



# What is happening to flexible workers in the supply chain partnerships between hotel housekeeping departments and their partner employment agencies?

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## ABSTRACT

The primary aims of this paper are two-fold: first, to consider the potential which exists for hotel management to establish a firm relationship with employment agencies to contribute to the deployment of right numbers and skills at the right place; and second, to assess whether both the hotels and employment agencies treat the flexible workers as a resource, or as a cost. The findings, based on 84 qualitative interviews, indicate that: there is a solid economic rationale that is likely to bind the incidence of flexible working practices to the wider recruitment strategies of the hotels; that the flexible firm models do not provide a full account of supply chain relationship between hotels and their partner agencies; and that the current management approach to labour flexibility conforms to a 'hard' version of HRM in that labour is treated as a variable cost. The findings suggest that flexible workers are highly likely disadvantaged in terms of access to training, career development, remuneration and other work-related practices than core employees. Overall, the data reveals that both dimensions of cost and, to a lesser extent, quality of the workforce provided by the employment agencies are central to the interests of the hotel management, thereby forming the backdrop to their decisions on whether to maintain these supply chain relationship with their partner agencies. Finally, the implications of these findings are discussed.

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## 1. Introduction

In the hotel sector, products provided have two dimensions: tangible (e.g. hotel rooms, restaurant meals and pub drinks) and intangible (e.g. warm greeting, speed, and outlet atmosphere). In addition to its service sector characteristics – i.e. intangibility, perishability, variability, simultaneous production and consumption, and inseparability – variability in demand is a feature of the sector which exerts considerable influence on its labour market characteristics (Guerrier and Lockwood, 1989; Baum, 1995). Unlike most other service businesses, the hotel sector operates a 24/7/12/365 system and this, in itself, impacts upon the availability of labour, scheduling and rostering, remuneration, working conditions and employee welfare (see Rawstron, 1999). To put it in another way, the reality of hospitality work is that much of it is required at essentially antisocial times or at times when other people are at leisure. Such a 24/7/12/365 delivery model is extremely variable and, frequently,

unpredictable. One implication of such highly fluctuating demand for the hotel services is that housekeeping employees frequently face demands on their personal time in the interests of their customers, which take them beyond contractual or, indeed, legal norms. In consequence, management of demand variability of the hospitality industry in general and hotel sector in particular has engendered a great deal of theoretical and empirical effort and has been the focus of considerable policy debate (see Geary, 1992; Atkinson, 1984, 1985; Williamson, 1985; Pollert, 1988; OECD, 1986; Pfeffer and Baron, 1988; Osterman, 1987; Handy, 1989; Marchington and Wilkinson, 2008; Golsh, 2003).

One response, of managers in the hotel sector, to the challenge of demand variation has been to seek greater flexibility in the workplace. Due to the importance of matching the needs of the worker with the needs of the business, researchers have attempted to conceptualise the working relationship between the individual worker and the firm in various ways (Peel and Boxall, 2005, p. 1676). Among the more popular frameworks are Atkinson's (1985) model of flexible firm and Handy's (1989) 'shamrock organisation'. The flexible firm model envisages that the firm is flexible in terms of its adaptability to expansion, contraction or change in the product market. It increasingly seeks and achieves greater

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flexibility in the forms of functional, numerical and financial aspects of its workforce (Pollert, 1988; Procter et al., 1994). In a similar vein, Handy's model of the shamrock organisation describes an organisation in terms of three leaves of the shamrock: the first leaf or group is core/permanent employees, the second is contractors, and flexible/part-time/temporary workers constitute the third leaf of the shamrock.

On the basis of Atkinson's (1984) and Handy's models, others (e.g. Harrison and Bluestone, 1990; Rubery et al., 1987; Standing and Tokman, 1991; Rimmer and Zappala, 1988; Harrison and Kelly, 1993; Golsh, 2003) differentiate between several different types of labour market flexibility: numerical, functional, wage, temporal, and procedural flexibility. These types of flexibility in turn have led to a growing proportion of workers in various non-standard employment relationships (see Pfeffer and Baron, 1988; Osterman, 1987; Williamson et al., 1975; Jensen and Meckling, 1976). In Pollert's (1988, p. 281) view, flexibility has been stressed as an essential ingredient of economic progress by the OECD (1986); has informed the reconstitution of European labour law (Deakin, 1986); and in the British case, has dominated employment and economic policy. It has also been identified as a key managerial concern, and applied to all forms of employment outside the full-time—i.e. permanent contract such as part-time and temporary work (Hakim, 1987).

