Flexible Work Arrangements (2003)

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Basic Concepts and Definitions

Flexible work arrangements is a term used to describe a group of alternative work options that allow work to be accomplished outside of the traditional temporal and/or spatial boundaries of a standard workday. Although there is no truly "standard" workday, the traditional workday is defined as a forty-hour week, from 9:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m., Monday through Friday (Catalyst, 1997). By contrast, flexible work arrangements allow work to be performed on a reduced hours basis, before or after standard working hours, and/or from alternative locations (such as the home). In the terms of boundary theory (Ashforth, Kreiner, & Fugate, 2000) [see Encyclopedia entry, Boundary/Border Theory and Work-Family Integration], flexible work arrangements allow for greater integration of roles through greater permeability and/or flexibility of the spatial and temporal boundaries separating them. Flexible work arrangements include options that, to varying degrees, relax the boundaries of the standard workday. Some examples include flextime (or flexible scheduling) [see Encyclopedia entry, Flextime], telecommuting (or telework) [see Encyclopedia entry, Telecommuting], compressed work weeks, and part-time or job-sharing arrangements. Flextime enables workers to adjust the timing of their work and while flextime arrangements often require employees to be present during a set of core hours, employees are able to vary their start and stop times around those core hours. Telecommuting refers to an arrangement whereby some of the time that traditionally would be spent at the worksite is spent working at home using telecommunications technology (e.g., fax, modem) to facilitate communication between the worker at home and the worksite. Telecommuting arrangements may or may not require the individual to be available during certain specified hours of the workday. According to Hartman, Stoner, & Arora (1991), the most productive telecommuting arrangements tend to be those that restrict telecommuting to a portion of the work arrangement, such as two or three days working at home rather than telecommuting full-time. Under a compressed workweek arrangement, employees typically work a standard 40-hour week but may only work 3 or 4 days of the week (i.e., putting in more than 8 hours but working fewer days). Finally, part-time arrangements are considered flexible work arrangements and may include, for example, job sharing where two individuals will share and coordinate one full-time job. Within each of these options, the degree of permeability and/or flexibility of the spatial and temporal boundaries separating work from other activities that is allowed by a given employer can vary significantly.
In an annual survey of human resource professionals conducted by the Society for Human Resource Management, 58% responded that their organizations were now offering flextime, a 7% increase over the previous year. Similarly, 37% responded that they were offering telecommuting, an increase of 11% over the previous year (SHRM Foundation, 2001). Employers believe flexible work arrangements are popular with applicants because it is assumed that the increased flexibility of spatial (where work is conducted) and/or temporal (when work is conducted) boundaries of work will allow workers to handle competing demands from work and personal interests (e.g., Bohl, 1996; Scott, 1996).

Making the transition from a traditional workplace to one that embraces flexible work arrangements is a significant challenge for employers. Initially, an assessment must be made ascertaining the need for flexible work arrangements. This may include a workforce demographics analysis and needs assessment. Second, an assessment of the culture and barriers to harmonizing work and personal life issues at the workplace should be conducted in addition to an “end state” analysis that captures the work and life balance culture that is desired by the organization and its employees (e.g., Bailyn & Fletcher, 1997). As Bailyn & Fletcher (1997) found, successful implementation of flexible work arrangements may mean conducting job analysis, changing management attitudes, changing performance appraisal systems, and reassigning work responsibilities. In this regard, literature on organizational change can be of value by way of providing guidance.

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

Flexible work arrangements have been important for work-family studies because the interface between work and family demands is a significant cause of interrole conflict, defined by Greenhaus and Beutell (1985, p. 77) as conflict experienced, “when pressures arising in one role are incompatible with pressures arising in another role.” Since the design and structure of work arrangements directly influence that interface, the type of work arrangement is assumed to either facilitate or constrain the ability of individuals to manage competing demands from work and personal interests (e.g., Bohl, 1996; Scott, 1996).

