Academic Workshop - Flexible working: the way of the future?

The "Flexible working: the way of the future?" workshop marked the culmination of a three year project led by PI Heejung Chung into Work Autonomy, Flexibility and Work-Life Balance. The day included three panel sessions, with consecutive speakers followed by a discussion with the audience and a discussant. The day finished with a roundtable session to discuss in more depth some of the issues brought up throughout the day.

Session 1

Mariska van der Horst, from the University of Kent, presented the results of research into the effect of flexible working into labour intensity. She found little support for the hypothesis that flexible working will decrease the likelihood of mothers leaving their jobs after childbirth, but did find evidence that the use of flexible working decreases likelihood of women reducing their *hours.*

Jaesung Kim considered the impact of workplace flexibility on workers in the U.S, specifically on their relationships with their partners and children. He found that, in general, schedule flexibility was beneficial for fathers' relationships, while part time work was beneficial for mother's relationships. Workplace flexibility had a positive interaction with levels of parent-child interaction and mother's appeared to receive a greater benefit from working from home than fathers.

Pascal Peters looked at self-employed women, analysing how their work-related values impacted on their career satisfaction. Using data from virtual work agency "moneypenny", she presented a rich analysis, which included the observation that self-employed women who valued intrinsically rewarding work are generally more satisfied with their careers than other groups.

Barbara Helfferich, from the European Trade Union Federation, functioned as a discussant for this session. She argued that the monitoring of work contracts and agreements is a crucial element in flexible working arrangements, noting that research by trade unions finds that part time women end up working beyond their contracted hours. She added that control for women is only helpful if supported by appropriate structures. Furthermore she suggested that reflexivity, and a critical consideration of gender roles within the family, is crucial for research in this context. Research in this area should also consider and engage with the continuing gender pay gap, job segregation, and pay differentials between 'male' and 'female' sectors. Furthermore she argued that there is a need to ensure that mothers' part time work is temporary, and ensuring that a return to full time work remains available to them. This has implications not just for immediate earnings but also for potential pension earnings later in

life. Finally, she suggested that increased teleworking reduces the influence trade unions are able to exert over the quality and safety of the working environment.

Highlights from **the follow up discussion included the** suggestion that, particularly for lower income workers, *informal* flexibility may be more pertinent than formal arrangements, and that this warrants further thinking and research. (Van Der Horst) It was also noted that we need to consider variation in external structures (e.g. external childcare provision) when attempting to understand work-family balance (Helfferich). Finally, an audience member noted that research should consider the effects of exclusion from work culture (e.g. networking opportunities) on the careers of those who work from home.

Session 2

Research from the German case highlighted the unintended consequences of flexible working. In her paper on gender discrepancies in the outcomes of schedule control on overtime hours and income in Germany, **Yvonne Lott** argues that employees can benefit from schedule control since they tend to be happier due to having more control and thus motivation. This could also reflect in higher salaries as the US case shows. However, employees work longer hours because schedule control is not only used as a tool to increase work life balance, mainly to increase performance. Chung's and Lott's research examines this conflict by looking at the German example from a longitudinal perspective and by including the gender dimension. Do men use schedule control differently than women? The scholars find that while generally men tend to work more over-time, especially when having autonomy over their schedule. However, looking at full-time employed employees only, women are still less likely to be working over-time, but when equipped with autonomy over their schedule, they increase their over-time hours to the same extent as men. Despite this, changing to working-time autonomy, men's income increases by more than 2000 Euros per year, while this is not the case for women. Income benefit exists mainly for men. Thus, schedule control has the potential to traditionalize gender roles by increasing mainly men's working hours and it might add to the gender gap.

Sarra Ben Yamed from the Centre for European Economic Research (ZEW, Mannheim) also finds that gendered differences in terms of teleworking and overtime. She concludes that while working from home is used by both genders to increase contracted working hours, by an average of 2.5 hours per week, women increase their over-time hours even more than men. However, even though this results in a lower gender gap in terms of hours worked, women do not get financially compensated for it to the same extent men do. Yamed suspects this is due to the employers' assumption that women use working from home to catch up on household work and thus women are less productive.

Jonathan Messenger from the International Labour Organisation argues that this blurring of boundaries between paid work and personal tasks happens for all teleworkers and find more evidence for teleworkers' tendency to work over-time especially highly mobile teleworkers. This helps to increase sovereignty and autonomy and results in higher work life balance. However, employees also report working in their free time to meet work demands. Messenger: "The trick is to be working anytime and anywhere, but not everywhere and at every time." According to Oscar Vargas from Eurofound, this blurring of boundaries increases

stress which is reported by 22 percent of highly mobile and regular teleworkers. Thus, the autonomy gained from teleworking cannot always offset the negative effects of the intensity of work. Vargas recommends to allow employees the "right to disconnect" and to increase part-time and occasional telework to decrease stress levels.

Clare Kelliher from Cranfield Business School discusses in her research whether we can make flexible working beneficial for both employees and employers. She argues that annual hours rather than weekly or monthly could be a way to allow employees to plan ahead and organise for example quality time with their children, holidays or study leaves in advance. Employers on the other hand can reduce staffing levels in quiet periods and do not rely on employees' goodwill to deliver 50 hours a week. "However, how many hours are too many hours?", highlights Kelliher just one of the problems with annual hours such as getting the right level of uptake among staff and the lack of flexibility in how annual hours work.

