

Jan Dettmers, Stephan Kaiser, Simon Fietze*

Theory and Practice of Flexible Work: Organizational and Individual Perspectives. Introduction to the Special Issue**

Introduction

Over the last decades, scholars have paid consistent attention to the concepts of flexible work. This reflects the growing relevance of flexible work patterns in practice. The general assumption is that flexible work arrangements enable an organization to adapt its workforce to changes in the working environment, which is mainly based on Atkinson's (1984) groundbreaking 'flexible firm' model. In practice, we increasingly observe flexible work time arrangements and non-standard working conditions (e.g. 'temps' or contract workers).

If flexibility enables organizations to adapt to changing demands from the environment from the organizational perspective the key issue of flexible work is to allocate the work force to the varying requirements of customers or production. From the employee perspective flexibility means to have options to choose, when, for how long and for which employer the employee wants to work. Both can be achieved by contractual flexibility (temporary employment, contract work) and by temporal and spatial flexibility (overtime, on-call work, flexitime, telecommuting).

However, statements that follow the assumption that 'rigidity is dysfunctional; flexibility, functional' (Pollert, 1991, p. 9) fall short. This assumption is neither valid on the individual employee level nor on the organizational level. From a systemic perspective (Sennet, 1998), flexibility for one side (e.g. the organization) may often lead to constraints for the other side (e.g. the employee). Flexibility for an organization does not automatically imply flexibility in terms of decision latitude for employees. To cope with this paradox, scholars (e.g. Höge, 2011; Hornung, Herbig & Glaser, 2008; Reilly,

* Prof. Dr. Jan Dettmers is assistant professor of Work and Organizational Psychology at the University of Hamburg, Von-Melle-Park 11, 20253 Hamburg, Germany. E-mail: jan.dettmers@uni-hamburg.de.

Prof. Dr. Stephan Kaiser is full professor at the Universität der Bundeswehr München, Chair for Human Resources Management and Organization, Werner-Heisenberg-Weg 39, 85577 Neubiberg, Germany. E-mail: stephan.kaiser@unibw.de.

Asst. Prof. Dr. Simon Fietze is assistant professor of Human Resource Management at the University of Southern Denmark, Department of Border Region Studies, Alsion 2, 6400 Sønderborg, Denmark. E-mail: sfietze@gmail.com.

** **Acknowledgements:** We would like to thank the authors who provided us with their interesting work and the anonymous reviewers for their comments that helped the authors to improve the papers and to sharpen the contribution.

1998) differentiate between capacity-oriented flexibility and employee-oriented flexibility or flexibility opportunities and flexibility demands to capture the potential positive or negative effects of flexibility on employees and organizations. Flexibility is also a relational concept and Johnsson (2006) makes a distinction between 'being flexible' and 'having flexibility'. Because of the asymmetrical power relation between the employer and the employee, it is typically the employer who has flexibility whilst the employee has to be flexible in relation to employee-friendly flexibility are relevant, with flexibility that can be positive or negative for each party.

Furthermore, research emphasizes that the phenomenon of flexibility in general and of flexible work in particular is attended by aspects of stability. For instance, in the field of strategic organizational learning, researchers distinguish between explorative and exploitative learning (Raisch, Birkinshaw, Probst, & Tushman, 2009). Based on the work of Duncan (1976) researchers assume that organizations must implement dual structures in order to facilitate long-term success. More precisely, this ambidextrous situation holds also true for the field of flexible work. By simultaneously combining flexibility, innovation and new knowledge on one hand, and stability, efficiency and exploiting existing competencies on the other, firms would be continuously able to change and adapt to environmental dynamics. The theory path-dependency and path-breaking follows a similar logic (Sydow, Schreyögg & Koch 2009).

In the economic literature, we find much research regarding how firms can realize a flexible workforce (e.g. Mayne, Tregaskis, & Brewster, 1996; Wright & Snell, 1998; Lai, Soltani, & Baum, 2008). While this research supposes that flexible work has economic benefits and is therefore a valid goal for firms, we also find criticism within the discourse on flexible work concerning the negative side-effects of flexible work. Kozica & Kaiser (2012) state that researchers with sociological backgrounds have extensively discussed job insecurity, which has increased in parallel with the increase in flexible working practices (Beck, 2000; Cooper, 2008; Doogan, 2001; Hesselings & van Vuuren, 1999; Lambert, 2008).

