

Free or precarious? A comparison of the attitudes of workers in flexible and traditional employment contracts

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Abstract

This study contributes to research on the impact of different kinds of employment contract on worker attitudes in the context of debates about the changing nature of employment in the 21st century and in particular the emergence of what have been described as either free or precarious workers. Work experiences and attitudes associated with part-time, temporary and multiple contracts are compared with those of workers in single, permanent, full-time jobs. Among a sample of UK pharmacists, few significant differences are found between workers on any of these contracts, either singly or in combination, and those in traditional employment contracts. The role of contract of choice and work orientations as potential mediators was explored. Although both were associated with attitudes, they had only a very minor role as either mediators or moderators. It is concluded that among this sample of professional workers, those on atypical employment contracts report experiences and attitudes that are at least as positive as those of workers in traditional employment contracts.

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Keywords: Flexible employment contracts; Multiple-job handling; Work attitudes

1. Introduction

Employment flexibility has been widely advocated as a means of ensuring the full and efficient use of human resources (Capelli, 1999; Handy, 1989; Lepak & Snell, 1999). While this might bring benefits to the organization, the consequences for the workforce, and more particularly those who are not seen as valued core employees, may be less positive. Indeed, the pace of change in organizations and their markets has led some observers (see, for example, Capelli, 1999; Smith, 2001a,b) to suggest that no workers, however valued by their present employer, can feel secure in their employment. In the European Union, the assumed costs to workers of employment flexibility has resulted in legislation to restrict working hours with further legislation proposed to protect the rights of those in temporary employment.

A number of writers and researchers have presented a different perspective on flexible employment. Barley and Kunda (2004), based on their research on technicians and engineers have identified what Knell (2000) among others has termed the “free worker” who is able to choose his or her position in the labour market. Building on research in Silicon Valley, Bridges (1995) has highlighted the concept of employability allied to new freedoms permitted by the

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growth of knowledge work (Leadbetter, 1999). This focus overlaps with the burgeoning body of work concerned with the boundaryless career (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996) and the importance of career self-management (King, 2004). This stream of writing suggests that an increasing number of workers are asserting control over their working lives and choosing where, for whom and on what kind of employment contract they work. As Storey, Salaman, and Platman (2005) note, there is an implicit positive discourse whereby the concepts of enterprise, freedom and independence are applied to self-employment and career self-management. Allied to this development, there has been a growing interest in work–life balance and a view that younger workers, those who have sometimes been classified as Generation X (Conger, 1998; Cramer & Dearlove, 2000), are less willing to accept what they would perceive as unreasonable demands from their employer. There is also evidence in the USA that the greater demands on life both at work and outside work are causing growing numbers of workers to reconsider their work–life balance (Friedman & Greenhaus, 2000).

Pink (2001) has portrayed 21st century America as a nation in which flexible working has freed large numbers of workers to choose the working arrangements that suit them. However not everyone is in a position to become a “free” agent. The assumption in the emerging literature is that employment freedom depends upon being in an area of work that requires distinctive knowledge and expertise and for which there is a high level of demand. It is therefore more likely to apply to those with key professional or technical skills who have some scope to choose a career pattern that suits them and who have the resources and know-how to maintain their employability and their employment-related networks (Marler, Barringer, & Milkowich, 2002). Paradoxically, these are the same workers that organizations are likely to look upon as core workers whom they would like to retain in permanent employment so they may be willing to negotiate reduced hours or other more flexible arrangements to hold on to them (Lee, Hourquet, & MacDermid, 2002). They can be contrasted with low skill workers who may become marginalized as organizations cut back their workforces and whose position in the labour market is likely to be more precarious as a result.

Despite the assumption that flexible employment is growing and is here to stay, the standard form of employment, which remains the benchmark against which forms of flexible employment can be judged, is the permanent, full-time job. Among all types of worker, including the potentially “free” knowledge workers, this remains the norm. Indeed, as Auer and Cazes (2003) have highlighted, across OECD countries permanent long-term employment in the same organization remains perhaps surprisingly resilient. Casey and Alach (2004) note that if the permanent, full-time job is the norm, then jobs that depart from this are often viewed as problematic and defined as part of a “secondary” labour market. There may therefore be disadvantages and costs for those workers who are engaged in forms of atypical, flexible employment, even among the potentially “free” professional and knowledge workers. By implication, the more flexible the employment, the greater the potential costs. An aim of the present study is to test this assumption.

Employment flexibility can take a variety of forms. An organization may reasonably seek flexibility with respect to the employment, allocation and reward of its workers (Atkinson, 1984). These are sometimes described, from an organizational perspective, as numerical, functional and reward flexibility (Beatson, 1995). Our focus is on the forms of employment contract that facilitate numerical flexibility. From a worker’s perspective, the key forms of employment flexibility are likely to concern the hours of employment and the contract of employment. Reflecting this concern, and reinforcing the traditional stereotype of the desirability of “normal”, “primary” employment, it is these atypical arrangements that have been the focus of legislation in the European Union. Feldman (1990), with respect to part-time working, and Connelly and Gallagher (2004) with respect to temporary contracts, have highlighted the need to recognise the heterogeneity of forms that these can take. There is particular scope for variety with respect to hours, since those working part-time may be employed on anything up to 30 h a week in the UK and even up to 35 h a week in Australia (Walsh & Deery, 1999). While it may be assumed that part-timers are employed for shorter hours than those in full-time work, this does not take account of the possibility that they hold second jobs. The possibility that some workers may have multiple jobs therefore needs to be built in to the analysis.

Feldman (1990) and Connelly and Gallagher (2004) note that forms of employment flexibility may combine so that workers may be both part-time and temporary. Walsh and Deery (1999) have compared part-time and temporary service workers and showed that they had different backgrounds and reasons for seeking a particular type of contract and that workers’ reactions depended partly on how well it fitted their circumstances and values. However there has been little research that has explored the experience of combining forms of employment flexibility including multiple job-holding.

The aim of this paper is to explore the reactions of a sample of potentially “free” workers to flexible employment. It seeks to test the competing broad hypotheses that flexible employment brings benefits or costs to such workers compared with those in traditional employment. It does so by focusing on three sets of potentially positive and three

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