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 **Foresight**

**Mental Capital and Wellbeing:  
Making the most of ourselves in the 21st century**

**State-of-Science Review: SR-C4  
Flexible Working Time Arrangements and their Impact on Work-Family  
Interface and Mental Wellbeing at Work**

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any Government or organisation.*

## Summary

**Flexible work arrangements (FWA) such as flextime, telecommuting, job sharing and compressed work week are benefits provided by employers, that permit employees some level of control over when and where they work. Findings show that FWAs enable individuals to integrate work and family responsibilities within their personal time and space and are instrumental in achieving a healthy work-family balance. Research demonstrates that it is not sufficient to implement family-friendly arrangements in order to reduce employees' work-life conflicts. Employees are often reluctant to take advantage of work-life programmes due to their fear of the negative consequences that may be caused to their career progress. Hence, it is essential that organisations understand the mechanisms through which work-family culture enhances or inhibits efforts to help employees achieve a balance between their work and non-work activities. Any such FWA arrangements should be integrated into organisational culture and thereby focus on the wellbeing of the employee and the family and the productivity of the organisation.**

### 1. Changing work context

The demographic composition of the workforce has changed dramatically in recent years to include more dual-earner or dual-career couples who have the added responsibility of the care of children or elderly dependents. In addition, extensive downsizing by large corporations has lengthened the average workweek for many employees, still further increasing the difficulties that dual-earner couples face in juggling the demands of the workplace and the home.

### 2. Work-family conflict: antecedents and outcomes

A great deal of theoretical and empirical work explores the way individuals reconcile the demands of work and family roles. In summing up the topic of occupational health, Westman and Piotrkowski (1999) noted that the conflict between work and family has become the dominant concern of current research in the work and family domain.

Work-Family Conflict (WFC) occurs when demands associated with one domain are incompatible with the demands associated with the other domain. Such conflict may arise because performance of one role absorbs time, creates strain, or is behaviourally incompatible with performance of another (Greenhaus and Beutell, 1985).

Researchers (e.g. Greenhaus and Parasuraman, 1986) have assumed that WFC predicts psychological strain, as it constitutes a potential stressor that leads to various forms of strain (e.g. burnout, health). Indeed, Kossek and Ozeki (1998) have demonstrated in their meta-analysis a consistent, negative relationship between work-family conflict and job and life satisfaction.

Most work-family conflict research and theory has focused on the individual, without considering the potential crossover effects of stress and strain from one spouse to the other. These effects have traditionally been conceptualised as the process whereby stress or strain experienced by one person in a dyad influences the experience of strain by the other person (Westman, 2001). The systems theory framework (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) conceptualises an individual as existing within the family system, the work system, and the work-family system, as components in these systems interrelate and affect one another. Thus, because of the inter-relatedness of individuals within the family system, it is reasonable to expect that spouses in dual-earner couples would have an impact on each other's work- and family-related

outcomes. Westman and Vinokur (1998) specified three mechanisms that may account for the crossover process: direct crossover via empathetic reactions, common stressors, and an indirect crossover process.

### 2.1. *Direct empathetic crossover*

This mechanism implies that stress and strain are directly transmitted from one partner to another, as a result of empathetic reactions. Accordingly, strain in one partner produces an empathetic reaction in the other, which increases his or her level of strain.

### 2.2. *Common stressors*

It is likely that family members in the same household will experience similar stressors stemming from the shared set of circumstances. Thus, common stressors will have an impact on the strain of both partners, and the positive correlation between the strains of the two spouses will appear as a crossover effect.

### 2.3. *Indirect crossover of strain*

This mechanism occurs when an increase in the strain experienced by one partner triggers a negative interaction sequence with the other partner. The strain of one person leads to social undermining behaviour toward the other, and this undermining behaviour acts as a stressor for the recipient of the behaviour, causing an increase in the recipient's strain level.

