

Flexibility in the workplace: What happens to commitment?

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Abstract: Flexibility is one the most highly appreciated norms of today's workplace. Amongst the push for broadening this trend in the employment relationship, an important question that arises is the effects it can have on employees' perception and how it can affect their commitment to the organization. This paper examines the issue of employment flexibility and the various forms it takes in the working environment. Equally, there is an attempt to ascertain how people in the workforce perceive the call for flexibility and how this affects their commitment levels towards organizations.

Keywords: Employee flexibility, employment relationship, workplace.

Introduction

One of the most important discussions on the ER (employment relationship) is the issue of flexibility in the labor force. Through substantial research numerous arguments arose regarding changes in the past types of employment. Whereas once job security was exchanged for commitment, currently organizations demand from their employees' flexibility, multiple skills and high levels of performance. In return, further from monetary rewards, there are opportunities for training and development so that people could increase their skills and competencies thus making themselves more marketable (Claydon & Collin, 2005). In this paper, we examine the issue of employment flexibility and its role in organizational life. The focus is particularly in the relationship of flexibility and employee commitment. Our objective is to assess whether the route to implementing flexibility has led to the alienation of employees from organizations and to the decrease of commitment levels towards their employers.

We start by introducing the concept of flexibility in the organization and its specific context with regards to the labor force and the competitive new climate. We define the labor markets and what hiring mechanisms are available for organizations and even more, the power management can exercise in its relationship with the labor force. At this stage, we highlight the specific types of employment flexibility and examine the various theories towards achieving it in practice. In order to comprehend the effects of labor flexibility in employee commitment, we introduce the concept of the psychological contract which in essence describes the implicit agreement between employees and the organization with regards to their reciprocal obligations and perceived expectations. As commitment is directly tied to the PC (psychological contract) we examine the negative impact flexibility can have as a perceived violation of the PC.

Extending that, follows a review of the state of employee commitment with regards to the efforts of infusing flexibility to assess if indeed there is a deterioration of commitment in favor of flexibility or as some evidence suggests there can be a compromise between the two. The last part deals with possible suggestions for managers to consider in order to pursuit flexibility without thwarting completely labor force commitment. In the conclusion, there is a recapping of the main points of the paper and some concluding thoughts.

Flexibility: An introduction

Literature suggests that in the 1980s and 1990s major changes occurred in the workplace and in the relationship between organizations and employees. In the past, employees expected to remain in their jobs for a lengthy period of time and enjoyed a relative level of security (Osterman

2001; Claydon & Collin, 2005). On the other hand, work patterns were designed and distributed by supervisors and the role of employees was restricted in the narrow tasks assigned to them. During the last two decades of the 20th century, international competition, domestic competitive pressures, technological changes and major financial events made organizations to seek `` greater flexibility and productivity as well as new strategies focused on speed, responsiveness to changing market conditions and innovation....have induced organizations to eliminate jobs not just in the factory floor as often as in the past but also among those who have traditionally been offered a long-term career within the organization`` (Hiltrop:1995:286)

The massive restructuring forced organizations and employees to renegotiate their relationship as new variables arose. As figure 1 depicts, in the past employees operated in a climate of stability, with loyalty and commitment to organization being rewarded in the long-term. There were shared responsibilities, opportunities for promotion and salary increase on a steady basis and there were more guarantees of future development in the organization. In the new situation, it is required that the workforce will be able to produce immediate results, employees are now judged with performance-oriented criteria and there is little security in maintaining a lengthy time of employment. Job security has been substituted by the call for training and development in order to make employees enhance their abilities thus permitting them to become more `marketable` in light of the shift from permanent to flexible employment.