In the follow-up discussion of the papers, the audience was mainly concerned with how to define work life balance and who is currently benefitting from flexible working. "We need to look at work life balance beyond family commitments", says Clare Kelliher and agrees Messenger, Yamed, Vargas and Lott that flexible working needs to be accessible to every worker. Messenger: "Flexible work is more available to privileged people and not the ones who actually need it", argues Messenger that employers mainly in competitive labour markets see the need to offer flexible working to attract the best employees.

Session 3

Heejung Chung addressed the flexibility stigma associated with workers' use of flexible work arrangements. She highlighted the problem of the observed stall in take-up of flexible work arrangements, which is potentially associated with the perception of flexible working as "slacking off". Her results showed that, despite the actual increase in intensity associated with taking up flexible working, this flexibility stigma remains prevalent. She showed that parents were more likely to fear the consequences of flexible working on their careers, and that men were more critical of flexible workers than women. Further, she provided evidence that flexibility stigma significantly reduces worker's likelihood of taking up flexible working arrangements even when made available.

Laura den Dulk, from Erasmus University Rotterdam, presented the results of a qualitative case study of a University professional services department, asking if flexible working is a solution for work life balance. Her conclusions emphasized the importance of organizational change, both in the need for a supportive overall organisational culture *and* for the support of close colleagues. She placed an emphasis on informally flexible practice at the supervisor level, rather than formalised institutional policies. She also noted, however, that greater job autonomy reduces the need for social support in the workplace.

Jennifer Swanberg, from the University of Maryland, placed the focus on low wage jobs in her paper, examining the organisational factors that contribute to work life conflict in such jobs. Low wage jobs, she noted, present a very different case to that of higher wage jobs, as such jobs are often by necessity performed at the employer's premises, and have hours based around inflexible customer demand. Swanberg highlighted three areas in which employees

faced challenges: schedule unpredictability, schedule instability and schedule rigidity, exploring how these related to the business-critical measure of staff turnover. Her results showed that schedule instability, and particular, was associated with plans to find a new job (and therefore potentially a driving factor in staff turnover).

In the follow up discussion, audience members wondered whether there might be some truth to the idea that flexible working created more work for colleagues. Chung argued that such an effect was not found in the data, but Den Dulk cautioned that in some, highly team focused and when workers relied on others to do their job, this effect might be an issue. This theme of context was taken up by Messenger, who noted that cross-cultural, cross-national and even inter-organisational differences were important to consider. An audience member also requested additional examples from Swanberg of specific innovations towards flexibility in low paid work, Swanberg suggested allowing shift swaps, removing punishments for requesting to change shifts, , arranging shift patterns around life as far as possible. She acknowledged that these were all 'simple changes' but argued that the key thing was for organisations to have a strategy and implement it.

Roundtable Discussion

During the roundtable discussion on the future of flexible working, **Lonnie Golden** from Penn State University argued that in order to address the negative effects of flexible working, we needed to understand the motivations to opt for this new type of work in the first place. Besides the chance for employers to save office space, a key motivation for employees is to get excess workload done while working from home. According to Golden, schedule control might lead to greater work centricity and thus ignore the preference of employees to divide work from non-work.

To protect workers' interests, **Barbara Helfferich** from the European Trade Union Confederation emphasises on the relevance of trade unions. "The trade unions needs to have a close look at their values and we need more evidence how collective agreements can help facilitate the organisational change", says Helfferich. **Heejung Chung** agreed and argues that trade unions should not only help workers to gain more legal rights, but also assist them in going through tribunals when their requests for flexible working were declined.

Besides bargaining at the company and local level, **Paola Panzeri** from COFACE highlights the need for more EU policies and legislations at the country level. Flexible working. "We support the European Parliament call on the Commission to evaluate the existing national legislation on the right to request flexible working", says Panzeri. Additionally, Panzeri calls for more legislation for self-employment or workers in bilateral relationships in order to create work life balance for everyone, "not just for the elite".

"Not a lot has changed since 1981 – we see that in large organisations, high value employees are offered flexibility, but not others", supports **Jonathan Swan** from Working Families. The real issue was also the informal flexible working remained uncaptured. According to Swan, flexibility has remained seen as a tool for mothers to manage childcare, but despite policies was it has not been taken up by fathers to the same extent due to organisational barriers.

However, especially younger fathers have been changing their attitudes towards flexibility and are prioritising reconciliation of work and family more than in the past.

To remove organisation barriers and enable workers to work flexibly, **Clare Kelliher** highlights the role of line managers and supervisors. If middle managers themselves are managed in a target-driven way, they are more reluctant to experiment with new forms of working that may or may not deliver the expected outcomes. "We should try to look at supervisors how they use their discretion to implement practices", agrees **Laura Den Dulk** from the Erasmus University Rotterdam. She calls for more intervention research in order to establish how flexible working can be beneficial for workers and organisations. Yurie Yokoyama raised the challenge of how to incorporate flexible working into working hours regulations considering that in certain countries working hours are high anyways and could be extended even further under flexible working. Golden suggested to not only to grant the right to request, but also the right to refuse".

reported by Joe Warriner