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Title:

Exploring the Negative Outcomes of Flexible Work Arrangements. The case of a consultancy firm in Spain.

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ABSTRACT

This paper's contribution to the literature is twofold. First, while the term flexibility has been looked upon using either an organizational or an employee perspective, this paper develops a framework to apprehend this conceptual duality. Drawing on the employee-organization relationship we build a model that contemplates flexibility of employees (demanded flexibility) and flexibility for employees (offered flexibility) simultaneously, stating that existing flexible work arrangements lay at the intersection of both.

Second, the paper constructs a theoretical rationale for the relationship between those flexible work arrangements and two so far unexplored undesirable HRM outcomes: high work intensity and decreased employee well-being.

These theoretical postulates are empirically explored by means of the qualitative in-depth study of the Spanish division of a large consultancy firm. Our findings support the existence of different combinations of demanded and offered flexibility. They also provide evidence that flexible work arrangements have differing impacts on work intensity and employee well-being.

INTRODUCTION

Establishing flexibility programmes has become an increasingly popular human resource practice across Europe (Kersley et al., 2006; Lähteenmäki, 2002; Fernandez-Rios et al., 2005) and is expected to be a crucial issue for the HR profession in the current decade (Rau and Hyland, 2002). This trend relies on the positive connotation of the word flexibility, especially in comparison with “rigidity” (Rose, 1999) and on the belief that it is beneficial to both the organization and the employees (Martinez-Sanchez et al., 2009). The related academic literature has looked into two main questions. First, great interest has been devoted to the effects of flexibility on different performance measures: p.e attendance and turnover (Dalton & Mesch, 1990), productivity (Konrad & Mangel, 2000), profit and sales growth (Perry-Smith & Blum, 2000). Second, analyses have been conducted on the reasons that drive the actors of the employment relationship to adopt such practices (Reilly, 2001). However, to the best of our knowledge, the extant literature has so far overlooked two relevant problems that require attention.

First, from a conceptual perspective, flexibility is a highly “amorphous” term (Pollert, 1991; 3), and does not have a straightforward definition yet. It has been utilized as an umbrella-term including a broad range of practices, work arrangements and workforce organization systems (Kelliher and Anderson, 2008; 420). Flexibility has been analyzed at different levels (national, industry, etc.). Our interest lies in organizational flexibility, or flexibility in the firm environment, but even within that limited context, extremely contrasting definitions can be easily found. Some observe flexibility as a characteristic of highly competitive firms that are able to adapt to their environment, and suggest that organizational competitiveness is achieved through putting pressure on employees (Blyton, 1992). Others assume employers and employees can equally benefit from flexibility and see it as an organizational must to increase performance and innovation (Martinez-Sanchez et al., 2009). For the growing literature on the relationship between work and personal life, flexibility is contemplated as a ladder towards balance and employee autonomy (Hill et al., 2008a). The diverse definitions of the term can be clustered with a dual perspective: firm oriented vs. employee oriented flexibility. This conceptual duality must be tackled because ambiguity can generate great difficulties to evaluating impacts on individuals and organizations.

Second, little attention has been paid so far to the eventual unintended or undesirable consequences of flexible work arrangements. Indeed, as noted by Pfeffer (2010) management literature tends to disregard dependent variables other than indicators of firm performance. However, employee health and well-being are crucial to social sustainability. Moreover, undesirable consequences can be omitted potential moderators of the flexibility-performance relationship (Rau and Hyland, 2002). Analyses on the link between flexibility and negative HR outcomes such as work intensification or decreased employee health and well-being are scarce. Yet, one could venture their relevance both as meaningful outcomes and as driver of performance and profitability (on the basis of numerous studies linking poor health to higher costs, absenteeism, turnover, etc. (Rosch, 2001; Mankelou, 2001; Ricci et al., 2007)).

Given these issues, this paper has two complementary objectives. First, it seeks to develop a theoretical framework that encompasses a twofold approach to flexibility. Second, on the basis of that framework, the paper aims to discuss two eventual undesirable effects of different flexible work arrangements: work intensification and decreased employee health and well-being.

These theoretical propositions are empirically explored through the qualitative analysis of the case of the Spanish division of a major international consultancy firm.

A DUAL PERSPECTIVE ON FLEXIBILITY

Theoretical background

Prior to exploring the effects of flexible work arrangements (FWA), it is important to have a clear conceptual approach.

Types of flexibility: Atkinson's model of the "flexible firm" was probably the first relevant contribution to the conceptualization of flexibility. Atkinson (1984) proposes the combination of three types of flexibility: Numerical, functional and financial flexibility. However, recent studies seem to find the dichotomy internal vs. external flexibility more accurate and helpful to grounding analysis than Atkinson's model (McIllroy et al., 2004). External flexibility (ELF) refers to the ability to change the dimension of the workforce by

hiring or subcontracting people or outsourcing activities, depending on the demand. This category can mostly be assimilated to Atkinson's numerical flexibility and exemplified by temporary and fixed-term contracts, agency work or self-employment (Kalleberg, 2001)

In contrast internal labour flexibility (ILF) has been synonymised with functional flexibility (Kalleberg, 2001). Indeed it consists of the ease with which the workforce can be allocated to different tasks, which can be characterized as upward, downward or horizontal flexibility (Reilly, 2001). However, ILF goes beyond Atkinson's functional flexibility as it also includes the possibility to adapt working hours within the organization (Grenier et al., 1997), which is generally known as temporal flexibility (Blyton, 1992) and has been found to be the most common flexibility practice in the UK (Kersley et al., 2006). This internal adaptation of the pattern of working schedules concerns both duration and timing (Berg et al., 2004).

Therefore, ILF encompasses functional and numerical flexibility, adding the idea that the latter is not necessarily external as implied in Atkinson's model. Teamworking or task flexibility, as well as part-time working or flexitime can illustrate ILF. As a result, some recent studies seem to find the dichotomy internal vs. external flexibility more accurate and helpful to grounding analysis than Atkinson's model (McIlroy et al., 2004).