Figure 1. Old and new variables in the Employment relationship

Old type	Current type
<i>Stable employment relationship</i>	<i>Individualism</i>
<i>Security</i>	<i>Uncertain environment</i>
<i>Fairness</i>	<i>Marketability of oneself</i>
<i>Trust</i>	<i>Increased risk</i>
<i>Loyalty</i>	<i>Disloyalty</i>

Undoubtedly, this interpretation appears considerably pessimistic and depicts employment flexibility as a negative concept. Another dimension is offered by the need discerned from the 1970s, as policy makers along with organizations considered the inability of the past system of employment to ensure the viability of organizations and in extension of their employees (Claydon & Collin, 2005). Furthermore, European firms faced stringent pressures due to international competition, increased unemployment and the need to reduce labor costs (EPOC, 1999; Claydon & Collin, 2005). Two important proposals to cope with these pressures were the so-called `low-road`, which entailed competing on prices, cutting wages and decreasing the overall social benefits of employees. On the other end, the `high road` was based on promoting quality, pursuing innovation whilst investing to the enhancement of the labor force (EPOC, 1999).

Another conceptualization of the latter framework is the shift from `Fordist` to a `Post-Fordist` regime. Fordism, describes a situation focusing on mass production and distribution of products in a stable market with standard terms in the employment relationship. On the other hand, Post-fordism describes a situation where organizations have to cope with constant change. At this level, firms are losing their stability in the marketplace as technological advancement sweeps away the old rules of competition along with the introduction of globalization and uncertainty (Thompson and McHugh, 2002).

In the European context, due to the multitude of institutions, national authorities, trade unions and social orientation of the member states, the `low-road` seemed not applicable. Instead, the road of technical innovation with emphasis on technological advancements, telecommunications and computing appeared more appropriate. Once again, it was necessary for employees to cope with these new conditions, along with cultivating the knowledge and abilities to meet organizational and business demands (Sparrow & Marchington, 1998; EPOC, 1999). The weight of all these considerations brought forth the need for labor market flexibility for organizations and employees

alike. By flexibility of course numerous concepts can be included even in the confines of employment flexibility that is discussed here. For example, organizations might wish to promote flexibility in their labor through the enhancement of the quality and competencies of their employees. Equally, we could recognize employment flexibility when management makes use of the external labor market to face internal shortages or deficiencies in the necessary amount of workforce.

At this stage, it is essential to mention some influential factors that affect labor flexibility. Primarily, we should analyze the term labor market and its practical linkage to organizations. The simplest and most important use of the labor market is as the source for organizations to hire employees. Breaking it down into specific categories, we can discern three main types of labor markets in table 1 below.

Table 1. Types of labor markets

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Unstructured, casual labor markets also known as `spot` market• Structured occupational labor markets which are external to the firm• Structured and administered labor markets which are internal to the firm |
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Casual labor markets describe competitive labor conditions where employees are selected according to demand fluctuations and wages are determined based on supply and demand. There are no barriers to entry for employees and no collective representation in the form of trade unions. Occupational labor market describes a pool of skilled employees who are sought from organizations often through trade unions and professional bodies and especially when temporary increases in demand occur. Both casual and occupational labor markets represent the overall external labor market for organizations in the sense that, hiring is done from an external pool of workers.

On the other hand, administered labor markets are sources of employment created to fill vacancies internally in the organization. The design of tasks and the rewarding system is different from the external labor market arrangements as promotion possibilities and salaries tend to be higher and unaffected by changes in the external market. Of course, organizations can adopt a combination of internal and external labor markets promoting individuals internally for specific tasks whilst hiring externally for other duties (Claydon, 2004; Claydon & Collins, 2005).

The existence of both internalized and external labor market is considered to have an effect on the determination of wages and working conditions. In essence, both themes are set mostly by employers and occupational groups directly rather than the forces of supply and demand as theory suggests. In other words, there can be a bias in favor of some individuals and groups and to the disadvantage of others (Claydon & Collins, 2005). Such possibility is described as labor market segmentation and it underlies several aspects in relation to employment flexibility and commitment as it will be examined later. In this context, Atkinson (1984) suggested a division of employees into two main groups, core and peripheral workers.