The intent of flexible work arrangements is to alleviate the scarcity of time and energy, and hence interrole conflict. What is not clear, however, is whether, or under what circumstances, increased flexibility and/or impermeability in the spatial and temporally boundaries of work increase or decrease interrole conflict. While increased flexibility may improve one's ability to handle competing demands, it may result in role-blurring which creates confusion about which demands should be attended to at any given time and/or increases the degree of interference between roles, resulting in a situation in which the individual is never really free from either work or family demands.
State of the Body of Knowledge

The rise of flexible work arrangements as an alternative to the standard and traditional work hours has been attributed to several changes. Kirrane (1994) identified several including demographic (e.g., aging population, increasing longevity, longer workforce participation, differences in the perceived value of work), sociocultural (more dual income and single parent families, increased hours spent at work), technological advances (e.g., computers, cell phones, wireless Internet access), business and economic (e.g., improving employee productivity, minimizing costs, downsizing) and changes in the legal environment (e.g., Family and Medical Leave Act, Equal Employment Opportunity laws, Americans with Disabilities Act). These changes have created incentives for employers to offer different benefits and established a framework to allow innovations in the traditional work arrangements to flourish.

Research on flexible work arrangements is disjointed; most studies look at only one particular form of arrangement (e.g., telecommuting) rather than attempting comparisons across the various types of flexible work arrangements. As a general rule, it appears that telecommuting has received more attention than other types of flexible work arrangements. Further, scholars and practitioners have yet to develop a consistent and commonly accepted vocabulary or typology to describe the different forms of flexible work arrangements and the dimensions along which they vary. Variation within each type of arrangement (e.g., telecommuting or flextime) remains poorly understood. Until such a common vocabulary or typology is developed and accepted, documenting the prevalence of flexible work arrangements and employer intentions to offer them will be difficult and the ability to make generalizations from research to practice will be hampered.

The research on flexible work arrangements has tended to focus on five primary issues. First, limited survey research has attempted to document the prevalence of flexible work arrangements and managerial attitudes toward these arrangements (e.g., Bond, Galinsky, & Swanberg, 1998).

Second, the majority of research on this topic has been aimed at understanding the influence of flexibility in work arrangements on a variety of individual-level outcomes. For example, flextime and telecommuting have been shown to have positive relationships with job satisfaction, productivity, and retention (Baltes, Briggs, Huff, Wright, & Neuman, 1999; Boston College, 2000; Hill, Miller, Weiner, & Colihan, 1998; Thomas & Ganster, 1995; Trent, Smith, & Wood, 1994) and negative relationships with depression, and absenteeism (Baltes et al., 1999; Thomas & Ganster, 1995). Accountants working under flexible work arrangements have been shown to have higher job satisfaction, lower turnover intentions, and lower levels of burnout and stressors (Almer & Kaplan, 2002). Flexible work arrangements, in particular reduced hours, have also been studied with regard to their impact on career development, promotion, and family balance issues (e.g., Bond, Galinsky, & Swanberg, 1998; Lee & MacDermid, 1998; MacDermid, Lee, Buck, & Williams, 2001.)
Third, some research has been devoted to understanding the moderating role of role conflict in influencing the relationship between flexible work arrangements and various outcomes. For example, Scandura and Lankau (1997) found that flextime arrangements were more strongly related to organizational commitment and job satisfaction for individuals with kinship responsibilities than for those without such responsibilities. Likewise, Krausz and Freibach (1983) found a significant negative effect for flextime on absenteeism, with moderating effects for marital status and parental status. Rau & Hyland (2002) found that applicant attraction to telecommuting and flextime differed as a function of role conflict. Hill et al. (1998) found that neither qualitative nor quantitative data from their study of telework supported the notion that telework increases the ability to balance work and personal life. A study by the Boston College Center for Work and Family (2000) found that telecommuting might increase stress for those individuals unable to separate their work selves from their family selves.