Additionally, spatial flexibility, also known as teleworking, has also been considered as a branch of ILF (Frank and Lowe, 2003). Evidence suggests this kind of flexibility is becoming increasingly common (Hislop and Axtell, 2007). It relies on the use of information and communication technologies to allow portable and ubiquitous jobs: workers can perform their tasks and activities from remote locations (Martinez-Sanchez et al., 2007). This includes home based work, teleworking from remote offices and mobile telework (Daniels et al. 2001).

Whose flexibility? Flexible Work Arrangements have been looked upon either from the viewpoint of organizations or the viewpoint of employees. The attributes and characteristics ascribed to flexibility from each of those perspectives vary widely.

From the organization's perspective, flexibility is one of the keys to success and survival in a changing, competitive and technologically challenging environment. Under this approach, the above mentioned model of the "flexible firm" has been a relevant reference to tailor

employment relations within organizations since the 80's. In this context, flexibility is a practice or a set of practices that allow organizations to adapt to changes in their environment, with only minor regard to workers (Dastmalchian and Blyton, 2001, 1).

While for decades the flexibility debate was dominated by employer concerns, rather than by workforce needs (Blyton, 1992), growing recent research has been looking at these practices from the perspective of the employee (Russell et al., 2009; Pitt-Catsoupes and Matz-Costa, 2008; Grzywacz et al., 2008). In this sense flexibility is conceptualized as “the degree to which workers are able to make choices to arrange core aspects of their professional lives, particularly regarding where, when, and for how long work is performed” (Hill et al., 2008a; 151). This definition maintains the multidimensional aspect of flexibility, including temporal and situational aspects. However, it implies it is the employee and not the employer, who chooses how to organize and arrange work. Even if the practices themselves might be the same, the underlying assumptions to their implementation, differ substantially.

Authors like Kerkhofs et al. (2008) have partly addressed the duality of flexibility at a macro level. Using data from the European Establishment Survey of Working Time, they discern six flexibility profiles characterized by different bundles of flexible working practices. The six profiles contemplate the level of flexibility (high, intermediate and low), as well as the content of the practices implemented by the firms (worker oriented or firm oriented). This twofold perspective underlines the fact that “firms may require flexibility to meet operational requirements for extended or variable working hours, but the working time arrangements designed to provide this may conflict with the type of working time flexibility which workers require” (Kerkhofs et al., 2008; 582).

At the firm level, Kelliher and Anderson (2008) explore the link between flexible working practices and job quality. They emphasize the difference between flexibility *of* and flexibility *for* employees and underline the prevalence of the former over the later in their empirical analysis. Fleetwood (2007; 387) states that “some flexible working practices are employee friendly and sought by employees (...) [whereas] other practices are employer friendly sought by employers, primarily to pursue profit”. Therefore, to analyze the effects of flexibility it is essential to first observe which the prevailing perspective is.

Proposed conceptual model: The flexibility matrix

When considering only one of the two perspectives, flexibility tends to be observed as a continuum, rather than as a dichotomy (Hill et al., 2008a; 152), varying from low to high flexibility. Nevertheless, if we are looking to encompass both perspectives, a continuum is no longer appropriate since different levels of flexibility *of* and *for* may be combined.

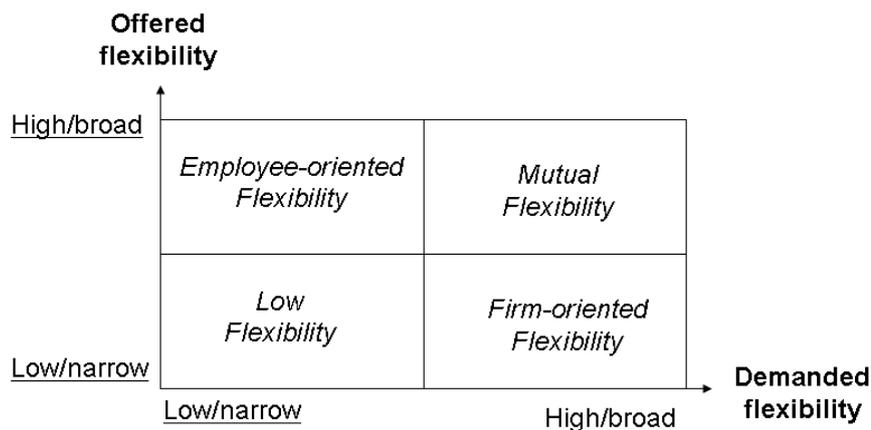
To overcome this limitation we generate our framework of analysis drawing on Tsui et al.'s (1997) employee-organization relationship (EOR). When examining the EOR, one should acknowledge both the contributions the organization expects from the workforce, and the inducements it offers employees in exchange for those contributions (Tsui and Wu, 2005). We translate this reasoning to the flexibility framework by confronting *demanded flexibility* to *offered flexibility*.

According to Tsui et al. (1997; 1091) “an employee-organization relationship strategy includes the employer’s expectations about specific contributions that it desires from employees and the inducements that it uses to effect the desired contributions”. When applied to the flexibility framework, one can say the employer simultaneously demands flexibility from its employees and offers them flexibility. The former (demanded flexibility) responds to the above discussed organizational perspective on flexibility. For example, in terms of temporal flexibility, the organization may expect employees to work overtime in response to workloads. The latter (offered flexibility) corresponds to the employee perspective on flexibility. The existence of flexitime programmes through which employees decide how to structure their working day, exemplifies this idea. The EOR framework is most appropriate to this analysis because both demanded and offered flexibility depend almost entirely on the organization’s wishes and strategy (even if employee expectations and pressure might exert some influence).