Core workers, are skilled employees participating in decision-making, enjoying significant opportunities for training and development and are relatively well-paid and secure. On the other hand, peripheral workers are low paid, enjoy little security in their job and their degree of autonomy inside the organization is limited (Dyer, 1998). Exploiting core and peripheral labor management, an organization would be able to break the rigidities associated with the traditional labor market segmentation, reducing thus the privileges and standard benefits employees were supposed to receive. Consequently, on one side, organization could reduce employment costs but also cause the decline of the influence employees have through collective representation in the form of trade unions. In this way, management is infusing a flexible model in the organization (Dyer, 1998).

The above conditions reflect the subtlety of the topic and as such defining employment flexibility can be complex. For our use, we will examine four main types of flexibility as suggested by Atkinson (1984).

- Functional flexibility: It allows employees to combine skills and competencies in order to increase their mobility across the various channels of production. Functional flexibility relies on extensive training and thus it is likely to be pursued when there is no longer a stable relationship between employees and the organization.
- Numerical flexibility: It refers to the possibility of the organization to adapt the number of its labor on a short-notice, increasing or decreasing it as it sees fit. Varying employee numbers can be achieved by hiring temporary agency workers and employing people on fixed-term contracts. Numerical flexibility is often related with limited employment security rights.
- Temporal flexibility: It refers to shifting working hours so as to meet production demands. This can include things such as working overtime and spreading the working hours unevenly over a period of time depending on fluctuations in production. Part-time employment also might be used by the organization to face even tougher peaks in demand.
- Financial flexibility: It is linked with efforts on behalf of the organization to reduce labor costs in order to protect profitability. To be applied, it requires partial use of temporal flexibility along with cost savings that come from using through the adjustment of wage levels to reflect performance on individual, group or organizational levels.

We can combine the forms of employment flexibility and labor market segmentation as table 2 illustrates.

Table 2. Forms of flexibility and market segmentation

Functional flexibility → Supplied by core workers whose skills are vital to the organization. They would enjoy high remuneration, greater possibilities for development and benefits. It would provide the administrative focus for the internal labor market. Numerical flexibility → Supplied by peripheral workers mainly in lesser positions as their skills would be transferable between organizations. This category of employees is more easily replaceable and hired according to the needs of the corporation. Financial and temporal flexibilities → Could be achieved through a combination of policies applied to both groups of workers (e.g. annualized hours for core workers and part-time agreements for peripheral employees).

The majority of arguments on employment flexibility have received significant critiques about their actual application. (Elgar, 1991; Claydon, 2004). The main problem with the flexible firm model is that it presumes the liberty of management to shape the employment system according to its wishes. It does not account for the lack of resolution often met at the managerial level to undertake such long-term strategic planning and the effort it entails (Claydon, 2004). In spite of its weaknesses, the model offers a clear categorization of the different kinds of flexibility and an indication of the approach organizations have taken towards achieving a flexible model. As empirical research in the UK suggests, management has been pursuing numerical flexibility rather than the other alternatives (Claydon, 2004; Collins & Claydon, 2005).

In simple terms, the tendency in the UK the last few years has been to externalize employment and marginalize the internal employment structures. Organizations, all the more select fixed-term and temporary employees opposed to direct employment. This is part of an effort to decrease costs associated with wages and social benefits thus minimizing the overall cost of labor. This picture depicts the general deterioration of secure employment conditions which is now

substituted by the demands from employees to exploit what opportunities are offered from cross-functional work, group-work and other related projects in order to gain an advanced level of training and knowledge. Through these opportunities, employees should try to augment their skills and competencies to make themselves more 'employable' and thus facilitating their potential transition to another organization. Even the concept of the 'high road' that proclaims the use of the knowledge-economy and is supposed to lead to the creation of a sophisticated workforce through the transfer of competition from cost-minimization to the development of superior products, often diverges from its roots. As globalization rises further, organizations realize that it is becoming increasingly difficult to reduce costs whilst maintaining a high standard of quality (Collins & Claydon, 2005).

