes for employees. However, the 'darker side' of flexible working is also evident with flexible workers experiencing a number of penalties stemming from their working pattern. The requirement to work from home during the Covid-19 pandemic resulted in flexible working becoming much more widespread and in some ways served to normalise flexible working,

particularly remote working. However, it is still too early to judge whether this will have helped ameliorate the darker side.

Overall, the outcomes for individual workers from employer driven flexible working practices is less positive, largely due to the reduction in job and income security resulting from many of these practices. However, for workers in some circumstances the trading of security for flexibility may be one considered to be worthwhile. Furthermore, the diversity of arrangements in this grouping makes it hard to make general observations.

Given the developments in the past decades, it seems likely that the flexibility debate will remain a prominent one in organisations and that flexible working arrangements will continue to feature. Experiences during the pandemic are likely to continue to shape how workers and managers view flexible working and as such it will be important for researcher and policy makers to monitor these developments.

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