The expression “flexible work arrangement” has been used in the literature to conceptualize the existence of employee oriented flexibility programmes (Hill et al., 2008b). We propose that defining it as a combination of demanded and offered flexibility would be more accurate and holistic since it takes into consideration the organization and the employee perspectives on flexibility simultaneously. As a result, the intersection of demanded and offered flexibility creates four general types of *flexible work arrangements*, which are organised in a two by two matrix: low flexibility, employee-oriented flexibility, firm-oriented flexibility and mutual

flexibility. Like for the EOR approach, two of them involve a rather balanced relationship with low or high levels of flexibility. In the other two, certain unevenness exists in favour of either the employee or the firm. Although in principle, balanced relationships should be mutually satisfying and durable in the long term (Peel and Boxall, 2005), unbalanced relationships are also possible (Tsui et al., 1997).

Figure 1: Flexibility Matrix



Low Flexibility (LF): The first balanced quadrant is labelled “low flexibility”. This arrangement implies that the organization does not demand or expect flexibility from its employees neither provides them with flexibility offers. As pointed out by the EOR framework, this is a close-ended arrangement. If we take the example of the working schedule, an agreement would exist that work starts for example at nine o’clock in the morning and finishes at six in the evening, Monday to Friday. The employer will not expect employees to work beyond this schedule but won’t offer them either the chance to adapt this timing to their personal needs.

According to the macro European study undertaken by Kerkhofs et al. (2008), this type of arrangement predominates in small companies with less than 20 employees, operating in industries where little sudden variation of workload occurs and the workforce is mature with low levels of skills and training. They pose construction and manufacturing sectors as general examples of this situation.

We must add that, as economic competition increases, firms need to be more and more capable to adapt to their environment and changing demands. In this situation it seems

reasonable to suggest this kind of narrow flexibility would be limited to very specific sectors and activities.

Employee Oriented Flexibility (EOF): The second quadrant, employee oriented flexibility is an arrangement whereby the company does not demand its employees to be flexible but offers them flexibility programs. Essentially this means that employees have a choice over the way in which they do their jobs (Kelliher and Anderson, 2008; 420) but are not required to constantly adapt to changing organizational demands.

Although this unbalance may seem illogical from the perspective of the organization, this kind of arrangement appears to exist in big organizations where workload variation is little or foreseeable, such as public administration (Kerkhofs et al., 2008). It may also exist in companies that essentially require semi-skilled or highly skilled workers, with rather tight labour markets. Indeed, high levels of firm dependency on employee knowledge and cooperation may result in workers acquiring a flexibility arrangement that benefits them (Donnelly, 2008; 199).

Firm Oriented Flexibility (FOF): Firm-oriented flexibility arrangements are most common in big organizations in which workload variation is mostly unforeseeable and environmental conditions, tight deadlines and competition require constant adaptation. Understaffing may also be an explanation to this unbalance (Sparks et al., 2001). They imply an unbalanced situation where, in contrast with the previous quadrant, measures are exercised at the discretion of employers, mostly benefiting the organization at the expense of the workforce.

Indeed employers expect high levels of flexibility from their employees, such as overtime, weekend availability or rotation capacity. However, they do not offer flexibility options, such as flexitime. This means individuals have little choice over the organization of their work day. As noted by Shore and Shore (1995) in this situation it is clear that the employee is the less powerful actor in the employment relationship.

Mutual Flexibility (MF): Mutual flexibility arrangements exist when organizations both demand and offer high flexibility to its employees. This kind of arrangements can be labelled as open-ended since no specific written contract is signed as to where balanced flexibility is

(Tsui et al., 1997). It implies a long-term commitment, and broad, unspecified obligations by both parts, exchange on the basis of a social agreement where trust is essential (Blau, 1964). These situations should predominate in sectors with a high variation of workload, where constant adaption to a changing environment is required but mostly in large firms that are able to offer flexibility programs to a young and skilled workforce they would like to attract and retain.

FLEXIBILITY, UNDESIRABLE HRM OUTCOMES AND PERFORMANCE

Notwithstanding previous research efforts, consensus has not yet been attained on the outcomes of flexibility. At the firm level previous studies report both positive (Bhattacharya et al., 2005) and negative (Van der Meer et al., 2009) relationships between different aspects of flexibility and performance. Similar divergent results can be observed at the individual level. While some point out the positive effects of FWA on employees (Hill et al., 2008b), others are unable to find any clear links between flexibility and employee outcomes (Hayman, 2009), and very few contemplate a connection to negative outcomes, such as work intensification (Kelliher and Anderson, 2010) or job insecurity (Peel, 2002).

These contrasting results may stem, from the consideration of partial perspectives of flexibility. To our knowledge, previous research has not analyzed these issues at the firm level, considering the combination of demanded and offered flexibility presented above. Moreover, the omission of variables that covary with FWA and also influence performance may tarnish results. Therefore, it is relevant to discuss if certain FWA engender undesirable individual consequences, such as work intensification or decreased employee health and well-being.

Flexibility and Work Intensity

Work intensity is defined as “the pace of work and proportion of working hours spent in work activity” (White et al., 2003; 179). Therefore, work intensification can manifest itself as increased work time (extensive effort or hours spent in work activity), greater effort (intensive effort or pace and intensity of work) or a combination of both (Green, 2001).

During the past decade, some researchers have struck up a debate around work intensification, trying to establish to what extent it is a reality and its causes: globalization (Burchell et al.

2002), information technologies (Black y Lynch, 2001, 2004; Green y McIntosh, 2001), or high performance work systems (Gallie, 2005) are some of the studied options. The disequilibrium between demanded and offered flexibility arrangements should also be considered a plausible cause.

As discussed above, from an organizational point of view, flexibility is a tool to adapt to competitive pressures and changing environmental conditions. Rendering work more flexible implies passing competitive pressure on to employees, hence requires them to work more intensely (Burchell et al., 2002). Given these assumptions, the following is proposed:

Proposition 1: *Work intensity will be higher in mutual and firm oriented flexibility arrangements than in employee oriented and low flexibility arrangements.*

Additionally, a recent study has found that offered flexibility can also lead to work intensification (Kelligher and Anderson, 2010). If we consider the work intensification effects of demanded and offered flexibility as additive, one could also propose the following:

Proposition 2: *Work intensity will be higher in a mutual flexibility arrangement than in a firm oriented flexibility arrangement.*

Flexibility, Health and Well-being

Despite the economic progress, the decline in the number of back-breaking physical jobs and the legal achievements in terms of working conditions, employee well-being has been found to have decreased in European countries since the 1970's (Green, 2006). Regardless of these findings, little research effort has been done to study the effects of managerial practices on employee health and well-being (Pfeffer, 2010). In particular, Carter et al. (2010; 3) point out that regardless “extensive technological and organisational innovation in non-customer interactive white collar work (...) it remains practically virgin territory as far as inquiry into occupational health is concerned”.

