Workplace flexibility and work-life balance: friend or foe?

Professional forum – DOP conference 2017

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Aims:

- What is ‘flexible’ working and why is it so popular?
  - Legislation and flexible working options
- Flexible working - some benefits and drawbacks
- “What works”? – The research evidence
- Current gaps in knowledge and priorities – a ‘check list’ for practitioners
So what is…. Flexible working – the current legislation and context
What does the term ‘flexible working’ mean to you?
Food for thought

• Where is the line between ‘flexible’ and ‘precarious’ work? Who is the main beneficiary?

• What is the difference between ‘flexible’ and ‘agile’ working?

• Space planning and hot desking
• More than one in five UK workers would take a pay cut for increased flexibility.

• Projected that 70% of UK businesses will adopt flexible working by 2020

• *Why is it so popular now?*
“A way of working that suits an employee’s needs, e.g. having flexible start and finish times, or working from home “

(https://www.gov.uk/flexible-working/overview)
Flexible working – some background

• Since 2014, all UK employees have the legal right to request flexible working - not just parents and carers

• Employees must have worked for the same employer for at least 26 weeks to make a ‘statutory application’.

• Employers can refuse applications if they have good business reasons to do so

• CIPD Report (2016) claims that 65% of employees work flexibly, but true figures are unknown
Types of flexible working

- Job Sharing
- Working from home/ e-working
- Part time work
- Compressed hours
- Flexi-time
- Hour banking e.g. annual hours
- Staggered hours

- School hours
- Term time only
- Casual working/ zero hours contract
- Self employment
- Freelance/ contract
- Phased retirement
**Why the interest in flexible working?**

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Employee</th>
<th>Employer</th>
<th>Public policy</th>
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<td>Geographical mobility</td>
<td>Adaptation to volatile market conditions</td>
<td>Increase diversity and equality</td>
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<td>More dual earner families</td>
<td>Increased competition</td>
<td>Fuel the economy</td>
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<td>Influx of women into labour market</td>
<td>More effective use of time/resources</td>
<td>Reduce welfare payments</td>
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<td>Caring roles e.g. ‘sandwich generation’</td>
<td>Need to attract (and retain) top talent</td>
<td>Attract votes</td>
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<td>Changing values – prioritising WLB?</td>
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**Any other benefits?**
Flexible working: who wants what?

**Employee**
- More autonomy e.g. start/end times/holidays
- Better coordination / juggling
- Less commuting time
- More freedom

**Employer**
- Reduced costs
- Increased retention/reduced absenteeism
- Improved productivity
- Innovation
- External PR
Is flexibility a realistic option for all?

- Are all roles suitable?
- What about small businesses?
- Many ‘business’ grounds to refuse
  - The extension of the right-to-request may increase discrimination cases?
  - May also enhance feelings of inequity

Grounds for refusing requests

- Burden of additional costs
- Cannot reorganise work among existing staff
- Cannot recruit additional staff
- Detrimental impact on quality or performance
- Detrimental effect on customers
- Insufficient work for the periods the employee proposes to work
- Planned structural change to the business

Acas
The Macro perspective (Rubery et al, 2016)

- Flexibility cannot be considered organisationally or individually without awareness of macro and meso systems

- Structural issues: how the welfare system is funded (e.g. difference Germany and UK)

- “Disposable” labour market
Some challenges:

- You have to have been with an employer for 6 months to request – if you change jobs/lose your job the ‘count down’ starts again.
- Benefits system – e.g. hard (if not impossible) for older workers eligible for universal credits to cut down on working hours; also hard to re-engage with benefits system if insufficient/inconsistent work.
- Job creation miracle during and after recession – at a cost to (personal) stability; firms more willing to hire on very flexible contracts.
- Childcare and regional infrastructure.
Is flexibility really beneficial?

- Extending the ‘right to request’ assumes that flexibility benefits both employers and employees

- Govt. estimates of the economic benefits of the roll-out of flexible working to all employees = c. £475m in 10 years

- Individuals and organisations have high expectations... happier, healthier and more productive in both domains?

- *Is flexible working really beneficial? What is the evidence?*
Imagine this scenario....

• An organisation has given you the following brief:

“We want to move everyone in the UK office towards agile, flexible and adaptive working. There is some resistance from senior managers who raised concerns that changing the organisation in this way won’t work. How would you help us make the business case that this move is in everyone’s interest?”

