Reduced Hours Work/Part-Time Work (2003)

Author: Rosalind Barnett, Brandeis University - Community, Families & Work Program

Date: January 28, 2003

Basic Concepts & Definitions

Most definitions of work time are based on the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics definition (1995); namely, 35 or more hours a week is full-time, fewer than 35 hours per week is considered part-time. However, there are some obvious exceptions to this rule. For example, among elementary school teachers, full-time is 32 hours per week; among nurses, 24 hours per week may be considered full-time if those hours are spent in back-to-back 12-hour shifts on weekends. One reason for an agreed-upon definition concerns payment for overtime hours. Workers covered by the Fair Labor Standards Act are entitled to time-and-a-half for hours worked in excess of 40 per week. Many workers, including professionals and managers, are exempt from the provisions of this act.

In contrast to most full-time jobs, most part-time jobs in the U.S. are "bad" jobs; i.e., jobs that typically have low salaries, limited or no career advancement opportunities, and few, if any, benefits (e.g., health care, sick leave, vacation time). In short, they are dead-end jobs. Most people working in these jobs are involuntarily employed on a less-than-full-time basis (notable exceptions are students working for extra money, seniors phasing out of full-time employment, and mothers of young children who choose part-time work). Recently, a new category of part-time jobs has been created, especially in the professions and management. These are "good" part-time jobs; i.e., jobs that have prorated salaries and benefits and a career ladder (Tilly, 1992). To mark this development, a new term • reduced hours • has been added to the lexicon. Unlike part-time workers, reduced-hours workers often work more than the 35 hours defined as full-time according to the BLS. For example, in a study of 82 reduced-hours professionals and managers in 42 firms, the mean number of hours worked per week was 31.9, but the range was from 20 to 55 hours per week (Lee, MacDermid, & Buck, 2000). A similar pattern obtains in medicine and law. Although far less research has been done on reduced-hours compared to part-time work, the focus of this chapter is on reduced-hours work.

Reduced hours refers to the number of hours worked; however, there are different types of reduced-hours work. One type is job-sharing, an arrangement in which two people agree to do the work of one. Job-sharing usually occurs when an organization wishes to maintain consistency with respect to its clients.
For example, in an accounting firm, one accountant with a well-established client list who wants to reduce her/his work hours might recruit another accountant who also wants to reduced hours and is able and willing to pick up a significant portion of her/his client work. At a minimum, such an arrangement requires considerable coordination and trust and may not be an option in many situations. One other form, which is relatively rare in the U.S., is V-time (Christensen & Staines, 1990). In this arrangement an employee agrees to work an annual number of hours, typically at less than full-time. However, the hours are scheduled throughout the year in such a way that some weeks might require 45 or more hours, whereas other weeks would require substantially fewer hours.

Reduced-hours options in the professions are typically voluntary and are usually arranged on a case-by-case basis; in contrast, conventional part-time jobs are generally negotiated on a formal basis. If a doctor wants to work fewer hours and her supervisor is agreeable, the chances are good that they can arrange a reduced-hours schedule. However, like any other such informal arrangement, it is unstable. If, for example, the supervisor changes her mind or is replaced, the reduced-hours schedule must be renegotiated. The informal nature of these arrangements also leaves open such important issues as seniority, performance review, criteria for promotion, on-call hours (where appropriate), and so forth. Issues of this type are typically spelled out in traditional part-time jobs.

With respect to organizational outcomes, there is growing consensus that reduced-hours workers are at least as productive as their full-time counterparts (Committee on Part-time Careers in Clinical and Investigative Medicine, 2000; Olmstead & Smith, 1994). For example, in 1998, Catalyst studied 2,000 managers and their supervisors in four companies (i.e., a Fortune 100 pharmaceutical company, a Fortune 100 technology company, a leading law firm, and a major consulting firm). The majority of the part-time workers and their supervisors reported that their work arrangement either improved or didn’t affect the employee’s productivity. Moreover, 46% agreed that individuals working part-time realized productivity gains. Other studies suggest that absenteeism and turnover is lower among reduced-hours compared to full-time employees (Blank, 1990). In addition, part-time workers tend to take fewer breaks and less personal time while on the job (Epstein, 1999). Moreover, increased organizational commitment and increased likelihood of returning to one’s job after leaves of absence have been associated with reduced-hours schedules.

