Employees' psychological health and the impact of Flexible Working Arrangements

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Abstract

The psychological health of employees is an essential ingredient in organisational productivity and success. It is however, often regarded as a peripheral issue within organisations as different levels of management deal with specific productivity goals. Within this context, the use of flexible work arrangements (FWAs)(—designed to balance employees' competing personal and work demands) —can attract scepticism on the part of supervisors and co-workers. Consequently, research has demonstrated that although flexible work arrangements can provide a practical solution for employees, their use can be muted by psychological tensions within workplaces. This can have repercussions in regard to the psychological health of those employees who use flexible work arrangements, and thereby suffer stigma and estrangement from their work community. It is therefore recommended that companies address the need to clearly communicate their vision to all levels of their organisation and that the benefits of FWAs do not flow solely in the direction of the person using them. Specific strategies for achieving this end are provided.

Introduction

In this chapter we discuss the construct of psychological health and its relationship with enhanced organisational productivity. Unlike previous generations where workforces were primarily male and work locations were fixed, modern workplaces are characterised by a greater diversity in personnel and locale. Many organisations have adopted flexible work arrangements (FWAs) which assist employees to balance their competing responsibilities. Commitments to work can be constrained by other compelling commitments in people's lives, commonly including demands arising from family responsibilities, sports activities,

study, community work, and such like. However, in spite of the need, the take-up of FWAs can be varied. Many workers find alternative, but less satisfactory, ways of addressing the competing demands in their lives. In many cases, the reason for poor take-up is influenced by organisational cultures that covertly discourage employees from utilising FWAs (see, Cech and Blair-Loy, 2014; Fuller and Hirsh, 2018). Consequently, employees with few alternatives may experience a stigma when accessing FWAs, which can adversely affect their well-being and their career advancement. We begin this chapter by defining what we mean by psychological health and we discuss why organisations should be interested in their employees' levels of psychological health. We discuss the commonly available FWAs and their demonstrated impacts for levels of employee engagement and productivity. Finally, we review the common gender and generational differences which impact FWA offerings, and we suggest key issues for the consideration of future researchers in this field.

Psychological Health

The term *psychological health* describes optimum human functioning and experience. Well recognised signs of optimum functioning include self-motivation, curiosity and active involvement in the social environment (Ryan and Deci, 2000), positive affect (Diener and Seligman, 2004), happiness (Ryan and Deci, 2001), flourishing/thriving (Fredrickson, 2001, May et al., 2004), ingenuity (Kim and Mauborgne, 2015), and resilience (Fredrickson et al., 2003). From an employer's perspective, these are all desirable attributes because workers with these qualities are creative, voluntarily share their ideas, and are productive, thereby enhancing organisational gains (Kim and Mauborgne, 1998, 2015).

According to Ryan and Deci's self-determination theory (SDT, 2000), desirable personal resources are not developed in isolation, but within structurally supportive social contexts (e.g., family and work). At the centre of SDT, competence, autonomy, and relatedness are acknowledged as basic psychological needs, which when satisfied, enable

people to succeed, thrive, and contribute their best thinking and efforts to their organisations. Therefore, the effective managements of supportive workplaces recognise that workers' psychological health is essential to organisational prosperity (Dijkers et al., 2004). It is only when people are enabled to function at an optimum level, that they are actively engaged, doing their best work, eagerly advancing organisational goals, and thereby enabling strategic organisational advantage over commercial competitors (Kim and Mauborgne, 1998, 2015).

Why should Organisations be interested in Workers' Psychological Health?

The short answer as to why organisations should be interested in their worker's psychological health is an economic one. The costs of a chronically mentally unwell workforce are considerable, and unfortunately, are steadily increasing. Occupational stress (workplace mental ill-health) claims by employees, organisational mental health insurance premiums, and other indirect costs attributable to occupational stress alone, cost industrialised countries billions each year. Recent estimates, for example, suggest occupational stress costs the Australian economy approximately AU\$15 billion per annum (Safe Work Australia, 2013). International estimates are comparable to these Australian figures, demonstrating that occupational stress remains a global predicament: Canadian work stress annual costs equate to AU\$11 billion, Netherlands AU\$23 billion, and UK AU\$46 billion (Hassard et al., 2014). In a recent review, Hassard et al. (2018, p. 1) described occupational stress as (still) being a "sizeable financial burden on society". Lost productivity specifically attributable to *employee absenteeism*, caused by the physical and mental health impacts of occupational stress, costs Australian organisations approximately AU\$5 billion per annum (Price Waterhouse Coopers, 2014). Recent calculations also indicate that approximately 6% (AU\$890 million) of the annual costs of depression experienced by employed Australians, is specifically attributable to occupational stress (Cocker et al., 2017).