Fourth, while scholars have speculated as to the characteristics of individuals who would be most likely to choose to use flexible work arrangements, little empirical work has been done in this area. Feldman and Gainey (1997) proposed that married workers and workers with kinship responsibilities would be more likely to initiate telecommuting arrangements than single workers and workers without kinship responsibilities, Kurland and Bailey (1999) suggested the opposite because telecommuting could result in strained family relationships because children and spouses may not respect the boundaries of a home worker's office. Flexible work arrangements have also been proposed to be attractive to older workers looking for bridge employment (Siegenthaler & Brenner, 2000).

Finally, flexible work arrangements have been studied in the context of their implications for societies and national employment policies. One example, compensatory time off, is commonly offered in the public sector in the U.S. but is illegal in the private sector. The debate over whether compensatory time off should be allowed is deeply rooted in arguments about job and income security. Some types of flexible work arrangements (most notably comp time and reduced hours) have been criticized as a way for employers to reduce their employment obligations and labor costs through the development of a contingent work force or secondary labor market and at the expense of improvements in the standard of living (e.g., Appiah-Mfordwa & Horwitz, 2000; Walsh, D. J., 1999). It is debatable as to whether flexible work arrangements improve or harm work relationships and the overall health and welfare of workers in a given country and the debate is obscured by differences in the interpretation of which arrangements are rightly classified as flexible work arrangements (see, for example, Zeytinoglu, 1999).

Many issues would seem to be on the horizon for flexible work arrangements. The current debate in the U.S. over compensatory time off is but one of them. In addition, flexible work arrangements raise many issues regarding workers' compensation claims, liability, and employee privacy.
Implications for Practice and Research

Flexible work arrangements are usually justified on the basis of their benefits to employees. Employers are looking to reduce stress, increase satisfaction and morale, reduce absenteeism and tardiness and ultimately improve recruitment, retention, and performance. However, the research, while still in its infancy, does not appear to support the use of flexible work arrangements as a broad brushstroke to achieve these ends. Flexible work arrangements do not appear to have a significant impact on productivity. The only interventions that clearly demonstrate a reduction of interrole conflict due to work and family demands are those that involve a reduction of hours spent at work. Flexible work arrangements do, however, appear to hold some potential to influence outcomes in the way that employers and employees desire when the work arrangements provide a good fit to the individual's needs. Thus, the research suggests that flexible work arrangements may be of limited practical use to some employers because it requires that work arrangements be suited to each individual. However, for those employers whose product or service and work processes are amenable to individualized work arrangements, flexible work arrangement may be useful in managing desired recruitment, retention, and performance outcomes as well as outcomes related to employees' psychological and physical well-being.

Role conflict appears to be a promising moderator that is worth exploring in future research. For example, employers may improve the usefulness of flexible work arrangements if they have a good understanding of the work and family demands their employees (or potential employees are facing).

There are several areas for research that need to be addressed. Research that is aimed at helping employers understand how to manage employees under flexible work arrangement will be useful. While there is some work along these lines on telecommuting, more is needed to improve our understanding of the challenges and appropriate management practices under other arrangements as well. This should include a better understanding of the costs and benefits associated with each type of working arrangement.

The impact of flexible work arrangements on family outcomes has been largely ignored. Researchers should examine the impact of flexible work arrangements on the distribution of household work and/or care-taking responsibilities as well as variables associated with the psychological and physical well-being of families.

It has been suggested that an individual's career path and long-term career success may be hampered when they opt to work under a flexible arrangement. The impact of flexible work arrangements on career paths and income attainment needs to be better understood, particularly in light of proposed gender differences in the use of these arrangements.
The societal impact of flexible work arrangements is poorly understood. Much of the current literature focuses on the impact of reduced hours in the development of a contingent work force. However, there are significant societal implications for other types of arrangements (e.g., telecommuting and flextime) and these should be explored in the future.

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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