

## **Flexible Workplace Practices: Employees' Experiences in Small IT Firms**

**Pratiques en matière de flexibilité en milieu de travail : expériences d'employés dans des petites entreprises des technologies de l'information**

**Prácticas de trabajo flexible: experiencias de los empleados de pequeñas empresas de tecnología de la información**

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### Résumé de l'article

Cet article rend compte de la manière dont les employés vivent les pratiques de flexibilité en milieu de travail (PFMT), telle que le temps flexible, dans le contexte de petites entreprises. Les recherches passées rapportent continuellement que les expériences vécues par les employés varient selon que la culture organisationnelle offre un soutien aux PFMT et en fonction des besoins de conciliation travail-vie personnelle. Ces études, toutefois, recourent habituellement à des données au niveau des individus ou encore se concentrent sur les grandes entreprises. Peu de recherche se sont consacrées à l'expérience vécue par les employés dans des petites entreprises. Ces employés connaissent peut-être des expériences uniques en matière de PFMT à cause du contexte de leur milieu de travail. Comme dans le cadre de recherches antérieures, cet article considère le rôle de l'âge et du genre dans la structuration des relations en milieu de travail. Sont aussi prises en compte les stratégies de contrôle de main-d'oeuvre pratiquées par la direction.

Les données proviennent d'une étude canadienne sur les petites entreprises des technologies d'information (TI) qui emploient entre quatre et vingt et une personnes. Une analyse de cas multiple a été menée comprenant des sondages sur le Web, des entrevues semi-structurées, des rapports d'études de cas et, de la documentation sur les politiques de ressources humaines en vigueur. Trois types de milieu de travail différents ressortent parmi les entreprises étudiées sur la base de leur culture de flexibilité et d'organisation du milieu de travail par rapport au temps. Certains de ces milieux reproduisent les attentes d'hégémonie en matière de genre, âge et culture organisationnelle, tandis que d'autres les mettent plutôt au défi. Les trois types d'entreprises ne se distinguent pas selon leurs caractéristiques spécifiques tel leur domaine de spécialisation, mais des modèles sont apparus évidents selon les caractéristiques d'âge et de genre des dirigeants et des employés. Les expériences vécues par les employés varient selon l'entreprise pour laquelle ils travaillent. Ces résultats suggèrent la présence de processus similaires ou différents dans les petites entreprises comparativement aux grandes entreprises souvent retenues pour fins d'études dans la littérature. Comme les grandes entreprises, les plus petites ne sont pas neutres ou ne procèdent pas par consensus et leurs employés peuvent se retrouver en position de grande vulnérabilité.

# Flexible Workplace Practices: Employees' Experiences in Small IT Firms

Catherine E. Gordon

**This paper examines how employees experience flexible workplace practices (FWPs), such as flex-time, in the context of small firms. Data are taken from a Canadian study on small information technology (IT) firms that employed between four and 21 individuals. A multiple case study of 17 firms is conducted using web-surveys, semi-structured interviews, case study reports, field notes, and HR policy documents. Results show variable experiences based on whether firms were flexible for employees and whether the workplace culture supported the use of FWPs. The findings suggest that similar and different processes occur in the small firms compared to the large companies often studied in the literature.**

**KEYWORDS:** alternative work arrangements, flex-time, work-life balance, small enterprises.

## Introduction

Studies have consistently shown that flexibility for employees, referred to in this paper as flexible workplace practices (FWPs), have beneficial individual effects. Work-life conflict, stress, and anxiety are reduced when FWPs, such as flex-time, are used (Christensen and Staines, 1990; Higgins, Duxbury and Lyons, 2008). As a result, employees' health and job satisfaction are enhanced (Christensen and Staines, 1990; Fenwick and Tausig, 2004). Labour statistics in Canada, however, show that the most common FWP, flex-time, is used by *only* 37 percent of individuals employed in the private sector (Statistics Canada, 2009). Given the positive outcomes, one might ask why more employed individuals are not using FWPs. To answer this question, we can look to some of the trends known about employees' experiences.