Researchers who are more interested in psychological effects have focused on the increase in job stress, burnout rates, mental ill-health (e.g. employment-related depression) and physical health problems (e.g. chronic back pain) work family conflict and job satisfaction (Docherty, Forslin, Shani, & Kira, 2002; Strazdins, D'Souza, Lim, Broom, & Rodgers, 2004). With respect to temporal flexibility health related outcomes and work-life balance has been in the focus of interest. The transition to flexible working hours has been proclaimed as an appropriate mean to satisfy individual needs and the compatibility of work and family life. However, more recent research on flexible scheduling emphasizes the double edged relationship of work-life-balance issues (Grawitch, & Barber, 2010; Pedersen, & Lewis, 2012). While some studies report negative relations of flexible scheduling with work family conflict and positive with health related outcomes or job satisfaction (e.g. Halpern, 2005; Hayman, 2009), the results of other studies support the opposite relationship (Bamberg, Dettmers, Funck, Krähe, & Vahle-Hinz, 2012; Costa, Åkerstedt, Nachreiner, Baltieri, Carvalhais, Folkard, Frings Dresen, Gadbois, Gartner, Grzech Sukalo, Härmä, Kandolin, Sartori, & Silvério, 2004; Martens, Nijhuis, van Boxtel, & Knottnerus, 1999). With respect to contractual or employment flexibility the psychological literature draws the same dif-

differentiated picture on the effects on health and well-being. Research on flexible employment has found that alternative employment arrangements are associated with both impaired and improved well-being. While in some studies flexible and temporary workers reported more health complaints, mental distress and lower job satisfaction than those in permanent employment (Benach, Amable, Muntaner, & Benavides, 2002; Martens et al., 1999) other studies reveal better psychological well-being and fewer health complaints among employees in alternative types of employment (Lettourneux, 1998; Virtanen, Kivimäki, Elovainio, Vahtera, & Cooper, 2001), while yet other studies find no clear differences (Sverke, Gallagher, & Hellgren, 2000).

These inconsistent results may be attributed to a lack of accounting for important individual and work-related background variables and the heterogeneity of alternative contracts (Aronsson, Gustafsson, & Dallner, 2002; Benavides, Benach, Diez-Roux, & Roman, 2000; Bernhard-Oettel, Sverke, & De Witte, 2005). There may be important differences between various types of alternative employment ranging between the exploited contract worker and the 'free' knowledge worker. Guest, Mackenzie, & Patch (2003) found that fixed-term contract workers were significantly more satisfied than permanent employees, which was not true for temporary or agency workers. Also between countries types and conditions of flexible employment may differ. Studies that take into account these differences differentiate between part-time work, fixed term contracts, on-call employment and substitute work (Bernhard-Oettel et al., 2005; Aronsson et al., 2002) that all have different effects on well-being and other outcomes. Other approaches suggest that alternative forms of employment may differ along a core-periphery continuum with, for example, probationary employment being closer to the core permanent employees than on-call or seasonal work (Aronsson et al., 2002; Bernhard-Oettel et al., 2005). Furthermore, job characteristics may differ significantly between various types of alternative employment (Goudswaard, & Andries, 2002) which may be associated with health problems (Strazdins et al., 2004). But also within the same types of employment, important moderating and mediating factors have to be taken into account to explain different effects of flexible work. A number of studies have compared satisfaction but also well-being of temporary workers who are or are not on their contract of choice (Ellingson, Gruys, & Sackett, 1998; Feldman, Doeringhaus, & Turnley, 1993; Marler, Barringer, & Milkovich, 2002). Being on the contract or in the occupation of choice seems to be more important than the permanent-temporary dimension (Aronsson, & Göransson, 1999; Guest et al., 2003; Isaksson & Bellagh, 2002).