We acknowledge that these economic costs of psychological health are influenced by national legislation, which defines an employer's legal responsibilities for their workers' mental health. Where such legal responsibilities are breached, workplace mental ill-health claims seeking financial compensation by employees may be submitted. For countries without this national legislation, economic costs are estimated primarily by employee work withdrawals (examples include low productivity, absenteeism, presenteeism, sick leave, turnover), and the costs of staff replacements, including employee recruitment and training costs. The costs to an organisation for *not* being suitably interested in their employee's good psychological health are therefore, considerable, regardless of the national legislative context.

For organisational scholars, the measurement of work engagement provides an efficacious snapshot of employees' psychological health and wellbeing within the social context of work (Bakker and Schaufeli, 2008, Downey et al., 2015, Timms et al., 2015b). The construct captures a sense of positivity that is characteristic of thriving workplaces (Salanova and Schaufeli, 2008, Schaufeli and Bakker, 2003) as well as people (May et al., 2004). It also contributes to the collective phenomenon of morale (Hart et al., 2000), and a demonstrable impression of cohesiveness, cooperation, vibrancy, and enthusiasm that is immediately obvious to any visitors to the worksite (Dinham et al., 1995). Employees who are engaged in their work find it energising, challenging in a satisfying way, are proud of the work they do, and report that their work time passes quickly (Schaufeli and Salanova, 2014).

There is therefore, a strong business case for organisations to pay attention to employee well-being. Harter, Schmidt, Agrawal and Plowman's (2013) meta-analysis established substantial relationships between workers' engagement and performance. Harter et al. (2013) found positive relationships between work engagement and customer loyalty, productivity, and profitability. They also reported negative relationships between work engagement and negative workplace events such as employee turnover rates, accidents,

absenteeism, theft, mortality, and product defects. This suggests that strategic planning for productivity gains must necessarily consider the psychological health of workers. Traditional paradigms (which assume that the two driving forces within organisations are economic concerns and self-interest, Kim and Mauborgne, 1998, 2015) are misleading and essentially destructive in terms of organisational prosperity (see also, Harter et al., 2002). Unfortunately according to Schein (1996), a lack of alignment between different work levels (e.g., management, middle management and workers) can lead to internal differences in organisational culture, thereby subverting innovation and hindering the potential for growth (see for example, Biggs, Brough, and Barbour, 2015). It seems that the misalignment described by Schein, has led to frustratingly flat-footed responses by organisations to strategies designed to accommodate the needs of the modern workforce.

Flexible Working Arrangements

Flexible working arrangements (FWAs) are organisational strategies devised to assist workers in managing their disparate responsibilities. FWAs often appear prominently in company policies where their inclusion signals to prospective employees that the interwoven nature of the domains of their lives are respected, valued and accounted for (Brough et al., 2005, Timms et al., 2015a). In addition, as workforces have increasingly diversified, governments have recognised the need for FWAs to enable successful synchronisation between work and non-work responsibilities. Hegewisch and Gornick (2008) reported that 17 Western countries have granted workers the statutory right to request FWAs. Indeed, under the conditions of the Fair Work Act (Australian Government, 2009), workers in Australia can request FWAs on the basis of parenthood, caring responsibilities, disability, domestic violence, or age.

Flexible work arrangements typically encompass: flexitime (i.e., work hours determined by employees), flexiwork (i.e., location or tasks of work determined by

employees), job-sharing (i.e., tasks of one job are covered by two or more employees), compressed work week (i.e., a standard number of hours is compressed into a reduced number of days per week), tele-working (i.e., employees work away from their workplace for some or all of the workweek, while being electronically linked), direct provision of care-giving and health benefits, and monetary and informational support for non-work roles (e.g., vouchers and referrals, McCarthy et al., 2010). FWAs can also be categorised according to whether they are longer term, formalised arrangements, or short-term/ad-hoc, informal arrangements (Townsend et al., 2017). FWAs are now widely implemented across all types of organisations including governmental, private, not-for-profit, large corporations, and small-and-medium businesses in most industrialised countries, and are mostly used by working parents in these organisations (Joyce et al., 2010).

