

# May I Work Part-Time? An Exploration of Predicted Employer Responses to Employee Requests for Part-Time Work

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Increasing numbers of professional and managerial employees are requesting a shift from full-time to part-time work. In a policy-capturing study, 200 attorneys (including both partners and associates) rated how likely their firms would be to accept different hypothetical attorneys' requests for part-time work. Supporting predictions based on dependency theory, respondents reported that their firms would be most likely to approve requests to work part-time from attorneys who perform well, would be difficult to replace, have strong organizational connections, and threaten to leave if their requests are denied. Supporting predictions based on institutional theory, respondents reported that their firms would be more likely to approve requests from women than from men and from attorneys seeking part-time work to take care of a child rather than to pursue a personal interest for which there is less institutional support. © 2000 Academic Press

In the past decade, the number of Americans working part-time has increased dramatically (Duffy & Pupo, 1992). Part-timers are a diverse group, differing in numerous respects, including their paths to part-time work (Feldman & Doerp-

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inghaus, 1992; Tilly, 1992). Some initially sought full-time work, but could find only part-time work. Others actively sought part-time jobs and found them. And still others originally worked full-time jobs but subsequently petitioned their employers to allow them to shift from full-time to part-time work. Particularly among managers and professionals, the latter path to part-time work is increasingly common (Tilly, 1991, 1992). In this study, we drew on two quite different, but complementary theories—dependency theory (Bartol & Martin, 1988) and institutional theory (e.g., DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Meyer & Rowan, 1991; Scott & Meyer, 1991)—to explore this path. Specifically, we conducted a policy-capturing study, asking attorneys to rate how likely it was that hypothetical attorneys of differing characteristics would be allowed to move from full-time to part-time work in their firms. Supporting both dependency theory and institutional theory, our results document attorneys' perceptions of their firms' practices and suggest new avenues for research on part-time work and other forms of nontraditional work arrangements.

## POSSIBLE DETERMINANTS OF EMPLOYER RESPONSES TO EMPLOYEE REQUESTS FOR PART-TIME WORK

### *Dependency Theory*

Dependency theory (Bartol & Martin, 1988) rests upon two fundamental assumptions: (a) managers are dependent, to varying degrees, upon their subordinates and (b) managers use pay to manage their dependence upon their subordinates. That is, managers are most likely to allocate relatively large pay raises to subordinates upon whom they are most dependent, particularly if the threat of dependency disruption is high (e.g., if the employee is considering taking a new job). Managers do this, dependency theory suggests, in an effort to retain the employees upon whom they most depend. We adapted Bartol and Martin's (1988) theory in an effort to explain, in part, predicted employer responses to employee requests to shift from full-time to part-time work. The more dependent a manager is upon a subordinate, we propose, the more likely the manager is to allow that subordinate to work part-time. Better to retain a valued employee part-time, a manager may reason, than to risk losing the employee entirely.

In their theory and research, Bartol and Martin (1988); 1989); 1990) have identified several sources of managerial dependence upon a subordinate. These include (a) ease of replacement (the extent to which the subordinate's knowledge or skills make him or her difficult to replace) and (b) organizational connections (the extent to which the subordinate has connections with powerful others in the organization who strive to safeguard and enhance the subordinate's interests within the organization). Further, dependency threat (the likelihood that the subordinate will leave the organization or intentionally reduce his or her job performance) is conceptualized as a moderator between dependency sources and pay allocation. Thus, the employee who would be difficult to replace and who

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