From the literature we have learned that we have to adopt a differentiated perspective when analyzing the effects of flexibility. However, what we can say is that there are not only positive but also negative effects of flexibility. Flexible work is therefore an ambiguous concept: on the one hand, it is a prerequisite for short term, economic success and competitive advantages, while at the same time, flexible work might be criticized for its negative effects on workers and society. Supposedly based on these or similar insights from research and practice, the German ministry of education and research (BMBF) has initiated a research focus on the balance of flexibility and stability. Within this research focus a group of researchers conducts several funded projects on the topic of flexibility and stability of changing work and employ-

ment ('Arbeits- und Beschäftigungsformen im Wandel'). From this group of researchers originates the motivation and idea of the special issue at hand, as it showed promise to collect recent research on flexible work. Thereby, it was the aim to be an outlet for researchers from within the research focus as well as for researchers from outside the funded project.

Moreover, the current special issue connects to a former special issue that was guest edited by Werner Nienhueser in 2005: *Flexible Work = Atypical Work = Precarious Work?* (management revue, 16(3)). In this previous issue Nienhüser raised two questions: 'What are the prerequisites and the consequences of new or atypical forms of employment at the individual level, at the firm level and at the level of society? In addition, how do different regulations or institutions mediate the consequences?' We pick up similar questions, although we do not overstress the issue of precarious work.

Overview of this special issue

In this issue we wished to highlight the complexity and scope of research on flexible work on organizational and individual level. We received a number of interesting papers that addressed very interesting questions and provided interesting results. Finally, only a small part of these papers could be accepted and integrated in this special issue. We arranged the papers along the question whether the papers contribute and concentrate on the individual or on the organizational level. However, we are fully aware that a strict separation between these levels is misleading sometimes. Moreover, it is a common characteristic of all papers that they highlight very specific aspects, like flexibility in knowledge-intensive firms, flexibility and organizational membership, or stress in flexible work arrangements and work-life conflict for independent contract workers.

The first article by Caroline Ruiner, Uta Wilkens and Monika Küpper titled '*Patterns of Organizational Flexibility in Knowledge-intensive Firms – Going beyond Existing Concepts*' starts with an idea of a flexible firm that is traced back to the work of Atkinson. However the authors try to go beyond the concept of Atkinson and argue that the use of external workers not necessarily aims at numerical flexibility. On the contrary, the use of flexible contracting is more connected to questions of allocating expertise and knowledge. Moreover and based on qualitative field studies, they show that this sort of flexibility is rather driven by knowledge workers than by firms. Therefore, this article gives us some new ideas on flexible work, adds to the complexity of the field, and contributes by proposing the amoebic organization as useful organizational model.

The contribution of Angelika Schmidt entitled '*The Implications of Flexible Work: Membership in Organizations Revisited*' asks for a revision of the traditional approach of a core and non-core workers. The article critically examines the polarization within the workforce by looking at theoretical conceptions of organizational boundaries and the types of ties between organizations and individuals based on the concept of structural coupling and membership. Thereby, the central assumption is that coupling has changed dramatically during the last decades. The authors conclude that the loosening of coupling has implications for the willingness of members to integrate in organizations.

Thirdly, we draw the reader's attention to an article that focuses on individual and psychological aspects of flexible work arrangements. The article by Tim Vahle-Hinz, Katharina Kirschner and Maja Thomson entitled '*Employment-related Demands and Resources – New Ways of Researching Stress in Flexible Work Arrangements*' provides empirical evidence that a flexible employment relationship can be a source for stress. Therefore, the authors strongly advocate considering both task-related and employment-related aspects on stress in flexible work arrangements. Employment-related demands and resources have shown to be important for health and well-being in flexible employment. However, still traditional aspects of job design remain relevant for health and well-being. So the authors are afraid, that flexible workers might face both, poor designed jobs and new employment-related sources of stress.

The final article by Stefan Süß and Shiva Sayah entitled '*Conflict between work and life: The case of contract workers in the German IT and media sectors*' continues the topic of the previous article. It deals with the issue of work-life conflict in the realm of independent contract workers in the German IT and media sector. As a result, the authors argue that the work-life conflict of contract workers is significantly influenced by working hours and income. Moreover, they give evidence, that the number of younger children has a significant impact on work-life conflict when regarded in interaction with gender. The paper contributes to the scientific conversation on work-life issues and provides a much differentiated understanding of work-life conflict in the case of independent contract workers.