Several studies found crossover of WFC from one spouse to another (e.g. Hammer et al., 1997; Hammer et al., 2003), while others found crossover of various kinds of strain (e.g. burnout' distress' depression, dissatisfaction) from one spouse to another (e.g. Bolger et al., 1989; Jones and Fletcher, 1993; Westman and Etzion, 1995; Westman and Vinokur, 1998). Thus, WFC does not impact only the employee but crosses over to the spouse. In addition to the WFC experienced by the spouse from the dual roles, the WFC of the employee crosses over to the spouse and acts as an additional stress. Furthermore, crossover of strain was found also among team members, indicating that one person's WFC may transfer to his/her team members. All these findings emphasise the need to prevent and limit WFC and its adverse effects on personal, family and organisational functioning.

Research shows that employees can avoid WFC by using instrumental coping strategies and thus accomplish balance between work and family. Work-family balance is defined by Greenhaus and Singh (2003) as "The extent to which individuals are equally involved in-and equally satisfied with their work role and their family role". According to Voydanoff (2005), work-family balance is a global assessment of the extent to which work and family resources are sufficient to meet work and family demands. Organisations are now offering flexible work arrangements to help employees better balance work and family demands. According to legislation in England (April 2003), all employees with children under the age of six or with a disabled child under the age of 18 have the right to request flexible work. When flexible work is executed successfully it is seen as delivering multiple benefits such as: improved productivity and performance; new ways of working; enhanced commitment and retention; and a creation of high performance business built on working smarter, not necessarily harder (DTI, 2004).

### **3. Flexible work arrangements: characteristics, advantages and disadvantages**

Flexible work arrangements (FWA) are defined as employer-provided benefits that permit employees some level of control over when and where they work outside of the standard working day (Hill et al., 2001). Several researchers have found that FWAs enable individuals to integrate and overlap work and family responsibilities in time and space, lead to positive spillover, and are instrumental in achieving healthy work-family balance (Hill et al., 2003). Almost two thirds of corporate US employees reported using some type of flexibility such as: flexible start/end times, telecommuting, compressed work week, part time or other reduced hour arrangement, job share, and occasionally adjusting hours as needed to take care of personal matters. This review focuses on the most prevalent FWAs: flextime, job sharing, telecommuting, and compressed work week. However, there is also reference to some other arrangements such as career sabbaticals and grandparent leave.

#### **3.1. *Flextime***

The most prevalent flexible work arrangement, flextime or flexible work hours, typically consists of flexible workday start and finish times. Flextime allows an individual to vary their work hours within organisational set parameters. Employees have to be on the job during a set of core hours but they have more choice over their work schedules. The degree of variation in hours of work depends on: the daily hours the organisation operates; the hours the employee is required to be present; and the extent to which satisfaction of other employees and customers depends on interaction with employees.

According to Baltes et al., (1999), flextime arrangements are perceived as reducing tardiness, absenteeism and turnover. They give employees more sense of control over their hours of work. They also enable employees to meet responsibilities at home during the non-core hours and help them avoid rush hours, thereby reducing commuting time (Gottlieb et al., 1998).

#### **3.2. *Job sharing***

Job sharing is an arrangement in which two people voluntarily share the responsibilities, salary and benefits of one full-time position, each working part-time on a conventional basis. It differs from other part-time jobs by requiring a coordinated approach to job responsibility. There is a great variability in the ways that time and demands are shared.

According to Gottlieb et al., (1998), job sharing is a way of achieving balance between the demands of the job and those of family and the community. It offers considerable flexibility in scheduling time at work and is usually accompanied by higher productivity, more job satisfaction and less stress and burnout. Problems that may arise are difficulties in communications and collaboration between partners. Thus, the optimal process in developing a job sharing arrangement is when the two parties apply to share the job.

#### **3.3. *Telecommuting (telework, flexiplace, work-at-home)***

Telecommuting is defined as 'Periodic work out of the principal office one or more days per week, either at home, a client's site or in a telework center' (Nilles, 1998). To date, most telework research has focused on home-based telecommuters (Hill et al., 2003). Supervisors are often sceptical of telework as they cannot observe the employee; they need to shift from what Hill and Weiner (2003) label "face-time culture" to a "result-oriented culture".