One trend widely documented is that the availability of FWPs is not based on need but rather varies by occupational status and the industry in which one works. Professionals and managers, for example, are the most likely to have access to FWPs compared to other employed individuals (Ferrer and Gagné, 2006; Golden, 2008;

Higgins *et al.*, 2008; Jacobs and Gerson, 2004; Zeytinoglu *et al.*, 2009). Another known trend is that employees with flexible options available to them have either good or bad experiences, depending on whether their workplace culture is supportive of the use of FWP (Blair-Loy and Wharton, 2004; Hochschild, 1997; Higgins *et al.*, 2008; Jacobs and Gerson, 2004; Thompson, Beauvais and Lyness, 1999). In an unsupportive workplace culture, employees are expected to work overtime hours regularly or work during set hours (i.e., 9am-5pm) at the office; neither their work-life needs nor FWPs are supported by supervisors, and negative career consequences are perceived to result from using FWPs (Blair-Loy and Wharton, 2004; Hochschild, 1997; Higgins *et al.*, 2008; Jacobs and Gerson, 2004; Thompson *et al.*, 1999). In contrast, the absence of these characteristics is indicative of a workplace culture that supports the use of FWPs and hence positive experiences result.

The typical experiences briefly described above are based on quantitative individual level data and ethnographic studies on large firms. Little research has focused on the experiences of employees of small firms (Lero and Lewis, 2008; Pitt-Catsouphes and Litchfield, 2001). Yet, small businesses (with fewer than 100 employees) employ 48 percent of the total, private sector labour force in Canada (Industry Canada, 2013) and 38 percent of the total, private sector labour force in the United States (U.S. Bureau of Labor, 2011). This neglect in the literature may result from the presumption that small firms are inflexible, and it may also stem from the tendency of North American research to focus on employment relations within large companies (Ram & Edwards, 2003). Small firms, however, may be more flexible than assumed in the literature. This paper adds to the understanding of how employees experience FWPs by conducting a multiple case study on small information technology (IT) firms. I argue that employees' experiences of FWPs in small firms vary according to how multiple power relations within a workplace context intersect.

## Experiences of FWPs

Flexible workplace practices (FWPs) give workers some choice about when, where, and for how long they perform their work (Hill *et al.*, 2008; Jacob and Gerson, 2004). Choice on the part of a worker is inherent in this definition. Accordingly, these arrangements are fraught with issues of control and power. Below, I discuss this notion in relation to who has access to FWPs and the factors influencing whether and how flexible options are used in contemporary workplaces.

## Access to FWPs

The availability of flexible options is not distributed equally among employed individuals. Consistently, research finds that workers who are most likely to have access to FWPs are professionals and managers who work in the service sector in

industries unrelated to construction, transportation, education, or health industries (Ferrer and Gagné, 2006; Golden, 2008; Higgins *et al.*, 2008; Jacobs and Gerson, 2004; Zeytinoglu *et al.*, 2009). These professionals and managers hold relatively advantaged positions in the labour market. Indeed, individuals occupying “good” jobs are more likely to receive intangible benefits, such as flex-time and autonomy, as well as tangible benefits, such as pension plans and bonuses, compared to individuals in “bad” jobs (Lambert and Haley-Lock, 2004; McMullin, 2010; Tilly, 1998). This crude classification of good jobs (e.g., engineers and accountants) and bad jobs (e.g., production operators and retail sales clerks) is useful in terms of identifying who occupies positions with or without privileges. Employed individuals who are men, white, not foreign-born, and middle-aged typically work in good jobs and also have access to FWP (Golden, 2008; McMullin, 2010; Tilly, 1998). One could argue that differences in access to FWP, like other work-related advantages, are partly the result of how class, age, gender, race, and ethnicity structure inequality in paid work (see McMullin, 2010; Tilly, 1998).