References

- Aronsson, G., & Göransson, S. (1999). Permanent employment but not in a preferred occupation: Psychological and medical aspects, research implications. *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology, 4*(2), 152-163.
- Aronsson, G., Gustafsson, K., & Dallner, M. (2002). Work environment and health in different types of temporary jobs. *European Journal of Work and Organizational Psychology, 11*(2), 151-175.
- Atkinson, J. (1984). Manpower strategies for flexible organisations. *Personnel Management, 16*(8), 28-31.
- Bamberg, E., Dettmers, J., Funck, H., Krähe, B., & Vahle-Hinz, T. (2012). Effects of on-call work on well-being: Results of a daily survey. *Applied Psychology: Health and Well-Being, 4*(3), 299-320.
- Beck, U. (2000). *The brave new world of work*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press
- Benach, J., Amable, M., Muntaner, C., & Benavides, F. (2002). The consequences of flexible work for health: Are we looking at the right place? *Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health, 56*(6), 405-406.
- Benavides, F., Benach, J., Diez-Roux, A.V., & Roman, C. (2000). How do types of employment relate to health indicators? Findings from the second European survey on working conditions. *Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health, 54*(7), 494-501.
- Bernhard-Oettel, C., Sverke, M., & De Witte, H. (2005). Comparing three alternative types of employment with permanent full-time work: How do employment contract and perceived job conditions relate to health complaints? *Work & Stress, 19*(4), 301-318.

- Cooper, M. (2008). The inequality of security: Winners and losers in the risk society. *Human Relations*, 61(9), 1229-1258.
- Costa, G., Åkerstedt, T., Nachreiner, F., Baltieri, F., Carvalhais, J., Folkard, S., Frings Dresen, M., Gadbois, C., Gartner, J., Grzech Sukalo, H., Härmä, M., Kandolin, I., Sartori, S., & Silvério, J. (2004). Flexible working hours, health, and well-being in Europe: Some considerations from a SALTSA project. *Chronobiology International*, 21(6), 831-844.
- Docherty, P., Forslin, J., Shani, A.B., & Kira, M. (2002). Emerging work systems: From intensive to sustainable. In Docherty, P. (Eds.), *Creating sustainable work systems. Emerging perspectives and practice* (pp. 3-14). London: Routledge.
- Doogan, K. (2001). Insecurity and long-term employment. *Work, Employment & Society*, 15(3), 419-441.
- Duncan, R.B. (1976). The ambidextrous organization: Designing dual structures for innovation. In Pondy, L.R., & Slevin, S.P. (Eds.), *The management of organization* (pp. 167-188). New York: Oxford.
- Ellingson, J.E., Gruys, M.L., & Sackett, P.R. (1998). Factors related to the satisfaction and performance of temporary employees. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 83(6), 913-921.
- Feldman, D.C., Doeringhaus, H.I., & Turnley, W.H. (1993). Managing temporary workers: A permanent HRM challenge. *Organizational Dynamics*, 23, 49-63.
- Goudswaard, A., & Andries, F. (2002). *Employment status and working conditions*. European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions Report. Luxembourg: Office for Official Publications for the European Communities.
- Grawitch, M., & Barber, L. (2010). Work flexibility or nonwork support? Theoretical and empirical distinctions for work-life initiatives. *Consulting Psychology Journal: Practice and Research*, 62(3), 169-188.
- Guest, D., Mackenzie, D.K., & Patch, A. (2003). *The psychological contracts, attitudes and behaviour of workers on temporary and permanent contracts*. London: King's College.
- Halpern, D. (2005). How time-flexible work policies can reduce stress, improve health, and save money. *Stress and Health*, 21, 157-168.
- Hayman, J. (2009). Flexible work arrangements: Exploring the linkages between perceived usability of flexible work schedules and work/life balance. *Journal of Community, Work and Family: Special Issue on Work/Life Balance*, 12(3), 327-338.
- Hesseling, D.J.K. & van Vuuren, T. (1999). Job flexibility and job insecurity: The Dutch case. *European Journal of Work and Organizational Psychology*, 8(2), 273-293.
- Höge, T. (2011). Perceived flexibility requirements at work and the employee-work-orientation: Concept and measurement. *Psychology of Everyday Activity*, 4(1), 3-21.
- Hornung, S., Herbig, B., & Glaser, J. (2008). Mitarbeiterorientierte Flexibilisierung: Konzeptgeleitete Evaluation eines Fallbeispiels aus der öffentlichen Verwaltung. *Psychology of Everyday Activity*, 1(1), 33-43.
- Isaksson, K., & Bellagh, K. (2002). Health problems and quitting among female "temps". *European Journal of Work and Organizational Psychology*, 11(1), 27-45.
- Johansson, D. (2006). Flexibility, stability and related concepts. In Furaker, B., Hakansson, K., & Karlsson, J. (Eds.), *Flexibility and stability in working life*. Basingstoke: Palgrave.
- Kozica, A., & Kaiser, S. (2012). A sustainable perspective on flexible HRM: How to cope with paradoxes of contingent work. *Management Revue*, 23(3), 239-261.