The term well-being is intertwined with health. Indeed, the most widely agreed definition of health is “a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity” (WHO, 1948). Bircher (2005, 336) adds complexity to this definition by considering health as a “dynamic state of well-being characterized by a physical, social and mental potential, which satisfies the demands of life commensurate with age, culture and personal responsibility”. According to Warr (1990), whose model is probably the

most widely used tool to evaluate well-being (Cropanzano et al., 2003; Rogelberg et al., 2006; Makikangas et al., 2007; Wood, 2008), is the overall quality of an employee's experience at work and has three core dimensions: psychological, physical and social.

Direct relationship: Karasek's (1979) job demands - job control model focuses on the distinction of discretion (the extent to which employees have the potential to control the tasks they conduct throughout the working day) and demands (stressors existing in the workplace) associated with jobs. The central tenet of this theory is that employee discretion over work mitigates the negative effects job demands cause. Hence it advocates that a combination of high job demands and low job control has the most detrimental effect on well-being. The vast majority of studies testing this theory have been supportive of its postulates (Wood, 2008). Green (2008; 26) finds that "where flexibility is introduced as something to benefit employees (...) it has as expected, a positive effect on discretion. Where the policies are to suit the employer's needs (...) this tends to reduce discretion". Within this framework, we develop the following proposition:

Proposition 3: *Employee health and well-being will be lowest under a firm oriented flexibility arrangement than under any other flexible work arrangement.*

Mediated relationship: The relationship between working practices, work intensity and well-being problems has been previously documented. Evidence exists that high work intensity, especially when referred to work time (long working hours), has a detrimental effect on health (Gospel, 2003). Sparks et al. (1997) conduct a meta-analytic study on the literature related to work time extension. Their results indicate a positive and significant correlation between long work hours and health problems (both physical and psychological). Other studies such as Sokejima and Kagamimori (1998), Schabracq and Cooper (1997) or Gallie (2005) corroborate this idea. In terms of intensification of effort, Truss (2001) carried out an in-depth qualitative study in Hewlett Packard and found out that when employees were investing more effort in their tasks, stress and other health problems (for example high blood pressure) increased. Wichert (2002) indicates work pressure and effort are related to less hours of sleep that, in term, lead to poor psychosomatic and psychological wellbeing. For Pinilla (2004) effort intensification, triggered by organizational practices, has brought about an impoverishment of employee health. Green (2004) agrees when he tries to measure the relationship between work effort and wellbeing and its evolution in the period 1992-2001 in

the UK, and concludes there has been a certain decrease of wellbeing. Drawing on this rationale, we make the following proposition:

Proposition 4: *High work intensity leads to decreased employee health and well-being, hence flexible work arrangements generating the highest work intensity will have the lowest well-being levels.*

METHODOLOGY

The method chosen to explore these propositions is a single in-depth case study (e.g. Donnelly, 2008; Truss, 2001; Thompson, 2007) of a leading multinational company with more than 200,000 employees that provides different kinds of business services (i.e. consulting, technology solutions, and outsourcing) to clients of different industries. The selection of this company is justified by its wide experience in cutting edge flexibility enhancing HR practices.

Besides, most employees in the organization are consultants who are believed to represent the archetype of knowledge workers (Fincham, 1999). They are highly skilled, degree-educated workers that the firm is interested in attracting and retaining. Yet, workers in highly skilled jobs experience higher work pressure when compared to other occupational levels (Gallie, 2005). Therefore, one should expect employees in this organization to be more likely to suffer from intense work and well-being problems. On the other hand, if in this case a process of work intensification and well-being deterioration is not evidenced, then it can be regarded as extremely unlikely that such a process might occur significantly in other settings (Goldthorpe, 1968).

This article reports on the first findings of a long-term research project, which circumscribe to the company's brand in Spain, with more than 10,000 employees. In this sense, Wächter et al. (2006) believe the Spanish subsidiaries of international firms have been "a strategic test bed for the implementation of innovative HR practices" because of their "malleability". As noted by Rodriguez-Ruiz and Martinez-Lucio (2010; 135), international companies, such as the one we study, have been essential to the implementation of new HR practices and have been the seed to the development of the HR function in the country.

As a consequence of all the above, we consider this to be a critical case and believe that the results of the study of this cutting edge international firm should provide valuable empirical and conceptual understanding, applicable in many other organizations.

The selected firm is divided into four principal *workforces*. Three of them provide the mentioned business services to the clients (“front office”) and the fourth one supplies internal services to the rest of the company (“back office”). The results presented in this article concentrate in one of the front office workforces (management consulting) and the back office workforce (support).

The data collection for the case was based on qualitative methods (45 interviews and document analysis). All interviews were recorded to be able to fully reconstruct the conversation for the analysis. In particular, our gathering information process was divided in several phases. First we were provided with vast official written material including basically annual reports, HR policies and internal HR communication documents. Second, we conducted 3 rounds of semi-structured interviews.

(1) At first, we interviewed the head of HR and 3 members of her team. These interviews were based on a questionnaire the interviewees had received in advance, were in average two hours and a half long and focused on discussing the extant HR policies and flexibility practices (*HR interviews*).

(2) Then, we held 5 interviews with senior managers and executives looking to understand the managerial discourse on flexibility (*executive interviews*).

(3) We conducted 36 interviews with employees belonging to different departments and professional levels. All interviewees had been with the company for at least 1 year, so that they could report on their experience on demanded and offered flexibility, to contrast their testimony to the managerial discourse and the official policies of the HR department. The average duration of these interviews was 40 minutes and the personal characteristics of the interviewees (gender, marital status, parenthood, years in the organization, etc.) were different in order to have as diverse a sample as possible (*employee interviews*).