### Workplace Culture and FWP

Organizations that offer FWP do not necessarily give employees discretion or control over their daily work tasks (Eldridge and Nisar, 2011). There is ample evidence showing that time-oriented workplace cultures, which characterize many contemporary workplaces, constrain employees’ ability to choose when, where, and for how long they work despite the availability of flexible options (Blair-Loy and Wharton, 2004; Hochschild, 1997; Jacobs and Gerson, 2004; Lewis & Smithson, 2009). Under these circumstances, supervisors perceive long hours of work and physical presence at the workplace as indicative of a worker’s commitment and competence (Blair-Loy and Wharton, 2004; Collinson and Collinson, 2004; Hochschild, 1997; Ranson and Dryburgh, 2011). The use of FWP, however, involves some time away from the office during a 9am to 5pm workday and therefore, contrasts with these ideal behaviours (Hochschild, 1997; Lewis and Smithson, 2009). Accordingly, most employed individuals will avoid the use of FWP out of fear of negative career repercussions (Higgins *et al.*, 2008; Hochschild, 1997; Lewis and Smithson, 2009; Thompson *et al.*, 1999). When time-oriented worker behaviours are idealized, a workplace culture is unsupportive of the use of FWP.

Time-oriented workplace cultures are marked by gender and age relations (Blair-Loy & Wharton, 2004; Duerden Comeau & Kemp, 2011; Hochschild 1997; Lewis & Smithson, 2009; Ranson & Dryburgh, 2011). The idealized behaviours present at these kinds of workplaces presume that workers can and will prioritize their work activities despite any family or personal commitments (Acker, 1990). As researchers have shown, women and people in their child-bearing and child-

raising years are particularly disadvantaged in these cultural environments (Blair-Loy and Wharton, 2004; Duerden Comeau and Kemp, 2011; Hochschild, 1997; Lewis and Smithson, 2009; Ranson and Dryburgh, 2011).

Despite this inherent issue of control with regard to FWP, the class relation between management and workers has not often been discussed. Management supports capitalist interests to accumulate profit, something that is not a primary concern of workers (Marx, 1961; Edwards, 1979; Friedman, 1979). Accordingly, management may employ direct or indirect control strategies to manipulate the workforce. These strategies are directly related to whether workers can choose when, where, and for how long their work is performed. Direct controlling methods involve bureaucratic structures, close observation of workers' day-to-day work tasks, and the fragmentation of the labour process into routine tasks (Braverman, 1974; Edwards, 1979). As a result, little job control is given to workers. These methods are often considered characteristic of large companies (Kalleberg *et al.*, 1996). In comparison, indirect control methods involve less rigidity. Under these circumstances, some managers may coordinate work tasks but give employees responsible autonomy whereby they have some choice over how their day-to-day work activities are performed (Friedman, 1977, 2000; MacEachen *et al.*, 2008). This simple, unstructured form of control is presumed and often found in small firms (see Edwards, 1979; Kalleberg *et al.*, 1996; Storey *et al.*, 2010) and is considered characteristic of firms in knowledge intensive industries (Frenkel *et al.*, 1995). Presumably, workplace contexts in which direct control methods are employed restrict the use of FWPs, whereas indirect control methods such as responsible autonomy facilitate such use. In this paper, these different controlling strategies are considered to be indicative of how class relations between management and workers are negotiated with respect to the labour process. How multiple power relations are negotiated and the resulting implications for employees of small firms are of interest in this paper.

## **The Flexibility of Small Firms**

There are two consistent findings in the literature regarding the flexibility of small firms. The first is that smaller firms are less likely to offer FWPs compared to larger firms (Dex and Scheibl, 2001; Ferrer and Gagné, 2006; Kalleberg *et al.*, 1996; Pitt-Catsoupes and Litchfield, 2001; Zeytinoglu *et al.*, 2009). The second is that FWPs in small firms are more likely to be available on an informal basis as opposed to the formal policies that are common in large firms (Dex and Scheibl, 2001; Pohlmann and Dulipovici, 2004). Informal FWPs are unofficial and involve undocumented negotiations between employees and their supervisors (Eaton, 2003). The literature typically asks about the FWPs available through HR policies and this may underestimate the flexibility of small firms (Lewis and Lero, 2008).

How employees of small firms experience FWP and how the context of a small workplace influences these experiences are not often addressed in the literature (Lero & Lewis, 2008; Pitts-Catsouphe and Litchfield, 2001). This paper does not suggest small firms be considered distinctive or be equated with larger firms but rather be studied in their own right. In this paper, I examine how employees experience FWPs in small firms that operate in the information technology (IT) industry. Given that these firms are small in size and knowledge intensive, I expect workers to have some control over when, where, or for how long their work is performed. Gender relations, however, are deeply embedded in the world of work and accordingly, small IT firms may not be organized in ways that support the interdependence of work and family. Thus, I presume that, in most firms, employees will experience contradictions with regard to FWPs and the expectations at work.