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

Several demographic and economic factors are driving the creation of reduced-hours career options. These factors include: (1) the increasingly long work weeks of highly educated workers; (2) the growing numbers of women working long hours; (3) the high proportion of dual-earner couples (59% in 1997); (4) the widespread dissatisfaction expressed over long work hours; (5) the high turnover of young professionals; and (6) the high cost of recruiting and training new employees. In addition, several scholars
have called for reduced-hours options as a means to increase employee flexibility, thereby reducing work-family conflict and stress-related job and family outcomes, as well as increasing quality of life (QOL). (Although the specific operationalizations of QOL differ from study to study, there is general agreement that QOL refers to: low levels of stress-related mental- and physical-health problems, burnout and turnover; and high levels of life satisfaction, career satisfaction, and job-role, marital-role, and parent-role quality.) Because of the widespread, if uncritical, call for more reduced-hours career options, it is crucial to ask whether they are in fact achieving the aims for which they are being designed.

State of the Body of Knowledge

Highly educated workers, both male and female, express similar levels of dissatisfaction with their work hours, and both report a willingness to forgo future pay increases for more nonwork time. In practice, however, few professionals take advantage of the reduced-hours options that are available to them (Boston Bar Association, 1999; Women's Bar Association of Massachusetts, 2000), and most of those who do take advantage of these options are female. A major reason for not opting for reduced hours is fear of negative career consequences (Jacobs & Gerson, 1997), a fear that appears to be well grounded.

Along with the escalating call for reduced-hours careers is the amassing of evidence that, at least for women, part-time compared to full-time work is associated with lower organizational rewards (i.e., wages and benefits), and often with poorer QOL outcomes. (Until more men opt for reduced-hours schedules, we will not be able to determine whether these relationships differ by sex.) They receive substantially fewer benefits, including sick pay, holidays, health insurance, and pension coverage, as well as receiving fewer unemployment and social security benefits. Women who work part-time are more likely to be assigned to routine jobs, to receive less training (particularly important for workers without a college education) and fewer promotions, and to be laid off. They also frequently work irregular hours at the discretion of the employer. Part-time workers also tend to have far less job security than full-time workers (Ferber & Waldfogel, 1998).

In addition, longitudinal analyses indicate a strong tendency for part-time employment to persist over time (Ferber and Waldfogel, 1998). And, both men and women who have ever been in nontraditional employment have far lower benefit coverage rates than employees with entirely traditional work histories. Moreover, to the extent that long-term part-time employment is associated with multiple job changes, the total number of jobs ever held has a substantial negative effect on wages and a highly significant negative impact on whether an individual has health insurance, as well as a negative impact on retirement plans both for men and for women (Ferber & Green, 2003).

Yet some studies find that working reduced hours, in contrast to part-time, is not a sure career-breaker. In a major Boston-area law firm that has formal reduced-hours career options, a few women who had been
with the firm for a long time, had switched from full-time to reduced hours and then switched back to full-time did become partners. And a study of 78 female reduced-hours managers and professionals reported even more positive results (MacDermid, Lee, Buck & Williams, 2001). While working on a reduced schedule, 35% of the women were promoted. A critical factor in affecting the career outcomes of reduced-hours workers is the support of management; a top-down approach in which work-hour policy is formally integrated with policies affecting other key aspects of employment seems essential for positive results (Barnett & Hall, 2001).