Table 1: Interviewee profile (Employee interviews)

		Men	Women
Management consultancy	Manager	4	6
	Non Manager	2	4
Support	Manager	2	6
	Non Manager	5	7

Finally, we had telephone conversations with some of the interviewees to obtain some additional data or clear up certain doubts. The combination of the different aspects of the process is contributing to improving our understanding of the phenomenon (Tashakkori and Teddlie, 1998).

In total 45 members of the organizations, belonging to different professional categories and departments where interviewed for this study.

FINDINGS

The results obtained from the case study have been organized into two sections: (1) flexible work arrangements, (2) effects on work intensity and effects on employee well-being.

Flexible work arrangements

In this section we present evidence on the existence of different types of flexible work arrangements within the company. All of the interviewees were asked to report on the flexibility they experience (both on the flexibility they are demanded to provide and on the flexibility they are offered by the company). In line with the above described theoretical framework, we find that not all employees experience the same combination of demanded and offered flexibility.

On the one hand, 83% of the employee interviewees agree that this organization requires high levels of flexibility from its employees. One of them explained to us:

“I should be working a certain number of hours a week but the company requires me to be flexible and give a little more. It’s not a process that one is really aware of, but

when you think about it, one really feels that pressure. The firm really asks us to be flexible, both in terms of time and responsibilities”. (Employee Interviewee number 8)

The employees’ perceptions go in line with the executive and the HR discourses. For example, one of the executive interviewees clearly acknowledged she demands her workers to be highly flexible:

“I have to demand flexibility from the members of my team, because if I have a problem at 9 in the evening, I want to be able to call someone in my team and solve it. If someone has a meeting on Monday early morning someplace else and they have to travel on Sunday. That is the way things are”. (Executive Interviewee number 3)

Additionally one of the members of the HR team explained how necessary flexibility is for the company and how that is taken into consideration during the recruitment process:

“This is a company that looks for flexible people. It is a necessity we have. We try to recruit people who accept changes in working hours and patterns, so that we can adapt to clients, and organizational and market changes”. (HR interviewee number 2).

However, 17% of the interviewees report low levels of demanded flexibility. These people feel they only have to comply with their working contracts, and believe they are not expected or demanded to work beyond it, or to adapt to any special circumstances. It is relevant to note that all of these employees belong to the “back office”, and tend to hold junior positions (analyst or specialist). In contrast the employees reporting high levels of demanded flexibility either belong to the “management consulting” workforce or hold more senior positions within the “support” group.

As far as offered flexibility is concerned, we find greater differences between employees. 61% of the employee interviewees believe the organization provides them with high levels of flexibility. We identified two recurrent elements in their discourse: the ability to work from home and to organize their working schedule:

“I really value the flexibility the company offers me. I telework 2 days a week. This allows me to avoid traffic and to have time to go to the gym twice a week. Also if one day I have personal things to do out of the office (bank or legal issues for example) I just tell my supervisor and he does not mind”. (Employee Interviewee number 17)

“I have flexibility because two days a week I leave work at 6 to take my daughter to an extracurricular activity. Then, if I need to I work from 9 to 11pm”.

(Employee Interviewee number 11)

Nevertheless, 39% of the employees we spoke to, consider their flexibility to be quite restricted. For instance, one of them told us: *“I do not have any flexibility. I cannot really decide what to do or when to do it. The client and the manager decide.”* (Employee Interviewee number 24)

In this case, the workforce the employees belong to seems to make a difference again. Most employees in the back office report high levels of offered flexibility. The official documentation shows that the company has started to put into practice some policies to empower employees in the support workforce with greater flexibility. Such policies are: (a) Telework: some employees have the opportunity to work from home between 1 and 2 days a week depending on their department and (b) Flexitime: employees are allowed to start work between 8 and 9 in the morning and finish between 6 and 7 in the evening. Both front office and back office employees have access to a third flexibility measure: (c) Flexileave: employees are allowed to apply for an unpaid extended leave of absence that can last up to two years, without putting forward any specific reason. However, since “management consulting” employees mainly work for clients and in many occasions within the clients’ establishments, flexibility options (a) and (b) have not been officially offered to them. Hence, it makes sense that their perception of offered flexibility is lower, although a few of them acknowledged they benefit from these policies in an informal way.

In addition, the professional category of the employees is also relevant. While lower level employees within the “management consulting” workforce tend to report very low levels of offered flexibility, the more experienced interviewees in this workforce with more senior positions perceive to have greater ability to adapt their working patterns. Indeed while the above mentioned formal flexibility options are not available to “management consulting” employees, perceived informal flexibility (Eaton, 2003) is higher among managers. With a longer employee-organization relationship, these employees have built trust and are less monitored, hence work more flexibly.

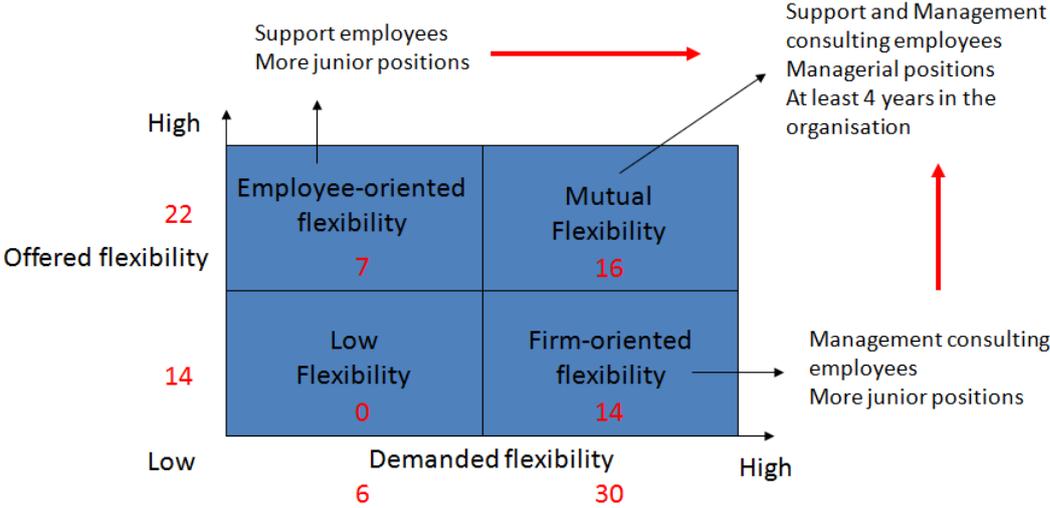
In sum we find that the interviewees experience three types of flexible work arrangements, as reported in table.