## Data and Methods

This paper draws on a Canadian study of information technology (IT) workers in small firms. The sample was drawn from three cities in Ontario and Alberta using online local business directories and key informants. Of the 43 firms asked to participate as a case, 18 agreed, yielding a 42 percent response rate. Fieldwork took place in 2004 and 2005.

Of the 18 firms, 17 employed between four and 20 individuals and one employed between 21 and 49 individuals. Ten firms were operative for fewer than 10 years, seven firms between 11 and 20 years, and one firm for over 20 years. The majority of the firms specialized in software and web development (72 percent); other firms focused on consulting and business endeavours (22 percent) or systems analysis and support (six percent). All staff members in a firm were invited to participate in the web-survey and semi-structured interview; participation rates were 60 percent and 81 percent, respectively.

Personal characteristics of the sample are as follows. The average age of respondents was 37 years old; in the IT industry, workers are considered “old” at age 40 or older (McMullin and Duerden Comeau, 2011). The majority of respondents were male (77 percent), white (94 percent), married or in a long-term relationship (66 percent), and parents (54 percent). The homogeneity of the race of participants means that the data do not shed light on race relations characterized by power.

Data for this analysis are taken from multiple data sources collected at 17 small firms employing between 4 and 21 employees. One case was omitted because it was a placement agency and, accordingly, respondents did not work at the same firm. The data examined include 103 web-surveys, 136 interview transcripts, and 17 case study reports, as well as observational field notes for each interview participant and eight available HR documents.

## Data Analysis

This paper explores how employees experience FWP in the context of small firms. A multiple case study approach is used. A case study approach presents complexities and contradictions that are difficult to summarize neatly but are reflective of real life and possibly the nature of FWPs in different firms (Marshall, 1999). Marshall (1999: 387) advises that a multiple case analysis be “interpretive,” such that theoretical and contextual considerations inform the reasoning. Accordingly, a comprehensive understanding of each small firm, its FWPs, and workplace culture with respect to time, were gained using the qualitative and quantitative data before making cross-firm comparisons.

### Firm Flexibility and Approach to Time Measures

For each firm, the availability and use of FWPs among all employees were examined. Work arrangements with respect to when, where, and for how long work was to be done are considered FWPs if they involve an alternative to the model of working in an office from 9am to 5pm, five days per week. The web-survey asked about participation in specific FWPs that include job-sharing, retirement transition, flex-time, a compressed work-week, and other arrangements. The semi-structured interviews asked open-ended questions concerning the FWPs available to all employees and options used personally. Sick days, something small firms in this study are not legally required to provide employees, were discussed as an alternative work arrangement by respondents and thus, are considered a FWP in this paper.<sup>1</sup> Interview respondents also discussed the FWPs of their co-workers and supervisors.

An emergent theme while analyzing the qualitative data is that FWPs were not considered entitlements for employees but rather arrangements with conditions attached. These associated conditions are not independent from a firm's workplace culture but also cannot be separated from assessing a firm's flexibility for employees. The terms employed by respondents are used to describe these conditions and include the following: *owing the firm back time* (actual or presumed time missed), *being flexible* for the firm by working overtime when needed, and *getting work done* in order for the firm to meet its deadlines. These conditions are informative regarding how FWPs are used in firms. The first is time-oriented and more restrictive compared to the latter two conditions, which are more results-oriented.

Initial analysis revealed that little variation occurred with regard to the availability of FWPs. To determine the relative flexibility status of firms, greater emphasis was placed on whether FWPs were used and the related condition(s) attached. A firm is considered “Flexible” if three or more FWPs were used or if

two FWP's were used with a results-oriented condition. In comparison, a firm is inflexible or "Rigid" if one or fewer FWP's were used or if two FWP's were used with a time-oriented condition attached.

