**Sloan Network Encyclopedia Entry**

**Alternative Work Arrangements (2004)**

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**Basic Concepts & Definitions**

Alternative work arrangements (AWA) represent employment arrangements that are arranged through an employment intermediary such as a temporary help firm or where the place, time, and quantity of work are potentially unpredictable (Polivka, 1996). This is the definition the Bureau of Labor Statistics uses to identify and measure the prevalence of such arrangements in the US work force. In total about 9% of the U.S. workforce is employed in these arrangements, which include independent contractors, temporary agency workers, on-call workers, and workers provided by contract companies.

The term "alternative work arrangements" is also often used interchangeably with *alternative employment arrangements, contingent employment, nonstandard work arrangements, reduced time employment,* and *flexible work arrangements*. Unfortunately these terms are often used inconsistently, which creates some confusion. For example, in work-family research alternative work arrangements often refer to flexible work arrangements [See Encyclopedia entry, Flexible Work Arrangements], whereas in industrial relations and sociological contexts, alternative work arrangements are often used interchangeably with contingent and nonstandard employment. A better label for AWA would be alternative *employment* arrangements, which suggests both the alternative nature of these arrangements and that the focus is on the type of employment arrangement rather than type of work schedule. Below is a summary of the distinctions and overlaps with alternative work (employment) arrangements.

The BLS defines contingent employment as any job that does not have an explicit or implicit contract for long-term employment (Polivka, 1996). The distinction between contingent work and AWA is contentious. Indeed many researchers have used the definition of AWA as their definition of contingent work or have simply coined new labels such as nonstandard work arrangements (Kalleberg, Reskin, & Hudson, 2000). Conceptual disagreements focus on what characteristic of the work is most important. On the expansive side, there are those who consider contingent employment any work that is peripheral, less economically secure, unstable, or not considered the norm (Belous, 1989; Polivka, Cohany, & Hipple, 2000). Under this definition there is wide overlap with the concept of AWA. In contrast, the narrowest definition (e.g. no implicit long-term contract) comes from the BLS. Under this narrow definition, the BLS reports that about 5% of the workforce is contingent (Hipple, 2001).
Nonstandard work arrangements represent any work arrangement that is other than a standard full-time job and therefore includes part-time employment in otherwise standard work arrangements (Kalleberg, Reskin & Hudson, 2000). Kalleberg, Reskin & Hudson (2000) argue that standard employment arrangements are characterized by the exchange of a worker's labor for monetary compensation from an employer, with work done on a fixed schedule, usually full-time, at the employer's place of business, under the employer's control, and with the mutual expectation of continued employment. Nonstandard work arrangements are also often used interchangeably (and therefore inaccurately according to the BLS) with contingent work, probably because it represents a much larger proportion of the workforce (i.e. 30% for nonstandard vs. 9% for AWA vs. 5% for contingent employment). Essentially nonstandard work comprises AWA plus part-time standard work arrangements.

Reduced-time arrangements [See Encyclopedia entry, Reduced Hours Work/ Part-time Work] generally represent employment arrangements where the hours of work are less than 35 hours a week. About 18% of the workforce is in reduced or part-time work arrangements. About 14% of employees in AWA are also working part time.

Flexible work arrangements allow work to be performed on a reduced hour basis, before or after standard working hours (i.e. 9:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. Monday through Friday), with a variation in schedules, and/or from alternative locations (e.g. telework). Researchers have also used the term "nonstandard employment schedules" (c.f. Cox & Presser, 2000) to describe these work arrangements. It is likely that a significant proportion of independent contractors, temporary agency employees, and contract company employees also perform their work before or after standard working hours; and in different locations, however; there is limited information concerning the percentage overlap between alternative and flexible work arrangements. In general, flexible work arrangements focus on the "when and where" of work, and AWA focus on the "with whom" the employment arrangement is with, which has implications for who determines "the when and where" of the work.

