International Management Journals

www.managementjournals.com

International Journal of Applied HRM

Volume 2 Issue 1

Management Flexibility and Staff Flexibility: Two Sides of the Same Mirror?

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ISSN 1742-2604

Few subjects can prove as contradictory as flexibility in the workplace. The respondents to this study, 134 professional staff employed in local government, were mostly found to believe that flexibility was a one-way street. The views of 30 directors or heads of human resources in local government were also sought to see if their views agreed with those of staff and/or managers.

While managers sought to encourage or oblige staff to be flexible in the interests of the council, they were not perceived by their staff to be open to requests for flexible working from their staff. The directors and heads of HR agreed with this view and offered their opinion on why this was the case. They believed that flexible working requests from staff were thought by managers to be disruptive to existing working patterns.

Introduction

The reform of local government has led to at least a potential fragmentation of local government organisational structures (Colling, 1999). The result of these reforms has been the breaking up of the local council as the monolithic monopoly provider of services (Boyne, 2002). Much of this fragmentation has been caused by the success of private contractors in securing contracts to provide council services (Colling, 1999) and from other extemally-imposed pressures like the drive for e-government (Newman, 2001).

However, fragmentation is internal as well as external, he stated that the internal effects of change can be seen in the financial and management independence of direct service organisations (DS0s) (Cutler and Waine, 1997).

This situation in the 1990s (Kirkpatrick and Martinez, 1995) is equally valid today with council departments having relationships with each other which are more contractual than collegial, more competitive than co-operative, with professionally-based departments encouraged to work as internal consultancies (Steele, 1999).

Many of these internal concerns for the overall cohesion of local councils have been further heightened by the introduction of local initiatives to share services, blur organisational boundaries and even share staff between different organizations (Boyne, 2002). The co-operation between voluntary, private and public organizations has produced a workforce filled with uncertainties for both its members and those seeking to manage it (Mori, 2001).

One commentator from the late 1980s, Ascher (1987), welcomed the fragmentation and argued that it would leave councils with more time to concentrate on wider issues such as strategic management and local and corporate governance (DETR, 2001).

To some extent this vision of the future sees a range of single-service agencies built around a strong and coherent political/professional/managerial leadership, including a central core of strategic planners and regulators (Colling, 1999). While some of this vision has come true, the vision did not envisage the development of the workforce beyond the boundaries of this single service agency into other organizations with a comparable mission (Newman, 2001). New initiatives in local government, especially in care work where multiple agencies work together at the strategic level, influence the development of the workforce and encourage the planning of the future workforce. This approach receives the support of those seeking cost efficiencies

through closer control of staffing numbers and deployment (Poole and Jenkins, 1997). It should be a side benefit of this approach that flexible working patterns are encouraged both to widen the pool of available workers to create numeric flexibility in the labour market and to ensure that no part-time requirement can only be met by workers seeking full-time roles. This has not happened, almost certainly through the resistance, to-date, of line managers who, despite the numerous family friendly initiatives of local and central government remain fixed to their limited and traditional view of how services should be delivered (Diamond, 2001). While this drive towards flexible working in the labour market both in local government and the wider population has been supported at the strategic level, almost without resistance, the operational management in local councils has found it difficult to translate the flexibility needs of workers into workable schemes. Indeed, while HR policies and statutory flexible working procedures appear to support flexibility for the employee, the ease of resisting these means of supporting flexible working on the grounds of business need, suggest that perhaps there is less than whole-hearted enthusiasm for effective measures for workers seeking more family friendly working arrangements (Edwards, 2000b).

Flexible Working from an Employees Perspective

The nature of work in the UK labour market and local government has changed dramatically in the last 30 years (Millward et al. 2000: p.20). Women comprise a growing proportion of the work force with a comparable increase in demand for 'atypical' work patterns (Robinson, 1999). The main different arguments about this transformation have been well-analysed (Gallie, White, Cheng and Tomlinson, 1998) and it is clear that there has been both a change in the workforce and a change in the nature of work (Geary, 2002).