As discussed earlier, the existence of overtime hours and management's rules on when, where, and for how long work is performed influence whether employees use flexible options. Management's rules on working time are reflected in the conditions attached to using FWP's outlined above. In this analysis, a workplace culture is considered to facilitate the use of FWP's if employees do not often work overtime and reciprocal exchanges of *being flexible back to the firm* or *getting work done* are present. Conversely, workplaces that do not reflect these dimensions are considered unsupportive.

## Results

A typology emerged from the data that groups firms together based on their similarities in relation to their FWP's and accompanying workplace cultures with respect to time (Lofland and Lofland, 1995). I refer to the three types as "Flexible/favourable," "Flexible/contradictory," and "Rigid." These workplace contexts are described below in terms of employees' experiences. A case example for each type is provided. Little variation occurred among the three firm-types with regard to firm-specific characteristics, such as business specialization, or provincial location. Differences did arise with regard to the characteristics of the owners and employees and these will be noted below. Pseudonyms are used throughout.

### Rigid Firms

Five firms are categorized as Rigid because few to no FWP's were used and when used, FWP's had time-related conditions attached to them. The only respondents from the sample who expressed disappointment with or confusion over the FWP's available to them were employees of these firms. A unique demographic characteristic of Rigid firms is the age difference between the older owners (median = late 40s to early 50s) and younger employees (median = 30 years).<sup>2</sup> The firm ComTech is presented as a case example because it best exemplifies the rarity of FWP's being used and how this is related to issues of power and control. ComTech specialized in software/web development. It had two office locations in Ontario, which were each headed by an owner. The firm employed four managers and eight other employees. Like other Rigid firms, employees were younger, male, and white, but unlike Rigid firms, ComTech had younger employers.

ComTech had formal HR policies that included the FWP's of flex-time, working from home, and sick days. The flex-time option allowed employees to



choose when they started and finished their eight-hour work day around the required "core hours" of 10am to 4pm. The obligation to work during these core hours was said to be based on the need to provide customer service. The option to work from home could be used if employees received their supervisor's permission, gave at least five days' notice, provided "just cause," and only used it from "time-to-time." How often this FWP could be used, and examples of "just cause" were not specified. The number of sick days available was not specified.

The conditional rules outlined in the HR handbook provide a glimpse of the workplace culture the owners attempted to establish. According to one male IT manager, "Management here is allergic to people working from home during business hours ... [If] you want to work from home, you have to arrange 'x' days in advance." (1117032, 31 yrs. old, City B). He was unsure what "x" represented despite being a manager himself. The "management" he referred to was the owners. From an employee's perspective, approaching an owner as opposed to a manager is presumably more daunting because of the large power difference. A male engineer commented:

When I got hired ... they [were] ... against working from home and that still seems to be the case, although parents seem to be [the exception]. If there's a problem, [management] seems to be okay with letting them work from home. I'm hoping that that will still be in effect whenever I have a kid. ... That hasn't been set down as a policy or anything so it's hard to say what the actual thing is. (1117097, 25 yrs. old, City A)

At the time of the study, this employee was single and childless. References to the owners as "allergic" or "against" employees working from home, suggest the owners not only idealized employees' presence at the office but also mistrusted employees to work in the firm's interest without close supervision. Knowing the owners' expectations thwarted the above engineer from requesting to work from home. Like other employees in small firms without HR personnel, he had no third party to whom to report concerns or problems encountered with regard to using FWPs.

Valuing presence at work is characteristic of Rigid firms. This expectation affected employees' experiences of ComTech's sick day policy. One IT manager commented:

[A former employee] had had some ... health issues. At one point [he] took a leave of absence for an extended period of time ... And when he came back he would still continue to take the odd sick day ... Management really didn't like that. But they didn't say that. They said, 'Okay that's it. No more sick days for the year.' Just (respondent snaps fingers) 'bam' like no warning, no addressing the issue. (1117032, male, 31 yrs. old, City B)

He later claimed that this arbitrary decision and the subsequent new rules contributed to feelings of paranoia among staff. The threat to remove vacation days if a certain number of sick days were taken reflects the reciprocal exchange of *owing back time* found in all Rigid firms. This requirement to *owe time* underscores the time-orientation of Rigid firms and reflects a way that owners can punish undesirable behaviours. Reprimanding employees for unfavourable behaviours is a direct control method that makes any perceived consequence for using FWP appear to be probable occurrences.