Telecommuting helps employees reduce their commuting time and travel cost. It relieves traffic congestion. It helps employees to coordinate better their work schedules with their personal and family needs. For example, it prevents parents from keeping their children at day care centers for many hours by allowing them to be there for the children after school. Flexibility to schedule daily work also gives employees the ability to respond quickly to family emergencies, and it lets people who regularly work overtime put in the extra hours at home.

Hill et al. (2003) compared three groups of IBM employees and found that those who used telecommuting had the most positive perception of work-family balance and greater perceptions of personal and family success, in comparison to employees working in traditional or virtual office settings. However, other researchers (e.g. Kraut, 1989) have found that that job satisfaction did not differ between teleworkers and non-teleworkers. Kurland and Bailey (1999), reviewing research on telework, revealed that, while telework was related to improved productivity, several factors in telework have a negative impact on motivation, social networks and teamwork, engendering resentment from non-teleworkers.

Furthermore, according to Kurland and Bailey (1999), there is evidence that telework has a negative impact on career mobility. As teleworkers are less present in the physical environment, they are less likely to be part of the political network that is instrumental in career progress. Other negative outcomes for teleworkers are less job security, lower pay, fewer benefits, and a higher risk for burnout. In addition, although one of the reasons for establishing telework is to decrease work-family conflict, Neal et al., (1993) found that teleworkers experience increased work-family conflict because of a lack of the physical boundaries between work and home. Moreover, telework does not eliminate costs of child care as it is difficult to combine work and care of young children at home. Thus, there is a need for thorough research on the impact of telecommuting in order to develop mechanisms to facilitate and improve telecommuting and its outcomes.

### 3.4. *Compressed work week*

Here, the standard, 40-hour working week is compressed into fewer than five days by extending the length of each working day. For employees, this is a mixed blessing, involving longer periods away from work but, on the other hand, driving some (especially older) employees to complain of fatigue at the end of the long day, resulting in a decrease in productivity (Gottlieb et al., 1998).

There are additional, less prevalent flexible work arrangements that incorporate such features as sabbaticals and grandparent leave – that is, time off for grandparents to be with their grandchildren.

### 3.5. *Grandparent leave*

Demographic change is forcing employers to work harder at keeping their staff. An attempt to retain mature age workers and promote a family-friendly workplace is *grandparent leave*. The Australian Government is hoping that the 2007 ACT – the new programme of leave for grandparents - will help keep experienced people in the workplace. The St. George Bank in Australia is allowing its 9,000 workers to take leave during the first two years of their grandchildren's life. Grandparents can take 12 months' unpaid leave to help care for the grandchildren. The leave can be taken flexibly: a couple of days a week, six-monthly blocks or in one go. In England, Walmart-owned Asda has also adopted the policy of grandparent leave. Under the Oregon Family Leave Act (the OFLA) from January 2008 grandparents will be considered 'family members' and so entitled to a leave. Thus, the growing practice of grandparent leave in many countries is now helping to keep experienced people in the workforce while promoting work-family balance.

### 3.6. Career sabbaticals

Another family-friendly benefit is the career break or sabbatical. This means taking extended time off work for personal reasons: extended maternity leave; marriage; a mid-life crisis; illness in the family; to pursue personal interests; or simply just the desire to travel or dive into a new hobby. Sabbaticals enable respite, regrouping resources and recharging one's personal batteries. In England, Asda has a 'career break' which lasts between six months and two years. Although this is an unpaid leave, jobs are still waiting for the employees when they return, and their pensions and seniority stay intact.

An additional method to cope with work-family conflict is a 'cafeteria-style' benefit programme that enables employees to craft their benefits package to meet their personal and family-specific needs. Thus, employees can use job sharing and time off for caring for children or parents at the same time.