**Importance of Topic to Work-Family Studies**

Some scholars see growth trends in AWA, as defined above, as responsive to family demographic changes (Albert & Bradley, 1997; Arthur & Rousseau, 1995). With dual-earner households as the statistically normative family structure, alternative employment arrangements offer independence from organizationally based career paths, which are being challenged as outdated and inflexible, especially for dual-earner households (Albert & Bradley, 1997; Bradach, 1997). On the other hand, critics note that independence and flexibility come at a high price. Alternative employment arrangements increase exposure to poor quality jobs, especially for women (Barker & Christensen, 1998; Kalleberg et al., 2000).
The question of whether workers "choose" and prefer part-time to standard employment has been widely explored (Blank, 1990; Blossfeld & Hakim, 1996; Meiksins & Whalley, 2002; Negrey, 1991; Tilly, 1996) but less is specifically known about whether AWA are a solution to work-family demands faced by dual-earner households.

In our culture, women are socialized to be homemakers and men to be family financial providers (Bernard, 1981; Moen, 2001). Marler & Moen (2003) using a national probability sample of independent contractors and temporary help agency employees found that those in AWA still reflect normative beliefs about paid work, unpaid family care work, and gender. Qualitative research also highlights the importance of gender-role orientation and stereotypes in shaping attitudes toward temporary employment (e.g., Rogers, 2000), or of reduced-time arrangements of female professional independent contractors (e.g., Meiksins & Whalley, 2002). Loscocco (1997) interviewed 30 self-employed individuals to understand to what extent, individuals away from the constraints of traditional employment reenacted or diverged from traditional gender roles. Her results showed that gender is a deeply embedded feature of work roles even apart from traditional structures. Men enacted work schedules that mirrored standard wage and salary employment. Married women worked around their family demands. Thus while self-employment offered the possibility for flexibility and autonomy, men and women exhibited gendered responses consistent with male breadwinner and female caretaker expectations.

State of the Body of Knowledge

Despite the uniformity connoted by the use of a single term, recent descriptive research on AWA reveals significant diversity within and across individuals in alternative work arrangements (see www.bls.gov). A brief demographic overview of each type of AWA drawn from this descriptive research, clearly illustrates the diversity.

Independent contractors are the largest group of workers in alternative work arrangements, representing about two thirds of those in alternative work arrangements and 6.5% of the entire workforce. Independent contractors are more likely to be white, male, over the age of 35, and hold a bachelor's degree. Part time work is also more common among independent contractors. Twenty-five percent of independent contractors worked part time compared to with 18% of workers in regular work arrangements.

Temporary help agency workers are those workers who are paid by a temporary help agency and at any point in time represent approximately 1% of the workforce. Temporary help agency employees are more likely to be women, black or Hispanic, and under the age of 35 years. Temporary help agency workers are also over represented in the manufacturing and services industries and in the administrative support and laborer occupations. In the last twenty years, this arrangement has been the fastest growing segment of the workforce, estimated at a rate of 11% per year compared to the regular workforce growth rate of
2% (Segal & Sullivan, 1997). This growth rate has slowed considerably since the mid-1990s (Polvika et al., 2000).

On-call workers are those workers who are only called into work when needed, for example substitute teachers or construction day laborers. They are the second largest category of alternative work arrangements. They comprise about 1.7% of the workforce (Polvika et al., 2000). On-call workers are more likely to be under the age of 25, and not surprisingly, to work part time.

Workers provided by contract companies are individuals working for a contract company, and who usually work for only one customer and usually work at the customer's worksite. Individuals in these work arrangements are predominately male and less likely to work part time. The majority of contract company workers were employed by the services and manufacturing industries. Examples include computer programmers, food service workers and security guards. This segment of the work force is growing rapidly as outsourcing becomes more accepted; however, it is still the smallest of the alternative work classifications, representing about .6% of the workforce.

Since the growth trend in alternative and contingent employment first gained attention in the mid 1980s (Belous, 1989), researchers have applied different theoretical perspectives to explain the trend. Applying dual labor market theory (Doeringer & Piore, 1971), some scholars fear that the increases in AWA indicate that secondary labor market dynamics are spreading into the economy's core. These trends are troubling because jobs in secondary labor markets are less stable and marked by lower wages compared to those in primary labor markets (Kunda, Barley, & Evans, 2002). Several ethnographies of temporary work (McAllister, 1998; Parker, 1994; Rogers, 2000), reduced-time (Negrey, 1991; Tilly, 1996), and contract work (Barker & Christensen, 1998) highlight the secondary labor market characteristics of jobs in AWA. Kalleberg, Reskin, & Hudson's (2000) quantitative analyses also reveals that nonstandard employment strongly increases workers exposure to poor quality jobs that include low wages and no benefits.