However, there is a troubled history concerning the implementation of FWAs and their expected benefits for employee well-being (Blair-Loy and Wharton, 2004, Cech and Blair-Loy, 2014). Research has demonstrated that actual use of FWAs may communicate a negative narrative (e.g., Brough, O'Driscoll and Biggs, 2004, Pocock, 2016). Thus (consistent with Schien's 1996 prediction), the *on-paper* existence of FWAs belies *the reality* of levels of organisational cultures tacitly discouraging their use (see also, Timms et al., 2015a). While Schien (1996) was clearly discussing organisational policies more broadly than FWAs, he did note that tacit assumptions about "how the world is and ought to be" influenced perceptions, thinking, and behaviour within organisation, and could well sabotage an organisation's formal policies. For example, Cech and Blair-Loy (2014) observed that while organisations may attempt to facilitate workers' needs by providing FWAs, co-workers and supervisors may well regard the *need* for flexibility as a sign of reduced commitment to the organisation. Cech and Blair-Loy (2014) called this "*flexibility stigma*". Such an atmosphere at work inevitably has ripple effects affecting employee well-being. Timms et al. (2015a), for

example, found a negative relationship they termed a *backlash* between FWA use and employee engagement over a period of 12 months. Field and Chan (2018) also found that some technology-enabled knowledge workers made themselves constantly available even after work hours because they felt that virtual displays of employee engagement have become a proxy for organisational commitment. It is, therefore, observed that hindering cultures (Dijkers et al., 2004) or subcultures (Schein, 1996) within organisations can in reality be dysfunctional and destructive in their attitudes towards FWA utilization.

Kim and Mauborgne (1998, 2015) also warned that workers who do not experience a sense of inclusion at work will hoard ideas and withdraw cooperation. The logical (and circular) consequence of such worker behaviour being the imposition of punitive measures to ensure compliance with company guidelines and expectations. As the management model involving coercive strategies for enforcing employee compliance is a common one (Albrecht, 2002), it remains difficult to convince organisational managements of benefits gained by enhancing employee well-being. However, Fink (2003) observed that a top-down mentality such as this inevitably leads to people working-to-rule, thus effectively withdrawing their voluntary cooperation (see also, Kim and Mauborgne, 1998).

FWAs and Their Effects on Workers' Health and Well-being

Although FWAs are now common in industrialised economies, a thorough understanding of their impacts on employee health and well-being is still lacking. Joyce et al. (2010) conducted a systematic review on the effects of FWAs. They found, FWAs that increased workers' control and choice (e.g., flexible scheduling or early/partial/gradual retirement) were shown to have significant positive effects on workers' physical, mental and general health (e.g., systolic blood pressure, heart rate, tiredness, mental health, sleep duration, sleep quality, alertness, and self-rated health status). Moen, Kelly, Tranby and Huang (2011) also found that a results only work environment (ROWE) that does not restrict

workers to where and when they work (i.e., organisation-wide flexible working) enhanced workers' health-related behaviours (e.g., getting enough sleep, exercising more, going to the doctor when sick, not going to the workplace when ill) through increasing workers' schedule control and decreasing negative work-to-home spill-over.

By contrast, FWAs that were determined by organisational interests (specifically, involuntary part-time employment, contractual flexibility, and fixed-term contract) either had no significant effects or negative effects on workers' physical and mental health (Joyce et al., 2010). In many cases, the nature of the relationship between FWAs and health and well-being, is also not self-evident. For example, Moen et al. (2011) found that if FWAs were offered to help individual workers on a selective basis, there were no significant effects between these FWAs (i.e., ROWE) and workers' health and well-being outcomes. Further, Rudolph and Baltes (2017) found that access to and use of FWAs were contingent upon workers' age and health, and they jointly influenced one another which subsequently had implications for work outcomes. Putting gender into context, Chung and Van der Lippe (2018) consistently found that women were expected to carry out more domestic responsibilities whilst using FWAs, while men were expected to prioritise and expand their work spheres. Consequently, women were more likely to fear and face negative career consequences due to their use of FWAs, consistent with Timms et al.'s (2015a) *backlash* effect. Therefore, future studies examining the influence of FWAs on workers' health and well-being need to be contextualised at both the mezzo and micro levels.