In sum, each of these flexible work arrangements has some advantages and disadvantages for the employee and the organisation, and what is good for the individual is not always good for the organisation and vice versa. Furthermore, Grant et al., (2007) have found that managerial practices frequently cause wellbeing trade-offs by enhancing one aspect, such as psychological wellbeing and decreasing another aspect, such as physical wellbeing. Some practices, while increasing employees' control and job satisfaction may undermine their health by leading to overload, fatigue, and strain. All these issues should be considered when implementing FWAs.

## 4. FWAs and human resource management

While alternative work schedules (FWAs) have become widespread, not enough attention has been paid to changes required in human resource systems (job analysis, recruitment, selection, performance appraisal and promotion) in order to support these schedules and ensure their effectiveness. Hammer and Barbera (1997) claim that the effectiveness of FWAs depends in part on the degree to which the different human resources systems have been taken into account and adapted to the change.

- **Job analysis:** Strategic job analysis should be conducted prior to implementation of FWSs in order to help identify and select suitable employees for the job. When considering compressed work weeks, job analysis should examine the types of tasks required in the specific job and the extent to which they cause fatigue as this may affect concentration, error, quality of work and health.
- **Recruitment:** FWSs may provide the organisation with a recruiting advantage, as they might attract workers who cannot (or do not want to) work a traditional schedule.
- **Selection:** Selection of employees to FWAs should be based on careful job analysis, taking into account the specific requirements of the newly-structured job. In job sharing, coordination might be needed between the job sharers. In this case, coordination abilities should be a criterion in the selection process.
- **Training:** Managerial training should take place in order to inform managers about types of FWAs and eliminate misconceptions about workers who choose them. According to Nollen (1982), FWAs may be a disadvantage in terms of training, as many organisations exclude part time workers from training due to the expense. However, part-time jobs can be useful while employees are being trained for new positions. Flexible work hours and compressed work can contribute to cross training as workers are required to cover for co-workers during their absence.

- **Performance appraisal and promotion:** Individuals job sharing, working part time, or flexible hours or compressed work weeks all have fewer opportunities for promotion than those working full time (e.g. Perlow, 1997). This may be due to managers' misconceptions, viewing these workers as less committed to their work. Another problem is that employees working on flexible schedules may see their managers less and this, in turn, may lead to lower quality evaluations (Murphy and Cleveland, 1995).

## 5. FWAs and work-family conflict

Efforts to address work-family conflict began as an initiative to give employees more control over their home and work life. The most important feature of flexible work arrangements is that they allow employees to meet responsibilities and priorities in their life in ways that conventional full-time work arrangements do not permit. Flexible work arrangements build more degrees of freedom into paid work. They also give more control to the workers, a feature that contributes to wellbeing (Karasek, 1979).

Research on FWAs suggests that they have positive outcomes such as lower work-family conflict (Anderson et al., 2002), and better work-family balance (e.g. Eby et al., 2005). Use of FWAs is related to positive outcomes for organisations such as lower staff turnover (Dalton and Mesch, 1990), and increased job satisfaction (Scandura and Lankau, 1997). Furthermore, a meta-analysis conducted by Baltes et al. (1999) demonstrated that FWAs were positively related to employee productivity, satisfaction with work schedules and overall job satisfaction, and negatively associated with absenteeism.

The findings on alternative work schedules demonstrate a relationship between utilisation of alternative work schedules and outcomes such as increased job satisfaction, decreased work-family interference, reduced absenteeism, and increased performance (for reviews, see Baltes, et al., 1999; Hammer and Barbera, 1997).

### 5.1. Perception of flextime: the culture dimension

An important notion in the field of FWA is that perceptions of flexibility may be different from the formal flexibility options given by an organisation and, therefore, have different patterns of effect on work-family balance.