Another aspect of ComTech's unsupportive workplace culture is the regular long hours of work. IT managers and employees worked a range of 45 to 60 hours per week. One male engineer commented,

Officially we are paid to do forty hours a week ... I try to stay around that. Now those are the good weeks. There are overtime crunches. We have gone through a few of them. ... When that happens, well, all bets are off and [we] could go to sixty, seventy hours. (1117123, 32 yrs. old, City A)

He later claimed that these intense crunch periods happened approximately four to six times per year. The need to work long hours was common at ComTech. This suggestion was also made in all but one of the Rigid firms. Individuals with substantial caregiving responsibilities would not be able to stay in such a position over the long-term. It is not surprising, then, that so few women and individuals over the age of 40 work in Rigid firms. Hegemonic expectations that workers are untrustworthy and are able and willing to prioritize their work were reproduced in Rigid firms and contrast how power relations were negotiated in Flexible/favourable firms, discussed next.

### **Flexible/favourable Firms**

Nine firms are classified as Flexible/favourable firms. These firms were flexible and had workplace cultures that supported the use of FWPs, hence the "favourable" designation. On average, Flexible/favourable firms had more owners and employees who were women and who were relatively older (median ages are 43 and 40 years, respectively) compared to the other firm-types. Interface Consulting is presented as a case example because it best shows how Flexible/favourable firms contrast to Rigid firms with regard to the range of FWPs used and how employees were managed. Interface Consulting specialized in consulting and was located in Ontario. It had ten employees and four owners, one of whom, the CEO, held the majority shares. At Interface Consulting, women held positions at all occupational levels: two were owners, three were consultants, and one was an office manager.

Employees at Interface Consulting spoke at length about the company's FWPs. One female employee commented:

I had two job offers and I decided to go back to Interface Consulting because of my past experience with them. ... They value work-life balance over anything else. Work is important but so is your home life ... As long as you're *getting your work done* ... then they are very flexible. In terms of, 'I have to take my daughter to a doctor's appointment and I'm going to be late this day because of that.' Like that's really not even an issue. I don't even stress about that stuff with them. (1115042, 35 yrs. old, other IT)

The reciprocal exchange noted above was merely to finish one's work tasks. It was found in all Flexible/favourable firms. Another female employee remarked:

I wanted to come in on a four-day week because ... I found that gave me a good balance. It gave me enough time [to be] in the office to feel like I was actually a full contributing member, but it also gave me an extra day when I can be with my kids and get errands done ... They've been very supportive of that. (1115054, 37 yrs. old, other IT)

Another employee worked two days per week from home. These personal testaments of Interface Consulting's flexibility suggest that the owners trusted employees and allowed them to have some control over how to perform their work. As a result, some of the employees' interests and work-life needs were met. These circumstances suggest that employees' personal lives were acknowledged and integrated into the expectations of how work should be done; this was also evident at other Flexible/favourable firms although perhaps not as strongly as at Interface Consulting. Gender expectations were the most blurred at this firm-type.

Employees of Interface Consulting worked between 32 and 40 hours per week but performed overtime occasionally. One analyst said, "Sometimes we're ridiculously busy and we do twelve hour days for two months straight. Other times it's, you know, nice and relaxed [and] ... we can work six hour days." (1115060, male, 29 yrs. old). This comment reflects an instance of *being flexible* for the firm in exchange for flexibility from the firm, or *flexibility-for-flexibility*. The occasional long work days when workers were flexible for the firm may not facilitate work-life integration for some employees, especially those who are primarily responsible for child care. Longer hours and the presence of the reciprocal exchange of *flexibility-for-flexibility* were occasionally required of employees in three other Flexible/favourable firms but were rare in the remaining five. Of these latter five firms, three appeared to be struggling financially to keep employees on full-time every week. Despite this difference, employees' experiences across Flexible/favourable firms were similar. These employees worked in workplace cultures that were supportive of the use of FWP and some trust on the part of the owners was evident.