Employee Engagement, Productivity and Flexible Work arrangements

Sonnentag, Mojza, Binnewies, and Scholl (2008) observed that being able to “switch off” during non-work time was a key factor in producing high levels of employee engagement. They noted that employees who were unable to achieve psychological detachment experienced a reduction of their work engagement. This concurs with

associations observed between long hours work cultures and employee psychological ill-health (Brough et al., 2005, McDonald et al., 2007, Peetz and Allan, 2005) and echoes warnings about the 24/7 connectivity with employees available to organisations through modern technology (Leiter et al., 2014, O'Driscoll et al., 2010). While the need for tractability in regard to working arrangements coincides with social and political drivers seeking workplace flexibility, it can meet with passive resistance on the part of supervisory staff (Cooper and Baird, 2015, Schein, 1996, Timms et al., 2015a,). According to Cech and Blair-Loy (2014) for example, staff members who are visible for long hours in workplaces are still generally regarded as being more committed, and, therefore, are more likely to achieve promotion. Other researchers (e.g., Donnelly et al., 2012, Fuller and Hirsh, 2018) have also associated this sort of supervisory judgement with a burden of shame and stigma endured by employees who use FWAs. Consistent with Schein's (1996) observation of misalignment, Dikkers, Geurts, den Dulk, Peper, and Kompier (2004) referred to this sort of work culture as *hindering* because its characteristic feature is mutual suspicion. According to Dikkers et al. (2004), workers dominated by a hindering work culture are compelled by expectations that they will submit to long hours at work and (by means of modern technology) be available around the clock (see also, Bessa and Tomlinson, 2017, Fenner and Renn, 2010, Leiter et al., 2014).

According to Pocock (2016) about one third of workers (both women and men) report that they do require some flexibility in order to achieve a better fit between their work and non-work lives, but they do not ask for it. In smaller workplaces this could be because highly skilled workers are legally required to be onsite at all times (as can be the case in the nursing profession, see, Weale et al., 2017) and any absence from only a small mass of skilled employees can be incompatible with organisational flexibility. These restraints are usually apparent to employees, would contribute to their expectations, and would generally be

accepted. However, the bulk of existing research has found other explanations for workers' reluctance to avail themselves of their legal right to request FWAs.

Gender/generational differences and their FWA needs

Canibano (2019) investigated the experiences of workers in a large global international consulting firm. Within this setting, FWAs afforded benefits both to individuals, and to the company. Canibano noted that female employees with family responsibilities were able to use a combination of telecommuting and flexible hours, and be available to communicate with company personnel in different time zones. According to Canibano (2019), this also provides an example of evolving combinations of individual and organisational FWAs which successfully negotiate the individual needs of the worker and those of the company.

Other research demonstrates indirect benefits to organisations which encourage FWA use. Castillo, Welch, and Sarver (2012), for example, observed that FWA provision in organisations enabled non-custodial fathers to have higher levels of involvement with their children, thereby contributing to the psychological health of both employees and their families. Morelock, McNamara, and James (2017) found that FWA provision enabled workability in older adults who have important organisational contributions to make but no longer wish to be in the full-time workforce. In both these cases, the provision of FWAs and encouragement of their use convey a message to workers that their needs are prioritised, demonstrates respect and contributes to organisational trust, thereby enabling an organisational culture of voluntary cooperation (Kim and Mauborgne, 1998).

Future Research in FWAs

The ability for some workers to conduct their work from their local café, home, or shopping mall was unimaginable less than one generation ago. Similarly, the ease with which we now conduct work with colleagues in different parts of the country, or, indeed, internationally, and in different time zones, was also unimaginable. We are the last generation

who were dependent on submitting our work in hard copy via the postal services, an act which now seems quite archaic. Technology has thus generated huge changes in the methods of our work. As discussed above, technology has been significant in providing flexibility to both our work locations and work hours, producing both positive and negative outcomes for employees (see also Brough and O'Driscoll, 2015). Future technological developments will also likely produce a change in our work methods which we cannot readily conceive of today. These changes and the appropriate management of their impacts are clearly a point of interest for future FWA research.