The change in the nature of work has produced a contradiction. While there is rising skill levels and increases in the amount of communication between management and employees and greater reported employee autonomy, there is also increases in stress and working hours and a sense of a lack of control over one's working life (Handy, 1995). Employees see employment as a long-term relationship based on agreed obligations. An employer, in the current labour market, might see the employment relationship as based on a contract characterized by short-term market-based factors with staff being a unit of production to be hired and fired (Geary, 2002; Green and MacIntosh, 2000). Relevant trends in relation to this employers view of contract include the rise of temporary and agency work, growing experience of redundancy, the reduction of legal limits to the right to hire and fire and, perhaps most striking, a dramatic increase in income inequality. The contemporary approach to employment has also witnessed the decline of trade union organisation and the resultant increased importance to the relationship between the individual worker and management (Guest, 2000). Such approaches by employers only reflect the view that flexibility is a need of organisations not of employees. New forms of work organisation such as teamwork, which some suggest will improve employee commitment and even empowerment, are based on employers not employees concepts of flexible working Geary (2002).

The truth is that new work organisation merely intensifies exploitation through its highly deterministic approach where workers are treated as mere subjects of change who are asked to accept work intensification by accepting that it is in fact empowerment (Edwards, 2000a; Edwards, 2000b).

Despite this one-sided approach to flexibility one of the largest recent employee survey (part of the Workplace Employee Relations Survey) finds that 65 per cent of employees agreed or strongly agreed with the statement 'I feel loyal to my organisation' (Cully et al., 1999, p.186). This finding is hard to reconcile with workers views that their need for flexibility is ignored by their employer.

The Negative Impact of Limited Employee Flexibility

It would appear that the relationship between employer and employee in terms of there being reasonably permanent employment is being undermined, as more and more employees no longer regard their employment as secure and many more are engaged in part-time working. Indeed, in an ISR (1995) survey the employment security of workers significantly declined between 1985 and 1995 from 70% in 1985 to 48% in 1995 in the United Kingdom. The Quality of Working Life Surveys found some disturbing results about the amount of negative impact of change and its knock on effect on perceptions of job security and willingness to seek flexible working (Worrall and Cooper, 1997; 1998). In both 1997 and 1998, over 60% of this national sample of managers had undergone a major restructuring over the last 12 months involving major downsizing and outsourcing. The consequences of this change, even among middle and senior managers, like the survey group used in this study, were that nearly two out of three experienced increased job insecurity, lowered morale, and the erosion of motivation (Greg, Knight and Wadsworth, 2000). In addition, the impact on working patterns was damaging, both from an employers point of view and in terms of managers' outside lives.

The change process caused more work to be imposed on the fewer managers and also a strong felt need by managers to demonstrate loyalty to the organisation by working longer and unsocial hours. The belief was that by showing loyalty this way they would protect themselves from the next wave of redundancies. It was found, in both the 1997 and 1998 Surveys (Worrall and Cooper, 1997,1998), that over three out of four managers in the UK regularly worked more than their contracted hours each week, with over 54% reporting working often or always every evening and over 34% always or often working over the weekends. What is even more worrying is that in the 1998 Survey, 56% felt these excessive hours adversely affected their morale, 55% their productivity, 59% their health and a troubling 72% their relationship with their partner/spouse and 73% their relationship with their children. These results with managers were also found by DEMOS in society at large (DEMOS's, 1995). This trend toward a long hours culture and intrinsic job insecurity was also having an effect on the family as more and more two-earner families/couples emerged in a climate which was anything but family friendly (Cooper, 1998a and 1998b).

The Methodology and Results of the Survey and Interviews

The survey into flexibility used a questionnaire to 350 local government principal and senior officers (middle managers and professionals) across England. The survey insured that a representative sample was taken from each different type of council across all geographical locations. There were 199 respondents, a response rate of 57 per cent. The postal survey was followed up by self-selecting semi-structured interviews with 20 senior officers by telephone, the group being, once again, representative of all types of councils. Care was taken to ensure that the group formed a representative sample with respect to gender, age, experience etc by gathering demographic information from the total population prior to selection. What

is most obvious is the high number of males compared with females represented amongst local government principal and senior officers, which reflects the gender inequalities at this level in councils. This inequality is reflected in the grade and pay information taken from the survey question, what grade is your current post in your organisation?

