

## Flexible working life: Blessing or curse?

Uncertainty and employee well-being

Katharina Näswall

katharina.naswall@canterbury.ac.nz

## Contemporary working life

- Technological development allow for more advanced production
  - Demands for faster production – demands for better ways of organizing
  - Expectations of increased pace and sophistication
- Move from industry (production) to knowledge and service (interaction)
  - Less well-defined products
  - Customer part of the production line
- More importance of human factors – individuals matter for work carried out

### **Flexibility - organizational perspective**

- Numerical – the appropriate amount of employees at a certain time
- Temporal – working hours which can be adapted as needs change
- Spatial – work can be carried out in several locations
- Functional – being able to find appropriate competence at appropriate time

### **Organizational boundaries**

- Vertical – influence between levels, less top-down
- Horizontal – integration of functions
- External – less clear distinction between org. and client
- Geographic – markets all over the world

### **New boundaries of work**

- Time – work can be carried out whenever
- Space – or wherever
- Structure
  - Less clear delineation between levels and work functions
- Employment
  - Many different types of contracts can be “real jobs”
  - When is someone doing “work”?

### **Boundaryless careers (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996)**

- Individuals moving between organizations to a higher degree (no life-long employment)
- Performance defined partly outside organization (stakeholders, clients, self-actualization)
- Productivity dependent on outside customers – network important
- Not following traditional hierarchical, linear transition pattern
- Priority given to life outside work
- Based on individual's own definition of career success

### Flexibility – the good news

- More independence
- More influence/autonomy
- More room for creativity
- More job opportunities
- More interesting career development
- More room for rest of life

### Flexibility – is it all good?

- Autonomy – lack of direction, when is job done, what is a good career trajectory?
  - Integration of work roles – lack of right skills
  - Influence on decision making – responsibility, accountability
  - Flexibility – How long can I keep this job? What is non-work?
  - Frequent job changes – what happens to shared knowledge?
- = Uncertainty for individuals and organizations

### Potential new stressors

- When is work done? – can always do a little more
- When is work done well enough? – can always get better
- What skills are needed? – can always learn more
- Balance between work and non-work
- How can stress recovery be facilitated?
- Added on to “classic” stressors – too much, too vague, too many different directives

### Flexibility issues still pending

- What are benefits of combinations of flexibility?  
For individual/organization
- What are the drawbacks/costs and who carries these costs?
- Is there a tipping point where some is good, a lot is bad? What determines this point?
- How can flexibility be managed to optimize benefits and minimize costs?

### Special focus on job insecurity

- Worry about the future of one's employment
  - "Will I lose my job?/I may lose my job"
- Result of individual's interpretation of situation – subjective perception
- Conceptualized as a stressor
- Different from job loss/unemployment
- "Job insecurity more dangerous to health than losing a job" (recent study by Burgard et al. 2009)
- Relevant in turbulent economic situations such as current, but is found in stable situations as well

### Job insecurity as psychological contract breach

- Psychological contract
  - Transactional – economic exchange of work for pay, established from the start of employment
  - Relational – benefits in exchange for loyalty (e.g., job security), more, develops over time
- Job insecurity constitutes breach of relational contract
  - Long-term employment no longer guaranteed

### Consequences for health and well-being

- Mental and somatic health (De Witte, 1999 and others)
- Anxiety and depression (Orpen, 1993)
- Burnout (Dekker & Schaufeli, 1995)
- Life dissatisfaction (Lim, 1996)
- High blood pressure (Burchell, 1994)
- Medical visits (Roskies & Louis-Guerin, 1990)
- Cardiovascular complaints (Siegrist et al., 1990)
- Sickness absence, long-term (D'Souza et al., 2006)

### Consequences for the organization

- Job dissatisfaction, decreased commitment and trust in organization, intentions to quit (Ashford et al., 1989, and others)
- Work performance (Rosenblatt et al., 1999)
- Safety behavior (Probst & Brubaker, 2001)
- Deviant behavior (Lim, 1996)
- Leave profession (nurses) – qualitative job insecurity (Laine et al., 2009)
- Sickness absence related to productivity

## Consequences for non-work

- Work–family conflict (Kinnunen & Mauno, 1998; Voydanoff, 2004)
- Spill-over to partner (Westman et al., 2001)
- Marital problems (through concentration and depression) (Barling & MacEwen, 1992)
- Negative effects on children’s work values (Barling et al., 1998) and school achievement (Barling & Mendelson, 1999)