A review of the literature on labour flexibility in the hospitality industry in general and hotel sector in particular reveals that much of the research on the topic has been concerned with the widespread 'adoption' of flexibility strategies. For example, various flexibility arrangements, variation in working hours or in numbers employed, improving employee deployment across tasks, choice of work location, or even change of employer, have been frequently acknowledged to minimise the labour costs, to achieve greater efficiency, to match between labour inputs and work outputs (Reilly, 1998, p. 16), and specifically, to manage demand fluctuations (Guerrier and Lockwood, 1989, p. 411). The ease of access to workforce had also led to greater use of flexible workers on an "as needed" or "just-in-time" basis in the hospitality industry (Walsh, 1991, p. 113). Wood (1999, p. 2) reported that the concept of outsourcing had been accepted as part of the fabric of hotel operations. Furthermore, Wood (1999) identified the housekeeping department as one of the most popular areas for external servicing. Other empirical studies have also concentrated on some of the determinants of specific types of labour flexibility (e.g. Abraham and Taylor, 1996; Harrison and Kelly, 1993; Davis-Blake and Uzzi, 1993); on the demographic characteristics of flexible workers (Baker and Christensen, 1998); on the kinds of jobs staffed by flexible workers and the related industries (Mangum et al., 1985); or on predicting the use of flexible work arrangements (Gramm and Schnell, 2001; Voudouris, 2004, p. 133).

Despite the large number of studies that have investigated the theory and practice of labour flexibility in the service industry and suggested that flexibility strategies are attracting considerable managerial interest, a deficiency in empirical data exists regarding, in Geary's (1992, p. 252) words, "those people's working lives these practices are designed to affect"—i.e. flexible workers themselves. What we currently know about labour flexibility in hotel sector lies at the intersection of two literatures: HRM and flexibility. Within both literatures, there has been much discussion of management's efforts to attain flexibility as a means to attain competitive success (e.g. DTI, 1995). It is discussed as a 'leading edge' practice and is therefore seen to be advantageous to employers (Geary, 1992, p. 252). However, a few studies have sought to examine the drama of these strategies' attempted implementation. There is considerable amount of empirical evidence to answer the question, 'what accounts for such management's resurgence of interest in labour flexibility'? However, there has been a relative dearth of research on the implications of flexibility and its associated practices for the

flexible workers, or on the flexible workers' perceptions of, and experiences with, flexible working—with the exception of Kunda et al. (2002) and Peel and Boxall (2005) whose work are (in)directly comparable to us (see Casey, 1988, 1991; Hakim, 1987; Marginson et al., 1988; Pollert, 1987; Wood and Smith, 1989; Geary, 1992, p. 252).

The aforementioned shortcomings in previous research stem from two sources: the research methods employed, and the tendency to study flexible working from the point of view of those managers who had a policy-making responsibility in the organisation. Concerning the former, there has been an exclusive reliance on surveys as the main source of information on labour flexibility and its associated practices or relationships with, among others, national culture, outsourcing, downsizing or deregulation of the labour market (e.g. Buultjens and Howard, 2001; Voudouris, 2004; Black, 1999; Littler and Innes, 2003; Harrison and Kelly, 1993). The survey-based (quantitative) methods, however, appear to be poorly suited to collect data which would allow conclusions about the *actual* adoption of flexibility and its implications for flexible workers. In the case of the latter source, the majority of previous survey research reflects the views expressed by management; views seen as reflecting the *actual* practice of flexible working practices (e.g. Benson et al., 2000). In other words, the respondents of the previous surveys were high level HR. This raises the question whether their responses are descriptive of the flexible working arrangements *as* practiced or *as intended* to be practiced (Bretz et al., 1992, p. 336). One explanation for this ambiguity is that flexibility practices are seen as an attempt by managers to drive down the costs and/or as a means of adjusting their workforce to changing market conditions (Gramm and Schnell, 2001; Gonzalez-Diaz et al., 2000; Voudouris, 2004). In consequence, the available research only reflects the views and perspectives of these managers. And, it remains unusual for employees to be asked how they evaluate the flexibility-related practices. The implication of such one-sidedness, according to Peel and Boxall, is that 'it weakens our understanding of employment as a *relationship*' (2005, p. 1675).

This study addresses both of the above problems by adopting: first, a qualitative methodology; and second, collecting data from multiple perspectives. We believe that the findings help provide a detailed picture of the current state of labour flexibility practice and how they are perceived by flexible workers. The findings revealed that there were some obvious affinities between the management of housekeeping departments and their partner agencies in terms of their orientations toward flexible workers. The data indicated that what managers recognised and experienced as their rationale for flexible working arrangements differed considerably from what flexible workers recognised and valued as flexibility. This disparity was generated by a lack of understanding of flexible working practices at management level. While the soft model of HRM emphasises policies which endeavour to win employees' commitment and motivation, both management and employment agencies seemed to treat the flexible workers as a variable cost. Indeed, the current managerial approach to labour flexibility practices conforms to the Michigan model of HRM (Fombrun et al., 1984; see also Randell, 1994; Storey, 1989; Townley, 1991) not least because the flexible workers were managed in a similar manner to equipment and raw materials: they were obtained as cheaply as possible; were used sparingly; and were exploited as much as possible. The study also found that the quantity and quality of training courses were too limited to provide a career path for flexible workers or result in high organisational commitment (see Soltani, 2010).

In sum, our review of the literature revealed that study of the nature and extent of labour flexibility is thought to be uniquely important because we presently have a limited understanding of exactly what flexible working means to the flexible workers; how

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