What questions would you want to ask the organisation? How would you identify priorities? What is your starting point?
How would we know if flexible working 'works'?

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<tr>
<th>The individual</th>
<th>The organisation</th>
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<tr>
<td>• High performance and productivity</td>
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<td>• Improved well being</td>
<td>• Good retention, low absenteeism</td>
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<td>• Better recovery and vigour</td>
<td>• Better organisational citizenship behaviours</td>
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<td>• Better work-life balance</td>
<td>• Diversity at all organisational levels</td>
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<td>• Increased schedule control</td>
<td>• Enhanced internal and external image</td>
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<td>• High levels of engagement and commitment</td>
<td>• Attraction of talent</td>
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<td>• Feel more respected</td>
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<td>• Increased feelings of PE fit</td>
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<td>• High job/life satisfaction</td>
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A quick summary of the research evidence

“What works”? 

What works is...
What type of evidence do we need?

Gold star: randomised controlled trials, meta-analyses/systematic reviews

Silver star: treatment evaluations, prospective studies

Bronze star: research which does not confirm to above criteria, but is well designed and informative
What type of research is available?

- Policies v. uptake
- Flexible work scheduling
- Job crafting
- Family-friendly working practices
- e-working
- National comparisons of availability and WLB/WLC
Does flexibility work?

Review of 148 papers by De Menzies & Kelleher (2011)

- Examined different types of flexibility (generic, schedule, remote working, compressed time, reduced hours)
  - Organisational outcomes (financial performance, productivity, absence and labour turnover)
  - Individual performance (productivity, performance ratings, quality of work)
  - Attitudinal, health and well-being outcomes

- Conclusion: no clear business case for the use of FWAs
Does flexibility work?

Systematic review by Joyce et al. (2010)

- Systematic review examining the impact of flexible working on the health of employees and their families

- Assessed RCTs, interrupted time series and controlled before/after studies
  - Flexibility had no effects on physical/mental health
  - Interventions motivated/dictated by organisational interests had negative effects
  - Some evidence for benefits where employees had more choice and control over flexible patterns

- Findings should be interpreted by caution as very few studies included
Does flexibility work?

Longitudinal study of 7 Companies by Kelliher & Anderson (2008)

- Some gains in WLB, job satisfaction, commitment and productivity
- Many found flexible working did not alleviate stress (34%) and some found it *more* stressful (16%)
- Some resistance from management: concerns about reduced ‘face time’ and trust
- Flexible workers less likely to be chosen for time-sensitive, high-profile tasks
- Evidence of work intensification for remote workers:
  - imposed intensification
  - enabled intensification
  - intensification as an act of reciprocation or exchange
The hidden costs of flexible working

• Inequity
  • Most effective where available to all
  • Greatest resistance if take-up is dominated by groups of employees (this is likely, due to prioritising need)

• Stigmatisation of flexible working arrangements
  • Stigmatised by co-workers *regardless of gender or age*
  • Considered less motivated/less deserving of promotion
  • Stigma is more pronounced; they are rated as ‘poor organisational citizens’; higher on weak, feminine traits/lower on agentic masculine traits
Reducing stigma

• How would you reduce the stigma of flexible working?
Flexibility can be beneficial for organisations and employees, but it is not a panacea and may be detrimental for some.

No one-size-fits-all solutions – flexibility must be truly flexible.

Some essentials:
- the right reasons (e.g. not solely motivated by savings)
- the right workplace culture (e.g. trust-based working time)
- the right technology
- the right training and support
- the right personnel
- the right management
- control and choice over the type of flexibility
1. What is your organisation’s understanding of flexibility?
2. Has it been implemented? If so, what is the uptake? Is there a policy and do people know about it?
3. Are there any barriers to who can work flexibly and how?
4. How international is your organisation?
5. Is e-working part of the (potential) solution?
6. How agile/ project based is your way of working?
7. How well trained are your managers to manage flexibility?
8. Who handles requests for flexible working?
9. Do you undertake regular ‘pulse checks’?
10. Have you done any business research on actual or projected outcomes – e.g. retention statistics, productivity, work-life balance satisfaction?
Thanks and stay in touch!

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