Recent research suggests that it is not enough to implement family-friendly policies and practices such as flextime to reduce employees' work-life conflicts (Allen, 2001; Thompson et al., 1999). Employees are often reluctant to take advantage of work-life programmes, usually because of strong norms for 'face time' and workaholic hours. Employees also fear negative consequences for their career progress if they use work-life programmes. Judiesch and Lyness (1999) found that taking a leave of absence was associated with fewer subsequent promotions and smaller salary increases.

Almer et al., (2003) found that assurance services professionals participating in a FWA are negatively perceived in terms of career success and anticipated turnover. For the participants in FWA there are perceived potential negative repercussions in terms of performance evaluation and promotion.

Although FWAs have been implemented in response to both employee and organisational needs, Murphy and Zagorski's (2002) findings show mixed results as to their effect on attitudes, behaviours and organisational effectiveness such as job satisfaction, absenteeism, turnover, productivity, administrative issues and work/non-work conflict. Thus, organisations might spend time, money, and energy developing and implementing work-life benefits that employees do not use because of an unsupportive work-family culture. As a result, neither the organisation nor employees benefit from work-life programmes.

One crucial factor in the success of FWAs is the organisational culture. Researchers differ in how they operationalise work-family culture. Some have included both formal (e.g. degree of schedule flexibility) and informal (perceptions of support) elements in their measures (e.g. Clark, 2001). Others have included only informal aspects of culture (e.g. Allen, 2001). For example, Thompson et al. (1999, p.394) have defined work-family culture as the “*shared assumptions, beliefs, and values regarding the extent to which an organisation supports and values the integration of employees’ work and family lives*”. Lewis (1997) argued that these values and assumptions lie at the heart of workplace culture and, unless they are examined, change toward a more family-friendly culture will be impossible. Thus, the work-family culture is influenced in part by the formal benefits offered by an organisation and by employees’ perception of a supportive work-family culture. Thompson et al. (1999) have suggested that work-family culture is comprised of three components: organisational time demands, career consequences for using work-family benefits, and managerial support.

- **Organisational time demands** refer to the extent to which there are expectations for long hours of work and for prioritising work over family.
- **Perceived career consequences** refer to the degree to which employees perceive positive or negative career consequences of using work-family benefits. Because of norms for visibility (‘face time’) employees often believe that participating in work-family programmes such as flexplace may damage their career progress because they will be less visible at work (Bailyn, 1993).
- **Managerial support** captures the extent to which managers are sensitive to, and accommodating of, employees’ family needs. Respect for an employee’s non-work life is an important component of a family-supportive organisation. Through its policies and practices, an organisation sends a message to its employees that non-work activities are important and valued. By implementing FWAs, the organisation provides workers with the resources to fulfil obligations themselves.

## 6. Importance of work-family culture

Because work-family culture has an important influence on the use of work-family benefits within an organisation, and because use of benefits is related to job and life satisfaction (Kossek and Ozeki, 1998), it is essential that organisations understand the mechanisms through which work-family culture enhances or inhibits efforts to help employees achieve a balance between their work and non-work activities. Research has demonstrated (e.g. Smith, 1997) that perceptions of a supportive work culture are related to higher utilisation rates of work-family benefits and associated with positive attitudes such as job satisfaction and commitment to the organisation. In addition, perceptions of a supportive work-family culture are negatively associated with work-related outcomes such as work strain, work-family conflict and turnover intentions: the more supportive the culture, the less strain is experienced (e.g. Allen, 2001; Thompson et al., 1999). Thus, even if benefits are available, they often are not utilised if the culture of the organisation sends mixed messages about whether it is acceptable to use them. Both Allen (2001) and Thompson et al. (1999) found a supportive culture was related to employee attitudes (e.g. intention to quit, commitment) above and beyond simply offering work-life benefits. Furthermore, Allen (2001) and Thompson et al. (1999) have demonstrated that employees are more likely to use work-life benefits when they perceive their organisations and supervisors as providing a family-supportive work environment. As research shifts towards positive psychology, researchers should expand the nature of outcome variables studied in work-family research to include positive outcomes. The narrow focus on individual outcomes (e.g. stress) and organisational outcomes (e.g. absenteeism) ignores the positive impact that businesses can have on family and community. The aim of FWAs should not be only to decrease WFC and enhance balance, but take it one step further by looking at positive outcomes (e.g. engagement, facilitation) of these arrangements when they are combined with the appropriate organisational culture. Thus, we should not pursue only balance but aspire to achieve work-family integration or facilitation (Greenhaus and Powell 2006), indicating that the best solution is to integrate work and family in such a way that both sides are enhanced.