- Lai, P.C., Soltani, E., & Baum, T. (2008). Distancing flexibility in the hotel industry: The role of employment agencies as labor suppliers. *The International Journal of Human Resource Management*, 19(1), 132-152.
- Lambert, S. J. (2008). Passing the buck: Labor flexibility practices that transfer risk onto hourly workers. *Human Relations*, 61(9), 1203-1227.
- Letourneux, V. (1998). *Precarious employment and working conditions in Europe*. European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions Report. Luxembourg: Office for Official Publications for the European Communities.
- Mayne, L., Tregaskis, O., & Brewster, C. (1996). A comparative analysis of the link between flexibility and HRM strategy. *Employee Relations*, 18(3), 5-24.
- Marler, J.H., Barringer, M.W., & Milkovich, G.T. (2002). Boundaryless and traditional contingent employees: Worlds apart. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 23(4), 425-453.
- Martens, M., Nijhuis, F., von Boxtel, M., & Knottnerus, J. (1999). Flexible work schedules and mental and physical health. A study of a working population with non-traditional working hours. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 20, 35-46.
- Nienhueser, W. (2005). Flexible work = atypical work = precarious work? Introduction to the Special Issue, *Management Revue*, 16(3), 299-303.
- Pedersen, V., & Lewis, S. (2012). Flexible friends? Flexible working time arrangements, blurred work-life boundaries and friendship. *Work, Employment & Society*, 26(3), 464-480.
- Pollert, A. (1991). The orthodoxy of flexibility. In Pollert, A. (Eds.), *Farewell to flexibility?* (pp. 3-31). Oxford: Blackwell.
- Prieto, C. (1993). The management of the work-force: A sociological criticism of prevailing fashions. *The International Journal of Human Resource Management*, 4(3), 611-630.
- Raisch, S., Birkinshaw, J., Probst, G., & Tushman, M.L. (2009). Organizational ambidexterity: Balancing exploration and exploitation for sustained success, *Organization Science*, 20(4), 685-695.
- Reilly, P.A. (1998). Balancing flexibility – Meeting the interests of employer and employee. *European Journal of Work and Organizational Psychology*, 7(1), 7-22.
- Sennett, R. (1998). *The corrosion of character: The personal consequences of work in the new capitalism*. New York: W.W. Norton.
- Strazdins, L., D'Souza, R.M., Lim, L., Broom, D.H., & Rodgers, B. (2004). Job strain, job security, and health: Rethinking the relationship. *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology*, 9, 443-475.
- Sverke, M., Gallagher, D. G., & Hellgren, J. (2000). Alternative work arrangements. In Isaksson, L., Hogstedt, C., Eriksson, C., & Theorrell, T. (Eds.), *Health effects of the new labour market*. New York: Kluwer Academic/Plenum Publishers.
- Sydow, J., Schreyögg, G., & Koch, J. (2009). Organizational path dependence: Opening the black box. *Academy of Management Review*, 34(4), 689-709
- Wright, P., & Snell, S. A. (1998). Toward a unifying framework for exploring fit and flexibility in strategic Human Resource Management. *Academy of Management Review*, 23(4), 756-772.
- Virtanen, M., Kivimäki, M., Elovainio, M., Vahtera, J., & Cooper, C.L. (2001). Contingent employment, health and sickness absence. *Scandinavian Journal of Work, Environment and Health*, 27, 365-372.