

Flexible Working in Organisations: the perspective of co-workers

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INTRODUCTION

Recent years have seen an increase in the number of employers in developed countries who have introduced flexible working policies, designed to offer employees options to alter their working patterns (Kersley, Alpin, Forth, Bryson, Bewley, Dix and Oxenbridge 2005; Riedman, Bielenski, Szczurowska, and Wagner 2006). These developments have stimulated research interest and there is now a considerable literature on the outcomes of flexible working (see for example Baruch 2000; Igabaria and Guimaraes 1999; Kelliher and Anderson 2008; Mann and Holdsworth 2003;). Although the evidence is mixed, studies have shown that adopting a flexible working pattern can have a number of positive outcomes for individuals, in relation to, for example, stress (Raghuram and Wiesenfeld 2004); family relationships (Lee, MacDermid, Williams, Buck and Leiba-O'Sullivan 2002); personal flexibility (Hartman, Stoner and Arora 1992) and satisfaction (Baruch 2000). A number of studies have also been concerned with the business case for flexible working, examining the impact on organisational performance. There is evidence that flexible working can impact positively on attraction and retention of employees (Aryee, Luk and Stone 1998; Branine 2003; Rau and Hyland 2002), staff involvement and consequently increased productivity (Osterman 1995). However, both meta-analyses and large scale studies comparing the performance of organisations which offer flexible working options and those who do not, have largely failed to find a performance effect (Bloom and Van Reenen 2006; Wood and De Menezes 2007).

The studies which have examined the outcomes for individuals have very largely focused on the impact on the flexible worker themselves (Golden 2007; Van Dyne, Kossek and Lobel 2007). However, it seems unlikely that the flexible workers alone will be affected by the changes in work organisation necessary to accommodate flexible working patterns. In many work environments co-workers, those who work *with* flexible workers, may also be affected, yet to date, little empirical attention has been focused on these individuals.

Anecdotal reports however suggest that co-workers may be adversely affected by the introduction of flexible working arrangements and many of the reported downsides of flexible working relate to the impact on co-workers (Shanahan 2005). Colleagues of those who work reduced hours, work remotely, or work at different times may be required to take on additional tasks (such as taking telephone calls, answering queries) to cover for those who are absent from the workplace. Similarly, work which requires co-ordination and communication may also be impeded if some employees have less face time in the workplace. Each of these may also lead to negative reactions, such as resentment on the part of co-workers, either because they experience an intensification of work and/or they feel less able to perform their own jobs. There is some evidence to suggest that such resentment may be exacerbated where flexible working is restricted to certain groups in the workforce (eg: parents and carers) (Shanahan 2005). Indeed, part of the explanation for the lack of performance effect demonstrated by the analysis of large-scale datasets could be that whilst flexible working may be beneficial to the performance of the flexible worker, it may be that it has a detrimental impact on the performance of co-workers, thereby mitigating performance gains from flexible workers.

The aim of this paper is to further understanding of how the use of flexible working impacts co-workers. We present findings from a study designed to examine the implementation of flexible working and which included the views of co-workers. We present both quantitative and qualitative data from a study in six organisations. The survey data shows co-workers' beliefs about how working with flexible workers affects their own performance at work. The interview and focus group data examine the experiences of co-workers in more depth.

BACKGROUND

Flexible working arrangements which allow employees a degree of choice over where, when and how much they work are likely to result in them having reduced 'face time' in the workplace (Milliken and Dunn-Jensen 2005) and consequently their physical presence will be less visible to co-workers (Van Dyne, Kossek and Lobel 2007). If flexible workers are not present, or are present less frequently when their colleagues are present in the workplace, this will have implications for the way in which work is carried out and for the team or work group. Co-workers may find that their workload is affected as they take on additional tasks on behalf of colleagues who are not present in the workplace (Reinsch 1997). Furthermore reduced face time alters the scope for interaction. Golden (2007) notes that in a typical workplace workers share physical proximity and also have the opportunity to interact due to chance encounters. Where workers have less face time as a result of different working patterns, chance encounters and informal conversations are less likely to occur and therefore there may be a need for greater formality such as increased scheduling of interactions with colleagues (Pearlson and Saunders 2001). Bailey and Kurland (2002)'s work on teleworkers found communications amongst co-workers were likely to be task-oriented and less likely to be informal.

The extent to which the conduct and organisation of work will be influenced by the presence of flexible workers is likely to vary according to the nature of tasks involved and in particular degree to which workers are dependant on communication and co-ordination with each other to perform their work. Pearlson and Saunders (2001) suggest that the jobs most amenable to teleworking are those where the tasks can be performed in isolation and there is not a need to match the work routines of individuals (enabled by telecommuting) with others in a team working to a more conventional routine. The degree to which there are negative outcomes for the working of groups (Van Dyne, Kossek and Lobel, 2007) may also be influenced by the nature of work, the routines of flexible workers and co-workers and the degree which the employees perceive themselves to be an interdependent work team. Van Dyne et al. (2007) have explored the cross level effects for groups which include flexible workers and observe that reduced face time may result in a number of co-ordination challenges, since the quantity, quality and synchronisation of communication may be altered, resulting in reduced awareness of the needs of others in the group. They also contend that reduced face time may affect group levels of motivation.