## 6.1. Survey data

The DTI's third work-life balance employees' survey (2006) found an increase in the availability of most FWAs since the earlier survey in 2003. Ninety per cent of employees reported that at least one form of FWA was available to them. The FWAs most commonly taken up by employees were flextime, working from home, and part-time work. Forty-nine per cent of employees who had flextime available to them made use of this arrangement; 44% who had the work-at-home option, worked regularly from home, and 38% who had the availability of working part time, worked part time. When employees were asked why they used FWAs, 21% reported that it made life easier or more efficient; 19% reported it was the nature of the job; 19% gave children's needs as a reason; 15% said they had more free time; 14% reported that they could spend more time with the family; and 15% related to the demands of their jobs. Employees were very positive about their FWAs; 89% believed there were positive consequences of using them. This survey shows that there is an increase of awareness and use of FWAs and in perceived positive consequences in comparison to the 2003 survey. Policymakers should relate to issues raised in this and other surveys when implementing FWAs.

## 7. Practical implications and recommendations

Although many organisations offer FWAs, the promised benefits do not always materialise. Several researchers have indicated that some evidence suggests that the strongest predictor of the efficacy of these programmes is how they are implemented and supported by management (Nord et al., 2002). According to Bronfenbrenner (1979), an individual's attempt to stabilise his or her environment is enhanced to the extent that the people around the individual are supportive of these activities. Thus, supervisors may decrease the impact of stressful situations by providing increased support, greater control over one's responsibilities and greater schedule flexibility (Anderson et al., 2002). In order to achieve culture change, work-life efforts should be linked to an organisation's strategy such that work-life balance will be considered essential to business success. More specifically, an organisation should consider linking work-life efforts to the strategic goals of increasing employee commitment, job satisfaction and career satisfaction, while decreasing staff turnover, absenteeism, job strain, and other health symptoms of its employees.

Top managers must embrace a vision for the organisation that supports work-life balance, and then communicate this vision through the company's mission statement. Furthermore, it would be helpful if top and mid-level managers modeled such new behaviours. To reinforce the importance of a supportive work-family culture, it is recommended that managers be held accountable. Managers should also be given the training needed to create a supportive culture, and be encouraged to consider how they might be contributing to a culture of overwork. For example, they should be encouraged to consider ways of measuring performance that don't include 'face time' – the common practice of equating work hours with productivity and commitment to the organisation. Employers and supervisors should be trained on supportive behaviours through a combination of training on general sensitivity to work-family employee issues, as well as more technical training specific to the characteristics of the new arrangements. There is a need for training interventions in order to enhance managerial competencies in managing work and family.

According to Rapoport et al., (2002), organisations need to focus on work processes and consider the ways in which outdated assumptions influence the total number of hours employees are expected to work, as well as where, when and how they work. In sum, introducing flexible work arrangements and customising them to individuals' needs and lifestyles can signal to employees that their company is committed to helping them achieve a more healthy balance between personal and work life. The various flexible work arrangements that have been reviewed as ways to achieve a balance between work and family life are believed to be a promising solution to the problem of WFC, though there are pitfalls that need to be avoided. Any such arrangements should focus on the wellbeing of employees and their families as well as

the productivity of the organisation. Planners should investigate whether these arrangements really work. If they are to contribute to wellbeing, the arrangements should provide a fit to the characteristics and needs of the workforce. Furthermore, when incorporating new flexible arrangements, care should be taken that they are also perceived by employees as such and, thereby, become more easily integrated into the organisational culture.

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