Senior Principal Officer	101
Principal Officer	49
Senior Officer	25
Other	11

The male respondents are almost entirely grouped in the Senior Principal Officer and Principal Officer grades while the female respondents are grouped almost entirely in the lower grades. An analysis of the Municipal Yearbook for the period of this survey reveals that the gender profile of the survey group reflects that of the local government management population almost exactly.

The Findings of the Survey and Interviews

Do you feel that you are expected to work more, about the same or less hours at home or in the workplace than your contract of employment states (in per cent %)					
Rank	1	2	3	4	Score
More Hours	20.6	41.2	29.4	8.8	Less Hours
Do you feel that your managers are willing or unwilling to accept any request you make to allow you to work more flexible hours					
Rank	1	2	3	4	Score
Willing to be flexible	0.9	7.6	41.0	50.5	Not willing to be flexible
Do you feel that there is an imbalance in flexibility between you and the organisation ? Do you perceive that your employer wants you to be more flexible to meet his needs than he is willing to be flexible to meet your needs ?					
Rank	1	2	3	4	Score
Employees Needs	2.9	11.5	42.3	43.3	Employers Needs
Do you feel that as a professional in the organisation you work for, that you are less/ the same/ or more loyal than they were five years ago?.					
Rank	1	2	3	4	Score
Less	8.7	30.1	53.4	7.8	More
Do you feel that you are more or less empowered in your job than 5 years ago ?					
Rank	1	2	3	4	Score
Less	0	7.1	51.0	41.9	More

The clear message in this survey is that:-

- There is a clear view from the respondents that they are required to work more hours that they would normally be obliged to work based on their contracted hours of work. This suggests a high degree of work intensification.

- The respondents hold the belief that their employing council would be unwilling to take seriously any request they made for flexible working.
- The respondents also believe that any flexibility around working hours or patterns is determined by the employing council purely to meet its needs.
- As the literature discussed above shows, despite the perceived unfairness the respondents report regarding their employers selfish attitude towards flexibility, the survey respondents conclude that their loyalty to their employing council has increased in recent years. Interviews with respondents support the view that job insecurity has created this strange contradiction.
- Once again, as reported in the literature referred to above and as confirmed through the interviews with respondents, the process of work intensification has been sold to the respondents as empowerment. The interviewees also commented that removal of management roles and cross-departmental working and inter-professional team working has disguised much of the work intensification and empowerment through de-layering of management tiers.
- There is a clear indication of the conflict which exists between an organizational culture which supports flexible working and self-determination of work patterns and a culture based on performance and the monitoring of objectives.
- The conclusion reached by the group surveyed and supported by those interviewed suggests that it is a range of criteria, which determine a councils responsiveness to employees needs for flexibility. These criteria are determined by the prevailing management culture, they are:

    1. financial constraints - if many constraints low employee flexibility
    2. staff/management relations – if good high degree of employee flexibility
    3. trades union involvement – if union involved in policy development/implementation high degree of employee flexibility
    4. degree of performance monitoring – if high low employee flexibility
    5. gender mix of work area – if high number of women high degree of flexibility
    6. professional or non-professional work if non-professional high degree of flexibility.

Flexibility in the Local Government Workplace - Discussion

Increasingly local government seems to be heading towards the minimalist model of organization based on the residualisation of all but core corporate management and residual welfare functions. In many respects, this trend is driving the workforce agenda in local government as non-direct employment options are afforded a much more significant role than before.

This trend seems to militate against flexible working, in great part, it seems, because managers have a predisposition and orientation towards controlling their service central core activities around a traditional and fixed hub of specific and predictable patterns and hours of work.

Managers in the councils strategic core are actively promoting the business case for flexible work roles, however, the interviewees reflect the view of most principal and senior officers that managers view as essential the maintenance of a strong grip on the deployment of staff and perceive such control as critical to the running of their departments. The focus of such need for control is the challenge managers face in working within the strictly defined financial and performance criteria laid down by the centre and monitored through accounting mechanism, performance measurement and other internal control devices.