Table 2: Interviewee flexibility distribution

		Mutual Flexibility	Firm oriented flexibility	Employee oriented flexibility
Management Consultancy	Manager	6	4	0
	Non Manager	1	5	0
Support	Manager	6	1	1
	Non Manager	3	4	5
Total		16	14	6

As depicted in figure 2, the workforce employees belong to and their managerial status clearly influence their position within the flexibility matrix. While we can perceive a trend for employees in the support team to evolve from an employee-oriented flexibility arrangement to a mutual flexibility arrangement as their career progresses, employees in the management consulting workforce experience a similar evolution but starting from a firm oriented flexibility arrangement.

Figure 2: The sample within the flexibility matrix



Effects on work intensity and employee well-being

In this section we present our findings on the link between flexible work arrangements and two negative employee outcomes, increased work intensity and decreased well-being. In line

with existing research on work intensity and well-being, our evidence is based on employee self-reports which have so far been considered reliable measures (Green and McIntosh, 2001; Kelliher and Anderson, 2010, Warr, 1990).

Effects on work intensity: As discussed above, work intensity is a twofold concept that includes extensive and intensive aspects. To evaluate the former we asked the interviewees about the number of hours they devote to work activity. According to Green (2001; 56) the latter is a lot harder to measure as it is “inversely linked to the porosity of the working day, meaning those gaps between tasks during which the body or mind rests”. Following Carter et al. (2010, 11), in our interviews we discussed 3 issues to assess it: work time density (that is the percentage of time spent at the work station), average of breaks taken per day and hours spent working at maximum intensity.

Our findings support the proposition that work intensity is higher in MF and FOF arrangements. Table 3 shows that extensive effort is higher in mutual and firm oriented flexibility arrangements. Employees having an EOF arrangement report to work 45 hours during regular working time (between 9am and 7pm), as stipulated in their working contracts. In contrast, employees in MF and FOF arrangements report to work between 22% and 33% more hours than their colleagues, as most of them work both late evenings (until about 9pm) and eventually during the weekends.

Table 3: Average working hours reported by employees

Work Arrangement	Average working hours/week
Employee oriented flexibility	45
Mutual flexibility	58
Firm oriented-flexibility	55

Additionally, employees having an EOF arrangement do not report to have to work very hard, to take few breaks or have to be constantly alert as MF and FOF employees tend to do.

“I do not feel my work is very intense, there are ups and down but it is relatively stable. I do not feel I need to put 100% of my senses into doing my job”.

(Employee interviewee number 18, EOF)

“It depends on the day but in general I sit at my desk for 10 to 11 hours a day. I do take one hour for lunch, but then rest of the time I focus and I rarely go for coffee or a chat. I need to concentrate to get my work done, otherwise I would need to spend the night in the office”. (Employee interviewee number 23, FOF)

“The thing about my job is that I have to be alert. Something new comes up all the time, so I need to work fast and to be capable of dealing with high workloads”.

(Employee interviewee number 32, MF)

All in all, as expected, work intensity seems to be higher in mutual and firm oriented flexibility arrangements than in employee oriented flexibility arrangements.

On the other hand, we hypothesized that work intensity should be higher in MF arrangements than in FOF arrangements. In this case, we did not find enough evidence to support our proposition. As one can gather from table 3, the difference in terms of average working hours between the two is rather small. Moreover, required concentration and effort do not seem to be very different either. What is noticeable is that the employees in these two different arrangements point out different reasons for working intensely, hence two alternative paths to high work intensity emerge from the analysis of the interviews: involuntary and voluntary.

Involuntary high work intensity: Employees with FOF arrangements point out that their jobs require them to work very intensely. On a day to day basis, the high demanded flexibility they are subject to is translated into imposed overtime and high responsibility assumption. The fact that these employees work intensely does not stem from a voluntary personal desire to outstand, but from external circumstances they do not have control over.

“My team has to work 11 hours a day in average. If we were to leave at 7, most of the days there would still be a lot to do. New things come up during the day that we need to respond to, in addition to what was already planned and there is nothing we can do about it”. (Employee Interviewee number 21, FOF)

“Generally I work overtime every day. In average 10 or 11 hours a week, because there is no other way I can finish all I have to do otherwise. It is a lot of work. (...) Being flexible also means that I have to assume responsibilities that do not correspond

to my category. As an analyst, there are certain things I should not be doing like responding to global company calls: more tasks means more work”.

(Employee Interviewee number 8, FOF)

Voluntary high work intensity: Conversely, employees with MF arrangements were particularly clear at explaining that the great effort they devote to their tasks is voluntary, that they work hard because they want to do so.

“I think everybody needs to be aware of what the company is giving them. This is a great place to work, so if get a work call during the weekend I accept it. If there is work to do I stay, not because anybody is asking me to do so, but because I feel it is my responsibility”. (Employee interviewee number 5, MF)

This kind of high work intensity seems to be the result of commitment and a positive social exchange (Blau, 1964; Cropanzano and Mitchell, 2005). Indeed, one of the essential characteristics of employee commitment is a “willingness to exert considerable effort on behalf of the organization” (Mowday et al., 1979; 226). In the past innovative HR practices have been proven to increase commitment (Whitener, 2001; Gould-Williams and Davies, 2005) because they are interpreted by workers as indicators of the organization’s interest on them (Wayne et al., 1997). Offering flexibility to employees (for instance providing them with the option to work from home if they need to or to adapt their working schedule), makes them grateful to the organization (Peter and van der Lippe, 2007) and encourages them to reciprocate in kind.