Employment flexibility and commitment

Based on the earlier analysis, employment flexibility presents a tendency to cause feelings of uncertainty and insecurity to employees. Naturally there are differences among countries and social contexts (e.g. EU and the U.S.A) but the voice that there are no more 'jobs for life' is increasing. Undoubtedly, this is bound to have adverse effects on employees and trigger negative reactions. The latter is further accentuated as trade union power declines and other forms of collective representation become marginalized. One of the most prominent feature employees bring into the ER is the sense of commitment to the organization which is not possible to remain unaffected in the general environment of instability.

The first question that needs to be asked is how employee commitment is borne inside the employment relationship. The most frequent tool to describe the ER and eventually leads to commitment is the psychological contract. We can describe it as 'individuals beliefs, shaped by the organization, regarding the terms of an exchange relationship between the individual employee and the organization' (Beardwell, Holden & Claydon, 2004:pg 520). In simple words, employees offer to the organization their labor, skills, loyalty etc and in return they perceive the organization must comply to a set of obligations such as financial rewards, employment benefits, job security etc. Similarly, the organization anticipates that employees will perform at high levels, will be loyal to the company and will work to achieve the organizations goals (Pointon, 2004).

The psychological contract is not in a written format as standard employment contracts (CIPD, 2003). Nevertheless, it encompasses a much wider view of the employment relationship as 'it looks at the reality of the situation as perceived by the parties and may be more influential than the formal contract in affecting how employees behave from day-to-day'¹. One important observation about the PC is that, since it is based on the perceived opinions of employees and considering the large amount of individuals in the labor force it can be highly subjective (Rousseau, 1995).

Guest and Conway (2004) provide a useful model of the psychological contract which begins from its antecedents. At this level, the PC includes individual characteristics, the organizational climate and specific HR policies. The combination of these factors produces the content of the psychological contract based on trust and fairness employees feel towards the organization as it is fulfilling its part of the bargain. The outcome depends on the feelings of employees. If the PC is positive, then there is an increase on work satisfaction and commitment which leads to a positive influence on performance. Equally, if employees feel that somehow the PC is violated than it is likely it will have adverse effects on performance. It is evident that the same changes that gave rise to employment flexibility described earlier also shifted the state of the employment relationship. This is precisely why, the psychological contract is a vital tool to gauge employee reactions in the changes occurring in the workplace. Equally, it allows comprehending how commitment levels have been affected from the entire process.

¹ CIPD staff, (2003). 'Managing the psychological contract', CIPD,[Online] <http://www.cipd.co.uk/subjects/empreltns/psycntrct/psycontr.htm?IsSrchRes=1>

With the changes in the context of the PC and the renegotiated ER, it is likely that some employees might feel that the organization is failing to meet its obligations and view their expectations not met. This could affect their overall loyalty and performance towards the company. The latter phenomenon is often termed as a violation or breach of the psychological contract (Rousseau, 1995). We should point that it is possible to distinct among the various degrees of intensity that violation of the PC takes . It is possible for employees to be aware of their employer's inability to meet expectations or that parts of the contract have not been fulfilled timely and thus the reaction might be mild in light of a `perceived breach`. On the other side, a `violation` produces a much stronger and emotional response (Morinson and Robinson, 1997). The effects of PC violation are strongly dependent on the emotional response it triggers to employees. Due to the subjective nature of employees' expectations, the reactions in the event of a violation or breach could differ, leaving a portion of the employees with a strong sense of injustice from the organisation and another portion feeling less damaged (Deery, Iverson & Walsh, 2003). How will employees perceive a violation of their PC will also be dependent on personal factors such as age, education and past experiences, possible combinations that altogether could create differential comprehensions about the employment relationship and to the degree a breach or violation is perceived (Rousseau, 1995;Deery, Iverson & Walsh, 2003).