Workplace relations may be affected by the presence of flexible workers. Walsh's (2007) study whilst not examining the perspectives of co-workers, found that part-time workers felt marginalised by their full-time co-workers and felt a moral obligation to assist them, stemming in part from their reliance on full-time colleagues for informal training and/or assistance performing their work. Other researchers have examined how relations between flexible workers and those without flexible working arrangements may be influenced by notions of equity. Kossek, Barber and Winters (1999) argue that feelings of inequity may arise, particularly among who view working

regular hours as a signal of commitment to the organisation. Kirby and Krone (2002) found evidence of co-workers feeling that work-family policies gave preferential treatment to those employees with family responsibilities and that the use of these policies by others created more work for them. They also observed that when respondents believed in reward being based on meritocratic principles, policies only available to certain employees were perceived as inequitable and inconsistent with these principles. Grover (1991) however found that those who might benefit from such policies were more likely to perceive them as fair. Fairness is important in this context since it has been shown to be related to work motivation (Greenberg 1982), pay satisfaction ((Folger and Greenberg 1985) and organisational commitment (Folger and Konovsky 1989).

The reactions of co-workers have been examined in the context of how they may influence the uptake of flexible working policies (Blair-Loy and Wharton 2002; Kirby and Krone 2002). The existence of a policy does not necessarily mean that it will be accepted as legitimate and followed as laid down (Kirby and Krone 2002), nor will it necessarily bring about a culture change towards work and family (Lewis 1997). Since work is embedded in a social context, both individual preferences and their willingness to act on them may be influenced by those they work with (Blair-Loy and Wharton 2002). It is well established that co-workers can influence each others' behaviour through group norms (Hackman 1992) and therefore the way in which co-workers perceive flexible working may influence the take up of flexible working arrangements (Kossek, Barber and Winters 1999). A number of studies have shown that negative attitudes on the part of co-workers influence the uptake and flexible working policies (Blair-Loy and Wharton 2002; Kirby and Krone 2002).

Golden (2007) has conducted one of the few studies of co-workers. Focusing on the co-workers of teleworkers, his study examined the impact of working with teleworkers on the satisfaction of those who remained in the office. He found teleworker prevalence to be negatively associated with co-worker satisfaction and that this was influenced by the amount of time spent teleworkers worked remotely, the degree of face-to-face interaction and job autonomy. The implications of Golden's study are potentially serious for organisations. However, his study was only concerned with teleworkers and therefore may not be applicable to all types of flexible working which result in reduced face time in the workplace.

METHODS

This research forms part of a wider study which examined the implementation of flexible working practices in six organisations. In addition to examining the effects of changed working patterns on the flexible workers, the study also examined how co-workers were affected. All organisations in this study had offered flexible working to employees for a number of years and therefore perceptions of flexible working had been built from experience over time. Data were collected through two main methods: an electronic questionnaire and a series of semi-structured interviews. The questionnaire included a number of questions specifically for co-workers about how working with flexible workers affected their work performance. The interviews were concerned with examining the lived experiences of co-workers. The interviews were recorded with the permission of the participants and analysis of the transcripts was supported by the use of NVivo software. Template analysis was used to identify clusters of themes which were organized hierarchically.

FINDINGS

Below we present both findings from the questionnaire and from interviews carried out with co-workers of flexible workers. First, we present the responses to three questions specifically asking co-workers how their own performance was affected by

working with flexible workers. These questions about the respondents the impact on the quantity and quality of work they delivered and about their ability to work in a team. The results are presented in table 1 below.

Thinking about other members of your team who work flexibly, does their work pattern affect	Positive effect	No effect	Negative effect
Affect the quantity of work you deliver?	26.2	63.6	10.2
Affect the quality of work you deliver?	27.4	67.2	5.4
Have an impact on the effectiveness of the team as a whole?	24.1	59.6	16.3

Table 1: Impact of Colleagues Working Pattern on Co-Worker Performance

Overall, these findings paint a picture of co-workers being largely unaffected by working with flexible workers. According to each measure the majority of respondents reported 'no effect' on performance. In all cases the lowest level of response was of a negative effect. Only 5% reported a negative effect on the quality of work delivered, with 10% and 16% reporting a negative effect on the quantity of work and team effectiveness respectively. The low level of reported negative effects in these organisations is in contrast to some of the anecdotal evidence suggesting negative outcomes for co-workers. Instead this would imply that co-workers are relatively undisturbed by the changes to work organisation necessary to accommodate flexible working patterns, or that they are accommodated without a significant affect on co-performance. Furthermore, somewhat surprisingly in the region of a quarter of co-workers indicated that working with flexible workers had positive outcomes for their own performance. This is perhaps easiest to understand with quantity of work, since it may be that they do indeed pick up additional work on behalf of flexible working colleagues. However, the reasons for the positive impact on quality and team work are less obvious.