Two days a week I can have all three meals with my family and avoid traffic, because my organization trusts me and allows me to work from home. Of course I need to repay this with my effort. (Employee Interviewee number, 13, MF).

It’s true that, when I telework, I work longer hours but I feel that is the least I can do if the company allows me to work from home. (Employee Interviewee number, 22, MF)

In sum, although we do not find support for proposition 2, there is evidence that firm oriented and mutual flexibility arrangements do not lead to high work intensity through the same path. While in FOF employees feel high work intensity to be imposed on them, in MF employees insist they voluntarily exert great effort. This finding is particularly relevant when it comes to analyzing the link between high work intensity and employee well-being.

Effects on employee health and well-being: As far as employee health and well-being are concerned, our findings support the assumption that they are lowest under a firm oriented flexibility arrangement (i.e. proposition 3). We explored this proposition by discussing with the interviewees the three different aspects of well-being aforementioned: physical, psychological and social.

All of the interviewees in FOF arrangements report to have problems with at least two of those aspects. The most common problems within the physical sphere include back-pain, headaches, difficulties to sleep and constant tiredness:

“Every trimester I need to take a few days off to recover from sleep deprivation”.

(Employee interviewee number 14, FOF)

“This job is very tiring, no doubt. It is very demanding”.

(Employee interviewee number 27, FOF)

The most recurrent psychological issues are high levels of anxiety and stress:

“At work I have to be 100% alert, but when I leave the office I still have to be at least at 50% in case something comes up. It is rather stressful”

(Employee interviewee number 7, FOF)

In terms of social interaction, employees in FOF arrangements report to have two different kinds of problems, within the workplace and outside of the workplace. The first one involves a certain discontent with the interaction with other employees, resulting from stressful working circumstances.

“I work under pressure. If the rest of my team is not 100% focused they make me lose time and I have to stay longer. We put a lot of pressure on each other and that damages our relationship. Sometimes the working climate is strained”

(Employee interviewee number 23, FOF)

The second one, takes place away from the working establishment, mainly at home, where the employee feels too tired and used up to pay attention to personal and family matters.

“Sometimes when I get home, I am so tired that I get into a fight with my husband or my children, for any silly reason”

(Employee interviewee number 16, FOF)

In contrast, 63% of the rest of the interviewees, having EOF or MF arrangements, report to have one of these problems, and only 27% mentioned elements belonging to at least two of the three aspects. Hence it seems reasonable to admit that employee well-being seems to be lowest under an FOF arrangement than under any other FWA.

As a result of the above, proposition 4 has to be rejected. Even if previous studies have linked high work intensity to decreased well-being (Schabracq and Cooper, 1997; Wichert, 2002), our results are not entirely aligned with them. Indeed, we find that interviewees affected by voluntary high work intensity are a lot less likely to point out any well-being problems than interviewees affected by involuntary high work intensity. Although MF and FOF arrangements have been found to have similar levels of work intensity, employees in MF arrangements do not perceive their jobs to negatively affect their well-being in a significant manner:

“Now that you ask, it is true that I sometimes feel a little anxious or stressed, but who does not nowadays? I wouldn’t say that my job affects my well-being particularly”.

(Employee interviewee number 10, MF)

“The only thing that comes to my mind is that, occasionally I have trouble sleeping but that is very punctual, and not always work related”.

(Employee interviewee number 5, MF)

Therefore, high work intensity is not necessarily linked to significantly decreased well-being.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

This study aims to contribute to the HRM literature by tackling two issues that have been overlooked by the extant literature on flexible work arrangements.

On the one hand the review of the literature shows the existence of certain inconsistencies in the definition of flexibility at work. While some studies consider flexibility to be an organizational tool to adapt to changing market demands, others see it as an employee centric practice that helps workers balance work and non-work duties. First, this paper develops a framework that aims to overcome this conceptual duality, by encompassing both sides of the debate. Drawing on Tsui et al.’s (1997) employee-organisation relationship we build a model

that contemplates flexibility of employees (demanded flexibility) and flexibility for employees (offered flexibility) simultaneously, stating that existing FWA lay at the intersection of both. Four ideal types of arrangements are characterized and depicted in “the flexibility matrix”: low flexibility, employee oriented flexibility, firm oriented flexibility and mutual flexibility.

Our interview data shows that indeed, employees within the studied organization experience different combinations of offered and demanded flexibility. They are situated within three of the four quadrants in the flexibility matrix. We find their experience to be dependent on two major factors: the workforce they belong to and their professional category. These findings go in line with the literature. As noted by Kerkhofs et al. (2008), firm-oriented flexibility arrangements are common in big organizations subject to savage competition, in which workload is mainly unforeseeable. Most employees within the “management consulting” workforce face the client and are submitted to its needs, they are required to be flexible in order to meet such needs. When in junior positions, employees are hardly offered any flexibility, they work within the client’s establishment and abide by the client’s rules. However, as they progress in their career, they build a long term, broad commitment with the organization, based on mutual trust (Blau, 1964), and the flexibility that is offered to them grows accordingly.

In contrast, within the support workforce, we find several cases of employee-oriented flexibility arrangements. Such arrangements are likely to exist where workload variation is little and foreseeable. This seems to be the case for some support departments such as finance, information systems or human resource management. Even if their workload is noticeable, it is rather stable and easier to predict, hence in general there is no need to require great flexibility from employees. Moreover, since the company is highly dependent on employee knowledge and cooperation, and in the back office there are no client imposed restrictions, offered flexibility is high. Nevertheless, as employees in this workforce assume greater responsibilities, the type of work they do changes, requiring them to provide more flexibility. Hence, as they progress in their careers, they tend to evolve towards mutual flexibility arrangements.