Economists explain increases in AWA in terms of changes in demand and supply. Demand changes result from changing employer preferences and product markets. Labor supply changes are driven by changes in wages and individual preferences for work (Blau, Ferber, & Winkler, 1997). On the demand side, increases in AWA are a consequence of product market volatility and increased foreign competition (Abraham, 1988; Golden, 1996), decreased union influence (Barker & Christensen, 1998; Capelli et al., 1997) and increasing employee benefits costs (Abraham & Taylor, 1996; Houseman, 1997). On the supply side, employee preferences such as those of married women in the workplace who desire more flexible schedules (Golden & Appelbaum, 1992; Laird & Williams, 1996; Loscocco, 1997) and individuals who retire and reenter the workforce as independent contractors (Kohli, 1994) explain the increases in the supply of individuals rather than increases in wages. The empirical evidence indicates that demand
factors (uncertainty in product markets; decline in unions, increasing costs of employee benefits) and supply factors (growth of the female labor supply) both coincide with the growth of alternative work arrangements (Aronson, 1991; Golden, 1996; Laird & Williams, 1996). Those interested in work and family research have examined the consequences (e.g. lower wages for married women) of apparent preferences for alternative employment (Hundley, 2003; Rothstein, 1996).

Research by organizational scientists suggests that changing strategies and transaction costs (Lepak & Snell, 1999) explain the increasing tendency for organizations to externalize employees (Pfeffer & Barron, 1988). Coincident with this shift in staffing policy, researchers have also noted a shift in career norms (Arthur & Rousseau, 1995). As job security and promotional opportunities within larger organizations decline, individuals are increasingly accepting a new conception of career (Marler, Barringer, & Milkovich, 2002). Boundaryless careers represent a different conception of job security where an individual's job security is validated by the external labor market and not within an organization's internal labor market. Several ethnographic studies depict this emerging free-market agency phenomenon, which appears to occur principally among the higher skilled in AWA (See Kunda et al., 2002; Meiksins & Whalley, 2002). These recent studies break the mold of earlier ethnographies that have focused exclusively on how individuals in AWA are exploited because of spreading secondary labor market characteristics.

**Implications for Policy and Practice**

Future research on AWA would benefit first and foremost from greater clarification and agreement on terminology with respect to terms such as alternative work arrangements, flexible work arrangements, nonstandard work arrangements and contingent work. The study of AWA requires a multidisciplinary perspective consequently, if we are to advance our knowledge across disciplines it is critical we develop consistency in how we define and label key concepts.

Future research will benefit from taking a multi-disciplinary perspective. For example, more studies are needed that consider the effect of family structure such as the division of household labor on the preferences and attitudes of those who work in alternative work arrangements. Along these lines, Marler, Tolbert, & Milkovich's (2003) exploratory study of dual earner couples in alternative work arrangements found that the wives, in couples where the wives worked in alternative employment and husbands in standard employment, reported feeling significantly more successful at balancing work and family than wives in couples where both worked in standard employment arrangements. On the other hand, the reverse was true for men in alternative employment with wives in standard employment. Marler, Tolbert, & Milkovich note, however, that alternative employment arrangements cannot be summarily described as either effective or ineffective strategies for managing work and family demands of dual earners. There are multi-level effects operating to shape the preferences and consequent voluntary labor supply decisions of those in AWA.
From an organizational perspective, given the diversity across the types of alternative employment arrangements, more studies are needed to understand what factors account for the differences and similarities across the classifications. For example, studies that explore the determinants and consequences of work structures and institutions, such as occupations (clerical, technical writing, programmers) and industries (high technology, construction, entertainment) that are favorable for AWA might be fruitful. This line of research would also benefit if it extended across all four types of AWA.