If the council is run by managers trained in human resource skills where there is a strong tradition of support for staff and human resource policies are well developed and seen to underpin operational management there is thought to be a greater acceptance of staff needs for flexibility. Such councils are perceived to be more 'friendly' to staff requests for flexibility and the respondents report the managers working in them as being more in tune with the councils flexibility objectives and any overall corporate strategy towards the use of family friendly policies. Similarly, in councils with a high degree of management devolution of responsibility for human resources it is reported that managers are less inclined to support staff requests for flexible working and find it difficult to support staff in meeting their domestic commitments. Often, managers in large councils are perceived by the survey respondents and interviewees to pay lip-service to the guiding policies on staff flexibility. Often these managers are perceived by the survey and interview group to be most under pressure working under tight budgetary constraints with tight centralised expenditure and strong controls over their departments performance which was seen as constituting a subtle method, devised by the council senior managers, of passing difficult rationing decisions about flexibility down the line.

Clearly for the managers paying lip service to family friendly policies, this is often viewed by them, in the view of the survey respondents, as a replacement of the service ethos for a more commercial one. The majority of interviewees, regardless of their councils political persuasion, see their managers as operating an internal regime based firmly on the principles of the private sector management arising from recent central government's reform package for local government.

Resistance to the further work intensification produced by these reforms contradicts with both local and central governments family-friendly policies and has created a degree of fragmentation in the way in which councils have sought to reconcile the divergent aims of these two opposed approaches to employment. Managers and professional staff have responded to this contradiction dependant on the prevailing

management culture in each council and each department and section of each council. The majority of respondents suggest that departments made up mostly of women, especially those of child bearing age exhibit a high degree of a typical working, including part-time and temporary working.

It is clear, and reflected in the views of the interviewees, that amongst professional and male staff, or departments where professionally qualified men and women work together, atypical work patterns are not developed and such working patterns have not grown as fast as they should have (Robinson, 1999).

The contradiction between the rising skill levels; increases in the amount of communication between management and employees; and, reported employee autonomy and the increases in stress and working hours and a sense of a lack of control over one's working life, could be countered by the use of flexible working patterns. However, there is a fundamental tension between work design which provides opportunities for flexibility or even self-determination of work patterns and that which calls for predictable outcomes based on defined tasks and close monitoring.

The Nature of the Employment Relationship in Contemporary Local Government

There seems to be little argument that employment based on a long-term relationship with agreed obligations between both parties and the idea that an employee is more than a factor of production to be hired and fired, will produce benefits for the employing council. There is no denying, from the view of the interviewees, that the current trends in relation to employment including the rise of temporary and agency work, growing experience of redundancy, and insecurity in local government employment have changed the relationship between the individual worker and management. Local government staff with professional qualifications used to have relatively high levels of flexibility in their work pattern, however, the prospect of unemployment, lower income and insecurity associated with outsourcing or privatization of some services means that the focus is not on flexibility but on compliance with the needs of management. In this respect, if there is a choice between attending for long-hours and keeping a job or flexible working and risking losing the job then the interviewees all stated that they would consider their family obligations as of secondary importance.

From the view of the interviewees, compliance with the perceived requirements of management and achievement of performance standards are, short-term, more important than any need for flexibility. The interviewees explain the high levels of loyalty and commitment to their work by stating that while management excesses in terms of the flexibility they demand may be viewed as straight exploitation view, there is still much in local government employment comparative with alternative employment, which makes up for the lack of flexibility for staff.

The interviewees express a broad sense of satisfaction with their work and a degree of commitment to the public service, which they would not experience in the private sector. It should be noted that while the majority of interviewees reported feeling loyalty and commitment, a significant minority reported feeling insecurity and stress, at least part caused by trying to meet both work and domestic responsibilities.

The Future for Flexibility

In predicting the future flexibility in local government organisations it seems likely that there will be only a small core of full-time, permanent employees, working from a conventional office. The council will buy most of the skills it needs on a contract basis through another employer, using individuals who might be self employed, or by hiring people on short-term contracts to do specific jobs or to carry out specific projects. In this way local councils will be able to maintain the flexibility they need to cope with a rapidly changing world without consideration themselves, as an employer, of the need for flexibility of staff who in future would be directly employed by someone else (Cooper and Jackson, 1997; Handy, 1994; Makin, Cooper and Cox, 1996). The evidence found in this study has substantiated the view that what employers refer too as the flexible workforce is not in anyway family friendly. The future for flexible working in local government might well lie in the hands of managers, or managers in companies carrying out the service functions of local councils, who have little incentive to allow flexible working because their concern is the achievement of performance or financial targets set by the council.

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