With respect to stress-related work, health, family, and QOL outcomes, the findings are not as encouraging. Compared to full-time workers, reduced-hours workers report more symptoms of physical-health (Herold & Waldron, 1985) and mental-health (Wethington & Kessler, 1989) problems, lower career satisfaction (Barnett & Gareis, 2003), and lower marital-role quality (Barnett & Gareis, 2002). Other studies show that work hours per se are unrelated to such outcomes as burnout (Barnett, Gareis & Brennan, 1999), psychological distress, job-role quality, and intention to leave one's current position within a year (Barnett & Gareis, 2000a), and life satisfaction (Barnett & Gareis, 2000b). Importantly, many of these findings take into account any tendency for employees in poor health to opt for reduced-hours work. It is also important to note that compared to reduced hours, long hours are typically associated with higher pay and benefits, which have a direct and positive effect on health outcomes.

Such contradictory and counterintuitive results suggest that the focus on objective work hours per se as the "cause" of work-family and QOL problems needs to be rethought. Several studies propose an alternative way of thinking. Specifically, it has been suggested that subjective indicators of the meaning of work hours are better predictors of outcomes than work hours. Subjective indicators include the extent to which one's own and one's partner's work schedule meets one's own and one's family's needs (i.e., schedule fit); the extent to which the employee is distressed because of the professional activities he/she had to give up in order to have more nonwork time (i.e., difficulty of tradeoffs); and the extent to which the employee experiences more rewards than concerns associated with her/his reduced-hours schedule (i.e., subjective experience of work schedule). It has also been proposed that more systematic attention be paid to the processes (e.g., mediation and moderation) linking work hours to outcomes.

Studies focusing on subjective indicators have yielded a series of interesting and nuanced views of the relationship between work hours and a host of outcomes. For example, schedule fit is related to such outcomes as psychological distress, life satisfaction, burnout, job-role quality, and marital-role quality (Gareis & Barnett, 2001). In other words, regardless of the number of objective number of hours you work • whether full-time or reduced-hours • if your work schedule is a good "fit," then your distress is low and your QOL is high. If you are working long hours and that schedule fits your needs, then your distress will be low. Alternatively, if you are working reduced hours and that schedule does not meet your needs, your distress will be high. Two other subjective indicators • difficulty of tradeoffs and subjective experience of
work schedule • produced similarly provocative results. These findings suggest strongly that if we are interested in improving employees' QOL and reducing their stress-related problems, we need to pay close attention the meanings employees attach to their work schedules • not just to the objective number of hours they work.

Recent studies also indicate that to fully understand the linkages between work hours and stress-related and QOL outcomes, we need to move beyond an exclusive focus on direct effects and include indirect effects; mediation and moderation. Mediators are variables through which a predictor affects an outcome. Moderators are variables that affect the magnitude and/or direction of the relationship between a predictor and an outcome. For example, among reduced-hours physicians:

- Work hours are related to burnout to the extent that schedule fit is low.
- Short work hours are related to poor marital-role quality to the extent that reduced-hours workers use their non-work time to do more than their share of the low-schedule-control household tasks (e.g., meal preparation and cleanup).
- Regardless of the number of hours worked, high perceived job demands are related to high psychological distress only among employed mothers who have troubled relationships with their children.

Thus, reduced-hours careers are only related to positive outcomes under particular conditions. Reduced hours is not the panacea envisioned by many.

**Implications for Practice and Research**

Several avenues of research need to be pursued in the future. One is to establish the conditions under which reduced hours have salutary effects for employees and their employing organizations. These conditions need to be broadly conceptualized to include workplace, family, and personal conditions. For example, employees might be encouraged to do a careful self-assessment of the costs and benefits they are likely to experience if they opt for a reduced-hours schedule. Another is to determine how best to create reduced-hours options that meet the sometimes conflicting needs of managers and employees. One possibility is to focus more heavily on maximizing employees’ schedule fit and other subjective indicators rather than searching for a one-size-fits-all policy. A third is to study how first-line managers implement reduced-hours career options (Powell & Mainiero, 1999). Another is to explore the correlates of such other subjective indicators as perceived insider status (Stamper & Masterson, 2002). Another is to study the impact on job-related indicators when reduced-hours and full-time employees work together.
The effects of reduced hours on employee outcomes would also be greatly influenced by changes in current employment law. If professionals and managers were included under the provisions of the Federal Labor Standards Act, then employers would be far less likely to insist on long work hours. Once the long-work-hours culture in management and the professions was no longer valorized, the stigma and negative effects associated with reduced-hours career options would wane. Under these circumstances, it is likely that the potential benefits of reduced hours would be realized.