It has been suggested that each generation of workers has an increased interest in improving the balance of their work and non-work responsibilities – primarily by their increased use of FWAs. A generational change of individual career attitudes and goals has also been observed, albeit with some mixed findings. It has been observed for example, how securing a job with suitable FWAs to support family commitments, sporting, study, and/or travel pursuits is increasingly a 'standard' requirement for young employees entering the workforce (Brough et al., 2014). Organisations in information technology (IT), marketing, and social media who seek to primarily employ young workers, are flaunting their creative FWAs options. This is a marked change when considering for example, that it is only recently that employees in some countries (e.g., Australian and New Zealand) received statutory paid parental leave (Brough et al., 2009). Whilst US employees of course, are still without this national provision. A pertinent consideration for future researchers then, will be to assess the impact of FWAs as these young workers age and potentially their FWA preferences (and those of their employers) change (Khallash and Kruse, 2012). What will be the preference for the even younger generations entering the workforce in 10-15 years? Will FWAs in new organisations be markedly different? Perhaps for example, the increasingly ageing population and/or the declining birth rates will encourage the use of different and/or

more generous leave and FWAs arrangements? Also, while it is simple for a technology firm to offer FWAs to their employees since the nature of IT work is portable, how would organisations in service industries such as retail, manufacturing and healthcare cope if their employees demanded more FWAs?

A final issue to consider for the future is if the impact of ecological/climate change will influence FWAs offerings and employee preferences. There is not, to date, any specific published research on this issue. However, the impact of how green spaces (both inside and outside workplaces), positively impact worker's well-being has gained considerable momentum in recent years (Buckley et al., 2018, Gilchrist et al., 2015). The inclusion of ecological activities within FWAs could be justified for example, for locations where the impact of a changing ecological climate is severe; for locations experiencing regular flooding, fires, etc. The benefits to organisations for their employees to work on community tasks, whilst experiencing a suitable mental recovery from their work demands, could perhaps be substantial. We therefore, anticipate that ecological/climate change may have an impact of future offerings of FWAs, in order to promote employee psychological health.

Conclusions

In this chapter, we have reviewed some of the key positive and negative impacts of FWAs for employee psychological health. We discussed both the monetary and psychological impacts for why organisations should be considerate of employee mental health. We indicated how the inclusion of formal FWA policies and clear support for their use, are associated with positive benefits for both employees, their families and their organisations. These benefits primarily consist of increased motivation, engagement, creativity, and service by employees, resulting in enhanced productivity. FWAs also assist organisations to recruit and retain employees, especially younger and older workers and employees with significant non-work responsibilities. Finally, we identified three key issues for future researchers to

consider: technological changes which will further impact where and how we conduct our work; changes in FWAs offerings shaped by the new emerging generations of workers; and how ecological/climate change may directly impact both FWAs and employee wellbeing.

Recommendations

The extant organisational culture is one important consideration for managements in developing appropriate responses to employees' legitimate take-up of FWAs. Therefore organisation-wide training is indicated. While provision for FWAs is legislated by governments and articulated in company documents, many organisational cultures tacitly discourage their use (Brough and O'Driscoll, 2010). The unsatisfactory presence of any experienced *flexibility stigma* (Cech and Blair-Loy, 2014) or *backlash* (Timms et al., 2015a) signals a need for an increase in organisation-wide education charting the benefits to both the organisation and to employees of policies which consider the non-work responsibilities of staff members. This falls in the realm of communication and training. It is therefore recommended that companies address the need for education within their organisation and clearly communicate to all levels that the benefits of FWAs go far beyond personal advantage.

It is also recommended that training provisions to *direct supervisors/managers* be increased. The primary hurdle faced by employees seeking FWA access is a lack of supervisor approval of this access (Thompson, Brough, and Schmidt, 2006). In many cases, supervisors react to the most apparent problem of physically absent employees, without due consideration of the range of human resource options available to support employees, or of the benefits arising from employees successfully accessing FWAs. When supervisors/managers are better educated about these benefits, then approval for FWA access can increase, producing flow-on benefits for both employees and their organisations.

Finally, an assessment of the specific FWAs desired by employees is also strongly recommended. Blanket provisions of commons FWAs, such as flexi-time, tele-working, and compressed weeks may not be necessarily be applicable to all organisations. For example, Field and Chan (2018) noted that tele-working appears to have fewer negative consequences compared to working reduced (e.g., part-time) hours, and suggested that future studies should look at the mechanisms that drive these varying outcomes across different cohorts and types of FWAs. Further, a discrepancy between offered and desired FWAs can exist (Brough et al., 2005). An effective organisation should aim to reduce this discrepancy and offer FWAs of most benefit to their employees.

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