From a policy perspective, there is clearly a need to reconsider labor policies in the light of changing employment arrangements. Current US labor laws, primarily crafted in the 1930s and 1940s, are premised on a "standard" employment arrangement and employer-employee relationship. Consequently, individuals in AWA are less likely to have the protections afforded by the Fair Labor Standards Act, Civil Rights Act, Age Discrimination Employment Act, Family Medical Leave Act and the Occupational Safety and Hazards Act (Carnevale, Jennings, & Eisenmann, 1998). They are also less likely to participate in medical and pension benefits provided by employers to their employees (Houseman, 1997). Several scholars have attempted to address these policy issues (See Barker & Christensen, 1998 and Carre, Ferber, Golden & Herzenberg, 2000). There are however challenges to crafting new policies. One is to reach consensus and consistency over definitions of the various employment relationships and arrangements. Another and more compelling challenge is how to address such a diverse group of workers in an equitable way.

References


**Other Recommended Readings on this Topic:**


**Locations in the Matrix of Information Domains of the Work-Family Area of Studies**

The Editorial Board of the Teaching Resources section of the Sloan Work and Family Research Network has prepared a Matrix as a way to locate important work-family topics in the broad area of work-family studies. ([More about the Matrix ...])

Concepts related to adult development are relevant to all of the "Individual" domains in the Matrix of Information Domains of the Work-Family Area of Study. In addition, theories of adult development are relevant to Domain F: Theoretical Underpinnings.
Note: The domain areas most closely related to the entry’s topic are presented in full color. Other domains, represented in gray, are provided for context.

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Domain F: Theoretical Underpinnings to All Domains
About the Matrix

Sloan Work and Family Research Network
Resources for Teaching: Mapping the Work-Family Area of Studies

Introduction

It was appropriate that the members of the Founding Editorial Board of the Resources for Teaching began their work in 2000, for their project represented one of the turning points in the area of work and family studies. This group accepted the challenge of developing resources that could support the efforts of teaching faculty from different disciplines and professional schools to better integrate the work-family body of knowledge into their curricula. The Virtual Think Tank began its work with a vision, a spirit of determination, and sense of civic responsibility to the community of work-family scholars.

A fundamental challenge emerged early in the process. It became clear that before we could design resources that would support the teaching of those topics, we would first need to inventory topics and issues relevant to the work-family area of studies (and begin to distinguish the work-family aspect of these topics from "non work-family" aspects).

The members of the Virtual Think Tank were well aware that surveying the area of work and family studies would be a daunting undertaking. However, we really had no other choice. And so, we began to grapple with the mapping process.

Purpose

1. To develop a preliminary map of the body of knowledge relevant to the work-family area of study that reflects current, "across-the-disciplines" understanding of work-family phenomena.

2. To create a flexible framework (or map) that clarifies the conceptual relationships among the different information domains that comprise the work-family knowledge base.

It is important to understand that this mapping exercise was undertaken as a way to identify and organize the wide range of work-family topics. This project was not intended as a meta-analysis for determining the empirical relationships between specific variables. Therefore, our map of the workfamily
area of study does not include any symbols that might suggest the relationships between specific factors or clusters of factors.

Process

The Virtual Think Tank used a 3-step process to create the map of the work-family area of studies.

1. **Key Informants:** The members of the Virtual Think Tank included academics from several different disciplines and professions who have taught and written about work-family studies for years. During the first stage of the mapping process, the Virtual Think Tank functioned as a panel of key informants.

   Initially, the Panel engaged in a few brainstorming sessions to identify work-family topics that could be addressed in academic courses. The inductive brainstorming sessions initially resulted in the identification of nearly 50 topics.

   Once the preliminary list of topics had been generated, members of the Virtual Think Tank pursued a deductive approach to the identification of work-family issues. Over the course of several conversations, the Virtual Think Tank created a conceptual map that focused on information domains (see Table 1 below).

   The last stage of the mapping process undertaken by the Virtual Think Tank consisted of comparing and adjusting the results of the inductive and deductive processes. The preliminary, reconciled list was used as the first index for the Online Work and Family Encyclopedia.

2. **Literature review:** Members of the project team conducted literature searches to identify writings in which authors attempted to map the work-family area of study or specific domains of this area. The highlights of the literature review will be posted on February 1, 2002 when the First Edition of the Work-Family Encyclopedia will be published.