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 ...).

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.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Domain A: Antecedent Descriptives</th>
<th>Domain B: Work-Family Issues and Experiences</th>
<th>Domain C: Covariates</th>
<th>Domain D: Responses to W-F Issues &amp; Experiences</th>
<th>Domain E: Outcomes and Impacts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Individual Antecedents</td>
<td>Individual Experiences: Needs &amp; Priorities; Problems &amp; Concerns</td>
<td>Individual Covariates</td>
<td>Individual Decisions &amp; Responses</td>
<td>Individual Outcomes &amp; Impacts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family Antecedents</td>
<td>Family Experiences: Needs &amp; Priorities; Problems &amp; Concerns</td>
<td>Family Covariates</td>
<td>Family Decisions &amp; Responses</td>
<td>Family Outcomes &amp; Impacts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Workplace Antecedents</td>
<td>Workplace Experiences: Needs &amp; Priorities; Problems &amp; Concerns</td>
<td>Workplace Covariates</td>
<td>Workplace Decisions &amp; Responses</td>
<td>Workplace Outcomes &amp; Impacts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community Antecedents</td>
<td>Community Experiences: Needs &amp; Priorities; Problems &amp; Concerns</td>
<td>Community Covariates</td>
<td>Community Decisions &amp; Responses</td>
<td>Community Outcomes &amp; Impacts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Societal Antecedents</td>
<td>Societal Experiences: Needs &amp; Priorities; Problems &amp; Concerns</td>
<td>Societal Covariates</td>
<td>Societal Decisions &amp; Responses</td>
<td>Societal Outcomes &amp; Impacts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Domain F: Theoretical Underpinnings to All Domains</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Domain A: Antecedent Descriptives</th>
<th>Domain B: Work-Family Issues and Experiences</th>
<th>Domain C: Covariates</th>
<th>Domain D: Responses to W-F Issues and Experiences</th>
<th>Domain E: Outcomes and Impacts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Individual Antecedents</td>
<td>Individual Experiences: Needs &amp; Priorities; Problems &amp; Concerns</td>
<td>Individual Covariates</td>
<td>Individual Decisions &amp; Responses</td>
<td>Individual Outcomes &amp; Impacts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family Antecedents</td>
<td>Family Experiences: Needs &amp; Priorities; Problems &amp; Concerns</td>
<td>Family Covariates</td>
<td>Family Decisions &amp; Responses</td>
<td>Family Outcomes &amp; Impacts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Workplace Antecedents</td>
<td>Workplace Experiences: Needs &amp; Priorities; Problems &amp; Concerns</td>
<td>Workplace Covariates</td>
<td>Workplace Decisions &amp; Responses</td>
<td>Workplace Outcomes &amp; Impacts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community Antecedents</td>
<td>Community Experiences: Needs &amp; Priorities; Problems &amp; Concerns</td>
<td>Community Covariates</td>
<td>Community Decisions &amp; Responses</td>
<td>Community Outcomes &amp; Impacts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Societal Antecedents</td>
<td>Societal Experiences: Needs &amp; Priorities; Problems &amp; Concerns</td>
<td>Societal Covariates</td>
<td>Societal Decisions &amp; Responses</td>
<td>Societal Outcomes &amp; Impacts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Domain F: Theoretical Underpinnings to All Domains</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>