On the other hand, this paper develops a theoretical rationale for the relationship between those flexible work arrangements and two undesirable HRM outcomes. We agree with

Pfeffer's (2010, 36) statement that the scope of dependent variables in management research should be broadened and that interesting questions will arise if we progress in our understanding of the connections between organizational practices and human well-being. Although the use of flexible working practices in organizations is growing (Kersley et al., 2006) and the related academic literature is developing fast, extant studies have basically concentrated on the effects over performance and job satisfaction. So far the links between FWA and undesirable outcomes such as increased work intensity and decreased employee health and well-being remain largely unexplored. In light of this gap, this paper contributes to the conceptualization of those links and the understanding of the mechanisms through which they occur.

In this sense, we find preliminary evidence to support two of our propositions. Indeed, we find that work intensity seems to be higher in mutual and firm oriented flexibility arrangements than in employee oriented flexibility arrangements. This is so because requiring flexibility from employees is a tool to adapt to competitive pressures and changing environmental conditions. Rendering work more flexible implies passing competitive pressure on to employees, who need to make tight deadlines and fulfil client's expectations (Bonazzi, 1993). This requires them to work more intensely (Burchell et al., 2002), both in terms of working time and intensive effort.

However, proposition 2 is not supported by our interview data. We find no significant difference on work intensity levels between MF and FOF arrangements. Nevertheless, we point out that the reasons for employees to work intensely in these two different arrangements seem to depict two alternative paths to high work intensity. The first one, that we label involuntary, is the result of perceived pressure that the employees have no control over. For Bonazzi (1993), because of this pressure, employees are structurally obliged to go beyond the stated limits of their tasks. For example some authors argue that requiring functional flexibility pushes polyvalent workers to stand for absent colleagues while they keep up with their jobs (van de Beukel and Molleman, 2002). The combination of high demands and a flexible schedule may also result in individuals working longer hours (White et al., 2003), because they feel pressure to finish work as soon as possible.

We label the second path to work intensification "voluntary" because it results from, incentives that constitute a way to obtain maximum discretionary effort from employees

(Appelbaum et al., 2000). Certain HR practices act as incentives, as they make employees perceive the organization is supporting them (Shore and Shore, 2005). Indeed, evidence exists that the implementation of some employer-based policies and benefits, over time, incites employees to respond in kind (Settoon et al., 1996; Haar and Spell, 2004; Whitener, 2001; Tsui et al., 1997). The workforce interprets such organizational practices as indicators of the organization's commitment to them (Wayne et al., 1997). Hence it seems natural to conclude they will reciprocate this feeling by increasing their commitment to the organization and deploying more effort. The rationale for flexibility is that when the organisation offers flexibility, such flexibility is reciprocated with greater commitment and effort.

This unexpected finding goes in line with Kelliher and Anderson's (2010) who show that flexible work arrangements generate work intensification simultaneously as a result of impositions on employees and of a beneficial social exchange between the employer and the employee. This finding is particularly relevant as we identify that the link between high work intensity and low well-being seems to depend on the pathway leading to such work intensity. In accordance with Karasek's (1979) postulates for the "*job demands- job control*" model, we find that when work intensity is augmented involuntarily feelings of anxiety and stress arise, physical health problems such as headaches are reported, and social well-being is diminished as a result of difficult social interactions. In the case of voluntary high work intensity, the workers have a discretion and control feeling that mitigates the negative effect of increasing effort demands, hence they do not feel their well-being is negatively affected. Nevertheless, we must say that even if high work intensity happens voluntarily, hence does not seem to have a direct negative effect on well-being in the short term, we agree with Green's (2001, 55) statement that "a process of growth that relies on work intensification is sure to be self-limiting". In this sense, identifying and controlling all kinds of work intensification may be advisable.

In light of these findings, we must reject proposition 4: high work intensity is not necessarily linked to significantly decreased well-being. Conversely there seems to be evidence that proposition 3 is correct: health and well-being are lowest for employees in firm-oriented flexibility arrangements than for employees in any other arrangement.

Beyond its findings, we believe this study has implications for future empirical research on flexible work arrangements. On the one hand, the flexibility matrix may provide guidance for

future firm level empirical research on the conceptualization of flexibility. In particular, it underscores that, rather than contemplating a single perspective of flexibility, it could be more accurate to consider a dual perspective. On the other hand, we should also note that a decrease in employee well-being has been found to have detrimental effects on performance and organizational results (Hart and Cooper, 2001; Ricci et al., 2007). If the above proposed links between FWA, work intensity, and health and well-being were confirmed, those negative HRM outcomes should be considered as possible mediators of the relationship between FWA and performance.

Obviously our results have to be taken cautiously considering the frame in which the study has been undertaken. At first, the analysis conducted in this article is only exploratory. However, the quantitative testing of our propositions, using an employee random survey, will be the next step in our research project. Second, the analysis is limited to one company. Yet authors like Donnelly (2008), Thompson (2007) or Truss (2001) or Hailey et al. (2005) have made significant contributions in the innovative HRM domain by deeply analyzing one specific company, and understanding its processes. In addition, the literature has claimed for further qualitative in depth research in this field (Guest, 1997; Purcell, 1999; Bjorkman and Xiucheng, 2002). Moreover, even if the results cannot be directly extrapolated to other organizations, as noted in the methodology section, this is a valuable study because it is looking at a critical case (Goldthorpe, 1968). Finally, for the sake of brevity, several relevant issues have not been tackled in this paper. For we intend to further explore the reasons to adopt one flexible work arrangement or another, or the existing tradeoffs between physical, psychological and social well-being (Grant et al., 2007) in future paper.

To conclude, we must say that debates over the extent to which flexible work arrangements can have negative consequences on employees, have been extremely rare. This article has tried to fill in this gap in the literature by examining two detrimental effects of different combinations of flexibility. All in all, we conclude that it is important for managers and HR practitioners to consider the impact that flexibility practices have on employees with a wide lens. If the nature and the implementation of flexibility are likely to negatively influence employee well-being it is reasonable to assume, they will reduce their performance as well. Although flexibility can have very positive impacts, overlooking these issues may be limiting their potential.

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