Building on the general picture of co-worker performance being relatively unaffected by colleagues flexible working patterns, we present data from the interviews describing their lived experiences of working with flexible workers. On the whole the findings from the interviews paint a broadly similar picture. The majority of co-worker respondents indicated that they did not find working with flexible workers who had reduced face time in the workplace problematic. Typical comments were,

It's never really been a problem (co-worker)

It doesn't impact on my performance at all (co-worker)

However, when describing their experience of working with flexible workers, some did indicate that there was an impact on the way work was carried out. A number of respondents explained that it was necessary to be aware of when flexible workers were in the workplace, so that work could be organised and distributed appropriately,

So long as everyone knows ... as long as there is clarity as to the flexible arrangement... then I think we can work around that (co-worker)

However, in the workplaces in this study this did not seem to be something which presented too many difficulties for co-workers. One co-worker reflected that when reduced hours workers took holiday they were proportionately away from work for longer, but that it was not a major problem and just something that needed to be worked around. One respondent made the distinction between convenience and effectiveness. Whilst he acknowledged that it was often more convenient to have colleagues present in the workplace at the same time, he did not feel that it impacted on effectiveness.

There were some particular circumstances where the reduced face time of flexible workers was reported to be problematic. For example, one interviewee indicated that when she joined the organisation, she relied on co-workers to help her learn the job and when they were not around this impeded her progress. She recounted,

It didn't affect me too much that she wasn't there everyday. I guess it did a little bit at the beginning, because she was obviously showing me around and showing me what sort of admin I had to do (co-worker)

In line with the survey findings it was acknowledged that teamworking, particularly the scheduling meetings was one of the biggest challenges of working with those with reduced face time, since the window of opportunity to schedule appointments was reduced.

The times I have had problems with flexible working is when I've tried to arrange meetings with people and it is something I need to discuss face to face (co-worker)

Flexible workers who worked remotely were not on the whole seen as difficult to contact. Some interviewees commented that in their experience they were sometimes easier to contact than people who were in the workplace, but not at their desks. Equally in those organisations where staff travelled extensively as part of their jobs, flexible workers were often seen as easier to contact. However, some co-workers expressed a degree of hesitation about contacting colleagues when they worked remotely. One commented,

But you will always have this apprehension of disturbing them which is weird! (co-worker)

In general, we found a preparedness on the part of co-workers to take account of the different working patterns of their flexible working colleagues. In many of these workplaces, co-workers were well aware that offering flexible working was part of the organisation's retention strategy and explained that they were willing to accommodate different work patterns in order for the organisation to be able to retain high calibre colleagues.

Although small in number, there were some respondents who found working with flexible workers problematic and this generated some resentment. One co-worker reported that she had to pick up work on behalf of colleagues who were absent from the office. She explained,

If you're not there, someone else has to do your job (co-worker)
and,

Because she is not there, I have to deal with that (paperwork). It's not a big deal, it is just another 5 minutes of time, but that is when I am doing (the co-workers) job, instead of doing my job (co-worker)

Equally, for those who worked more traditional working patterns, some reported that being alone had a negative impact on motivation,

I didn't see anyone from team until 10.30 or 11am and it's not really motivating you (co-worker)

There was a general view amongst co-workers that flexible working worked better if the working arrangements were clear and there was a shared view of what was acceptable and what was not, especially where flexible working was informal.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Thus, contrary to the commonly expressed views we found relatively little evidence of co-workers experiencing working with flexible workers in a negative way. Our questionnaire data showed that most co-worker respondents felt that their performance was unaffected by working with flexible workers. Only small numbers reported a negative effect on the quantity and quality of work they delivered. Whilst the scores for a negative impact on the performance of the team were slightly higher, less than a sixth of respondents felt that their team effectiveness was reduced as a result of working with flexible workers. A similar picture was painted by our interview data, where although some difficulties were acknowledged, the general experience of working with flexible workers was not seen as a negative one by co-workers. In some senses these findings are not surprising since flexible workers are not alone in having less face time in the workplace and co-workers have to find ways of operating with those who for example undertake significant amount of work-related travel and/or who carry out work on client sites. Less face time does offer fewer opportunities for interaction (Golden 2007) and where challenges of working with flexible workers were cited by our respondents they tended to be concerned with communication and the scheduling of meetings (Van Dyne et al. 2007).

The organisations included in this study were all large employers who had had a flexible working policy in place for some time. It may be that these co-workers had worked with flexible workers for some time and thus would have had the opportunity to experiment and establish ways of working with colleagues who had less face time in the workplace and to address any difficulties which arose. It is also noteworthy that although there may have been some differences in the interpretation of policy, all the organisations had flexible working policies which were open to all employees, not just those who had caring responsibilities. Therefore all co-workers would have had the opportunity to negotiate or request a flexible working arrangement also and as such not having to accommodate an arrangement unavailable to them may have gone some way to ameliorating feelings of inequity (Glover 1991).

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