The aftermath of a violation in the psychological contract therefore is strongly associated with the loss of trust and commitment to the organisation (Hiltrop, 1995;Rousseau, 1995). As employees feel pressured under the new demands that arise and the disruption of the agreement with their employer, loyalty to the organization is put under pressure (Iles, Forster and Tinline, 1995). Organizations for their part try to redesign the workplace through a variety of methods. These methodologies can range from redundancies to delayring and decentralising structure eventually to `` run their businesses with half the human effort., half the person space and in half the production time...they believe the drive for flexibility will also provide workers with a sense of empowerment... transition to a lean production will lead to a win-win situation`` (Hudson:2002:51).

The problem is, as mentioned earlier that even the `high-road` approach often diverges from theory when applied practically. Unfortunately, it becomes focused again on cost-cutting and promoting labor flexibility with little attention paid to employees. Recapping, on one end is the disruption of the old psychological contract as perceived by employees and on the other end, the promises for employability and increased skills in return for increased performance and commitment The latter is often thwarted by the inability of the system itself, the unwillingness of management to pursue such long-term strategies and the negative feelings of employees towards this climate of change.

What is happening with flexibility?

Insofar, theory suggests that the majority of efforts to introduce and establish employment flexibility are primarily driven by the motive to secure organisational interests, with little attention paid to the core of the workforce and consequently to the overall levels of commitment. The problem is that for any flexibility system to work, commitment is an inherent part (Hudson, 2002;Claydon, 2004). On the other side, the change in the employment relationship is likely to cause feelings of insecurity, stress and skepticism among the lines of employees which may produce negative reactions and have adverse effects on the levels of commitment towards employers. The question now becomes how can the two pictures come together? Is flexibility won on the expense of employees and the reaction of the workforce is such that cannot influence the course of the situation?Or there is a middle path to reconcile the two parties.

Undoubtedly, accounting for the competitive pressures in the marketplace flexibility has made its way as an essential tool. The various approaches organizations have adopted on the path to labor flexibility, to a certain extend provide some benefits with regards to the fulfillment of organizational goals. More specifically as Hudson (2002) reports, in a survey with a sample of fourteen organizations where managers were asked to comment on the effects that

redundancies and restructuring had on productivity and costs, nine out of fourteen stated that there was an increase on productivity and twelve that cost reduction was significantly favorable (Hudson:51-52). But is this situation definite? Can organizations build flexibility that revolves around their own interests? Another aspect is that ``the drive for flexibility is taken too far, the result could be a lose-lose situation wherein employees lose health and well-being whilst the organization loses essential competencies, capacities for innovation and long-term competitiveness`` (Hudson: 51).

Broadly speaking, employment flexibility has been earned to a degree on the expense of employee commitment. Nevertheless, in spite of all the massive changes in the workplace, some perceptions in the labor force are still vibrant. The need to feel a relative level of stability is still quite strong in spite of all the discussions and examples of restructuring and redundancies (Guest & Conway, 2004). An interpretation of this is that commitment towards employers is not yet extinct but because the workplace is in the process of the major changes, the turbulence that has been created as an effect altered the balance of the old type of employment relationship based on commitment in exchange for security. Furthermore, the approach that employment flexibility can elicit commitment in the context of involving employees more in the decision-making and by offering them more challenging work designs that could augment their skills, is debatable. In theory, such a principle is operational but as literature suggests, internal and external inefficiencies often lead to overcapitalization of the human capital in organizations hence adversely affecting levels of commitment.

It is important to note that this theme although accurate, it is subject to a generalization. There are significant differences from context to context that will influence both employment flexibility and commitment. For example, there are differences between European and American organizations through the existence of more rigidity in the EU with the presence of more regulation, more trade unions and an increased call for employee protection. Contrary, in the U.S organizational structures are flatter and regulation with regards to employment is more relaxed (Osterman, 2001). Also, employee reactions as shown can vary. The emotional response from a breach to violation in the psychological contract can differ and as a result the levels of trust and commitment can also vary from individual to individual. For example, middle-aged employees are likely to have different perceptions and ability to adjust than graduates (Woodruffe, 2005).

