

The concept of flexible working and evaluate the disadvantages essay sample

[Business](#), [Employment](#)



1. 0 INTRODUCTION

Dispelling some popular myths, flexible working is not a new concept, since some of the world's leading companies have been offering flexible working schemes for more than ten (10) years. When implemented properly, it can possibly make a difference to the performance of a business. It is noted that

Many people still have an image of traditional working patterns which involve spending Monday to Friday in a workplace with contractual provisions for a 36-40 hour work weeks' holiday.

(Foot & Hook, p. 164)

Flexible working aims to give employees the freedom to work anywhere at anytime, with access to all the resources associated with the traditional office environment. It is an approach in organising the way people work together and may affect organisations both internally and the way they interact with trading partners.

The nature of work is being redefined and this has created strong pressures for greater flexibility in patterns of work organisation and in the workforce.

(Mullins, p. 579)

Despite the obvious benefits, there are still many obstacles that make flexible working an unpopular option with employers and employees.

2. 0 LABOUR MARKET THEORY

The labour market theory include areas such as the analysis of existing resource, human resource demand forecasting, human resource supply forecasting and human resource planning.

These activities are carried out on an ongoing basis. The planning phase cannot be effective for as long as five years, it has to take into consideration the new trends that emerge, while forecasting cannot be precise in knowing the demand or supply of labour. Policies based on such forecast are always adjusted to new information. Taking this into consideration it is said that

The concept of flexibility has developed as a central theme in discussions of how to reshape organisations' labour markets.

(Beardwell & Holden, p. 97)

3. 0 FLEXIBLE FIRM

A significant approach in dealing with flexibility in the organisation was John Atkinson idea of the flexible firm. The concept of a flexible firm suggests that a workforce can be designed to meet business needs through flexible staffing arrangements. It is also recognizes that organisations will require enhanced flexibility to meet an ever evolving market and competitive market pressures.

The flexible firm (as proposed by John Atkinson 1985) included :-

Numerical Flexibility

The firm's ability to adjust the level of labour to meet fluctuations in demand.

Functional Flexibility

The ability to adjust and deploy the skills of the workforce to meet changing demand.

Distancing Strategies

The replacement of standard, traditional employment relationships, with commercial ones.

Pay Flexibility

The way in which payment systems support and reward function and numerical flexibility.

According to Atkinson workers are divided into two groups which include 'core' and 'peripheral' as seen in fig 1. The 'core' group being permanent employees, displaying functional flexibility characteristics. The peripheral workers on the other hand are in the form of 'numerical flexibility' and distance flexibility being used, as required by demand. Also subcontracting referred to in Atkinson's model as 'distance flexibility' can be seen as a structural change in the way an organisation operates.

Source: Institute for Employment Studies 1985 taken from Beardwell and Holden 2001

Fig 1

4. 0 ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES OF THE FLEXIBLE FIRM

4. 1 Advantages

Advantages for organisations that implement flexibility would include an ability to achieve a competitive edge, being able to be adaptive, dealing with the impact of new technology and new organisational structures. (Armstrong M., 1995, p277). The need to be competitive in an ever increasing global market has become evident in recent years, with states being unable to protect industries from the corporate global players.

The resultant of many new technologies is that there is an increased need to be able to change skills and working arrangements within the labour force; this requires an ever-increasing amount of flexibility from the workforce.

Functional flexibility allows people to respond to change and move quickly between tasks, this may also lead to craft workers being multi-skilled; such as brick layers also being plasterers. With fluctuations in the demand for products there is a need for management to regulate manning levels in response; this is what Atkinson called numerical flexibility.

The financial flexibility of a firm also allows it to reflect supply and demand of external labour markets in payment levels whilst helping to facilitate both functional and numerical flexibility.

There are a large number of companies such as BT and Nortel Networks, who have long implemented policies (see appendix I) that encouraged the use of

flexible working. Recent legislation recognises the need to offer flexible working regulations and introduce initiatives to benefit both employee and employer.

4. 2 Disadvantages

It can be argued that the increase in flexibility is an ever-increasing form of exploitation of the workforce, allowing the management to maximise the use of labour capital. It can be said that

Functional flexibility involves work intensification and work related stress, while the discretion and control that employees are supposed to enjoy is largely illusory.

(Parker and Slaughter 1988, quoted in Beardwell and Holden 2001, p105)

However it can be argued that functional flexibility allows people to respond to change and move quickly between task but with the removal of fixed, long term contracts, and the drive towards cross-skilling, it could be said that management is gaining an ever increasing control over labour using the 'flexible firm' as a vehicle of legitimisation.

Also by placing employment contracts outside the organisation, they become somebody else's problem. Any problems concerning adjustments in contractual arrangement i. e. wage rates, hours worked and so on, are placed with the sub-contractor. Out sourcing of labour can only be of an advantage, if it brings in external talent or the sub-contractor is bound by fewer constraints with regards to employees i. e. enjoying a relative union

free workforce and being able to exert more bargaining power on the workforce.