3. **Peer review:** On October 1, 2001, the Preliminary Mapping of the work-family area of study was posted on the website of the Sloan Work and Family Research Network. The members of the Virtual Think Tank invite work-family leaders to submit suggestions and comments about the Mapping and the List of Work-Family Topics. The Virtual Think Tank will consider the suggestions and, as indicated, will make adjustments in both of these products. Please send your comments to Marcie Pitt-Catsouphes at pittcats@bc.edu
Assumptions

Prior to identifying the different information domains relevant to the work-family area of study, members of the Virtual Think Tank adopted two premises:

1. **Our use of the word "family" refers to both traditional and nontraditional families. Therefore, we consider the term "work-family" to be relevant to individuals who might reside by themselves.** Many work-family leaders have noted the problematic dimensions of the term "work-family" (see Barnett, 1999). In particular, concern has been expressed that the word "family" continues to connote the married couple family with dependent children, despite the widespread recognition that family structures and relationships continue to be very diverse and often change over time. As a group, we understand the word "family" to refer to relationships characterized by deep caring and commitment that exist over time. We do not limit family relationships to those established by marriage, birth, blood, or shared residency.

2. **It is important to examine and measure work-family issues and experiences at many different levels, including: individual, dyadic (e.g., couple relationships, parent-child relationships, caregiver-caretaker relationships), family and other small groups, organizational, community, and societal. Much of the work-family discourse glosses over the fact that the work-family experiences of one person or stakeholder group may, in fact, be different from (and potentially in conflict with) those of another.**

Outcomes

We will publish a Working Paper, "Mapping the Work-Family Area of Study," on the Sloan Work and Family Research Network in 2002. In this publication, we will acknowledge the comments and suggestions for improvement sent to us.

Limitations

It is important to understand that the members of the Virtual Think Tank viewed their efforts to map the work-family area of study as a "work in progress." We anticipate that we will periodically review and revise the map as this area of study evolves.

The members of the panel are also cognizant that other scholars may have different conceptualizations of the work-family area of study. We welcome your comments and look forward to public dialogue about this important topic.
Listing of the Information Domains Included in the Map

The members of the Virtual Think Tank wanted to focus their map of work-family issues around the experiences of five principal stakeholder groups:

1. individuals,
2. families,
3. workplaces,
4. communities, and
5. society-at-large.

Each of these stakeholder groups is represented by a row in the Table 1, Information Domain Matrix (below).

Work-Family Experiences: The discussions of the members of the Virtual Think Tank began with an identification of some of the salient needs & priorities/problems & concerns of the five principal stakeholder groups. These domains are represented by the cells in Column B of the Information Domain Matrix.

- Individuals' work-family needs & priorities
- Individuals' work-family problems & concerns
- Families' work-family need & priorities
- Families' work-family problems & concerns
- Needs & priorities of workplaces related to work-family issues
- Workplace problems & concerns related to work-family issues
- Needs & priorities of communities related to work-family issues
- Communities' problems & concerns related to work-family issues
- Needs and priorities of society related to work-family issues
- Societal problems & concerns related to work-family issues

Antecedents: Next, the Virtual Think Tank identified the primary roots causes and factors that might have either precipitated or affected the work-family experiences of the principal stakeholder groups. These domains are highlighted in Column A of the Information Domain Matrix.

- Individual Antecedents
- Family Antecedents
- Workplace Antecedents
Community Antecedents

Societal Antecedents

**Covariates:** The third set of information domains include factors that moderate the relationships between the antecedents and the work-family experiences of different stakeholder groups (see Column C in Table 1).

- Individual Covariates
- Family Covariates
- Workplace Covariates
- Community Covariates
- Societal Covariates

**Decisions and Responses:** The responses of the stakeholder groups to different work-family experiences are highlighted in Column D.

- Individual Decision and Responses
- Family Decisions and Responses
- Workplace Decisions and Responses
- Community Decisions and Responses
- Public Sector Decisions and Responses

**Outcomes & Impacts:** The fifth set of information domains refer to the outcomes and impacts of different work-family issues and experiences on the principal stakeholder groups (see Column E).

- Outcomes & Impacts on Individuals
- Outcomes & Impacts on Families
- Outcomes & Impacts on Workplaces
- Outcomes & Impacts on Communities
- Outcomes & Impacts on Society

**Theoretical Foundations:** The Virtual Think Tank established a sixth information domain to designate the multi-disciplinary theoretical underpinnings to the work-family area of study (noted as Information Domain F).
Table 1: Matrix of Information Domains (9/30/01)

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