Examining the above framework on more practical terms, managers are mostly afraid about decreases in performance, loss of organisational citizenship and the creation of a pessimistic climate in the workforce (Rousseau, 1995, Sparrow and Marchington, 1998). Simultaneously, the decline of commitment might undermine the very objectives that flexibility was set to achieve as it will impede with the organization's effort to capitalize on its intangible assets in an era when human talent and skills are a key competitive driver. In spite of the negative indications, research conducted by the CIPD (2005) suggests that surprisingly, in the UK contrary to common beliefs employees are not so fearful about losing their jobs and that commitment levels have remained relatively stable (Woodruffe, 2005). Of course, these arguments are subject to further scrutiny but undeniably present a milder picture, it can also be an indication that steps can be taken to improve the overall picture. Providing guarantees of job security is indeed difficult but measures can be adopted to limit the sense of insecurity in employee lines. Guest (2000) suggests for example corporate policies of avoiding compulsory redundancies as a solution to alleviate the negative sentiments

For their part, HR departments should ensure that the various training schemes and involvement programs unfold in a pace of partnership with employees. Equally, the programs should truly provide opportunities for development and enhancement of employees' competencies. This would allow not only for people to make themselves more `marketable` but also to strengthen their bond with the organization. Using this method, HR practitioners could assist in the overall empowerment of employee commitment (Guest, 2000; Hudson, 2002). In order for any of these measures to take effect it is necessary to make changes in relevant management practices,

from senior to line management (Hiltrop, 1996). Starting from the top of the hierarchical ladder, management should undertake and ensure the viability of such plans through investment on long-term basis and by avoiding instances of sacrificing commitment and greater benefits in favor of short-term cost reductions.

In the overall redesign of management practices, important is the role of line managers the ones who are the direct link between employees and the organisation. Equally they often are the ones with authority to deal directly with the workers on most of the daily operations of the company (Hutchinson, 2005). Consequently, how line managers behave plays a major part in motivating positively or negatively the levels of employee commitment (Hudson, 2002; Hutchinson, 2005). Summing up, management has to provide a positive leadership outlook that will inspire trust and a spirit of co-operation in the labor force in order to facilitate its adjustment in the new climate and not feed their negative sentiments.

Conclusion:

Flexibility in the workplace is a key theme in almost every organisation and it is often pursued by endeavors to introduce resilience in employment and the expectation of relevant benefits. Nevertheless, it should not be disregarded that employees are individuals with emotions and perceptions and the climate of insecurity that has been building up is likely to shake the trust and most importantly the commitment towards their employers. In spite of the externalisation of the labor market and the ease to hire personnel, organizations require the skills of employees as well as their commitment in order to operate efficiently. To a degree, flexibility has been won on the expense of commitment as theory suggests but there are also indications that the focus is turning. Attention now is on how to ensure that employment flexibility does not thwart commitment but it facilitates the transit from the older type of commitment of loyalty in exchange for security to a commitment based on employability, a challenging working environment and the enhancement of employees skills and talents.

Any effort to infuse trust and commitment in the labor force needs to be co-ordinated and carefully implemented as it can produce long-term benefits for the organization. Consequently, managers should not ignore long-term strategies by favoring more short-term agendas. Extending that, the organisation requires an overall shift in its management policies towards employees, promoting a positive outlook and avoiding unnecessary declarations and examples that will give rise to any sort of negative climate. Communication is essential from top to bottom in building a partnership with employees. Equally, the role of HR departments is important in gauging employee attitude and especially the perceptions as described by the PC. This could assist organizations in avoiding violations in the contract or at least minimizing the detrimental outcomes which could adversely affect employee commitment. Through a positive environment of openness and co-operation, employment flexibility and commitment can co-exist.

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