5. 0 FLEXIBLE ARRANGEMENTS

Flexible working includes a wide variety of work patterns which are alternate arrangements or schedules from the traditional working day and week.

Employees may choose a different work schedule to meet personal or family needs.

5. 1 Flexi Time

This is an arrangement where employees can work a full shift but vary the time they start and finish. These arrangements are usually established with specific guidelines so that a core working day exists. Flexi time is usually arranged in advance with the employee with a set arrangement for start and finishing times. It can be used by employees who wish to avoid long traffic jams, or who would like to drop of there kids to school before they come to work. A major issue with this type of arrangement would be the capability of the firm to have supervision for these varying times.

5. 2 Teleworking

Teleworking occurs when people spend a day or more a week working from home and the rest of their time at the office. Often only a telephone is all that they need at home. But ideally, the worker should have their own office number and have calls diverted to their home when they are working there. Other tools include an answering machine, mobile phone, fax and a personal

or laptop computer(see appendix II). With a modem and an A. D. S. L link, workers can dial directly to the office network via a WAN.

5. 3 Job Sharing

Job sharing occurs when two or more persons share one or more positions or set duties. Each person is employed part-time but together they cover a full-time position and divide the pay holidays and other benefits. It is important that those in a job sharing arrangement work effectively as a team and communicate well.

5. 4 Banking Hours / Annualised Hours

This arrangement allows employees to choose within negotiated boundaries, their days and hours of work to the maximum for a set period of time. They work on the basis of the number of hours to be worked over a year rather than a week. Arrangements like these may be suited to fields when there is variation in demands such as peak hours or seasonal peaks.

5. 5 Reduced Hours / Part Time

Employees could choose to work less than the usual 40-hour workweek. Arrangement like these may be on a temporary basis depending on individual circumstances. Work hours may be negotiated or may be chosen to coincide with peak workload hours, depending on the type of business.

Proportion of working age people in employment, working part-time by industry in the UK. Spring quarter 2003.

Source: Labour Force Survey

Fig 2

6. 0 ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES OF FLEXIBLE WORKING

6. 1 Advantages

Individuals

They benefit from improved self-esteem, health concentration and confidence through gaining greater control of their working life. A person going to work and having to commute, enters his workplace extremely tired and de-motivated, while the flexible worker who remains at home have a longer sleep, and is prepared for a day's work ahead. They route their work e-mails to their homes and make sure that all work related calls are being put through to their home phone. Essex University Institute of Social and Economic Research recently proved that Monday mornings is associated with low job satisfaction.

Organizational efficiency and effectiveness

Flexible working offers organisations the ability to tap into new talent pools while having happier and more productive workers, therefore leading to an improved working environment and a highly motivated workforce. A company is only as good as the knowledge and expertise that resides in its people and more and more they are realizing that they need to offer greater flexibility to attract and keep quality people. The average cost per year for a

company to maintain a permanent workstation in London is 13, 249 (pounds sterling). (The total cost of office survey, 2002). So organisational benefits include savings on office space and other employment overheads.

Society

With less people commuting, flexible working can result in reduced traffic and pollution to the environment. Motor vehicle emission volumes for any given time decreases, due to decreased engine idling. Air quality potentially improves due to the reduction in emissions and better air quality promotes better health.

6. 2 Disadvantages

Employee

With personal obligations and longer commuting times in recent years putting more pressure on workers to strive for work life, balance. Policies such as flexi time and telecommuting have become workplace staples. But technologies that give workers more time and flexibility also give employers greater ability to contact a worker anytime anywhere, with employers doing just that. Although more flexibility could help the employee achieve a work life balance, the most effective method to dismiss the anytime, anywhere work habit, maybe the creation of corporate culture that truly rewards balance.

Employers

Most companies may have difficulty in managing home workers and monitoring their performance. Monitoring and assessing the performance of people who work at home is the biggest challenge for managers. Also initial cost of training and providing suitable equipment including adoptions to meet health and safety standards and the needs of disabled employees would be significant for any size of business. With individuals working at home there is a risk that they would feel isolated, which can contribute to a manager's problem in maintaining team spirit. This can be compounded by the risk of information security problems and increased telecommunications costs.

Job sharing is not considered profit friendly; with job sharers spending more time making arrangements which decreases their productivity and administrative cost for two persons are usually higher than one.

7. 0 CONCLUSION

There is evidence that a move has taken place towards flexibility but the extent of this change and whether this change is reversible or not is more questionable. When asking " what is the flexible firm" we must ask ' flexibility for who'? Whether the quest for flexibility is flexibility for all or flexibility for a few i. e. management and inflexibility for many i. e. workers, it must give concern whether the Flexible firm is Utopia or exploitation?

Simply put, flexible work arrangements are alternate arrangements or schedules from the traditional working day and week. Employees may choose a different work schedule to meet personal or family needs.

Alternatively, employers may initiate various schedules to meet their customer needs.

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