### **Flexible/contradictory Firms**

Three firms are classified as Flexible/contradictory firms. This third workplace context overlaps with Flexible/favourable firms with regard to flexibility for employees but not with its workplace culture, hence the name. Employees

of Flexible/contradictory firms often worked overtime, which had different implications for them and their experiences compared to Flexible/favourable firms. A unique characteristic of Flexible/contradictory firms is the young ages of the owners and employees (median is 33 years and 28 years, respectively). There is also a predominance of men in these firms. How a firm can have a workplace culture that contradicts its flexible status is clearly illustrated in the case example of Online Design. Online Design specialized in software/web development and was located in Ontario. It had two owners, two managers, and seven other employees.

A male IT manager spoke of Online Design's flexibility by sharing his personal experiences:

On Monday ... [my wife] had a dentist appointment ... so I just stayed home [in] the morning [with my baby]. ... [The CEO] didn't even realize I was gone. He doesn't expect that you [will] make up the time [missed]. He knows, like last week I was here till midnight one night trying to hit a deadline so it sort of balances out. ... [At my previous] job ... they really had their thumb over your head all the time. ... [You couldn't be] five minutes late in the morning even though you're definitely there fifteen minutes after five many days. (1106081, 29 yrs. old)

Performing overtime one night and then starting work late another day is an example of the reciprocal exchange of *flexibility-for-flexibility*. This exchange is indicative of the responsible autonomy strategy employed at Flexible/contradictory firms. According to the manager above, the CEO trusted employees and, therefore, a formal timetable was unnecessary.

With regard to the regularity of long hours, however, one male programmer said:

I've been here [at the office] on weekends ... [The CEO] doesn't like that because he'd rather you be home with your family. But some projects call for it [especially when] ... the timing conflicts and ... you have to juggle both projects. (1106029, 33 yrs. old)

This programmer was married and had a young child, and yet, he did not suggest that he experienced work-life conflict because of the long hours of work. Although the power relations between the owner and employees appeared to be negotiated in ways that gave some autonomy to employees, working many hours can impede interests or needs outside of work. This aspect of Online Design's workplace culture contradicts with its flexibility for employees.

The combination of often working overtime and the reciprocal exchange of *being flexible* for the firm may lead to an environment that could be costly for employees. In Online Design and other Flexible/contradictory firms, it was difficult for employees to use FWP's in ways that facilitated work-life balance because long hours were already worked. Notably, however, employees of Flexible/

contradictory firms tended to be childless; parental status was mixed within the other firm-types. The autonomy given to employees does not mean that they can control their workloads or that workplaces are not gendered or do not reproduce expectations of younger employees.

## Conclusion

This paper sought to understand how employees of small firms experience flexible workplace practices (FWPs). Seventeen small information technology (IT) firms were compared in relation to their flexibility for employees and their workplace culture's approach to time. Three different workplace contexts emerged that this paper refers to as Flexible/favourable, Flexible/contradictory, and Rigid. Employees' experiences varied according to where they worked. Below, their experiences are compared with the typical experiences of large firm employees documented in the literature. New insights regarding small firms with respect to FWPs are highlighted, and future research directions are noted.

One contribution of this study to the literature is that it takes into account multiple power relations of gender, age, and class in the context of small firms. It should be noted that the typical experience of FWPs in large companies is influenced by the presence of a supportive or unsupportive workplace culture, marked by power relations. As discussed earlier, unsupportive time-oriented workplaces reproduce hegemonic gender and age relations whereby workers are presumed to be able and willing to prioritize the firm's needs. Class relations between management and workers are not typically addressed in the literature on FWPs, but they were partly included in this analysis by examining the control strategy employed by management (owners). If direct/indirect strategies had not been considered in this analysis, the difference between Rigid and Flexible/contradictory firms would be less apparent. In both firms, it was possible for employees to be required to work long hours often. The advantage of using FWPs to fulfill family responsibilities was not realized by most employees in these firms. Yet, employees' experiences differed; employees of Rigid firms were disappointed with or confused about the FWPs at their firms, whereas employees of Flexible/contradictory firms were satisfied with the leniency of their day-to-day work schedules. Management employed direct controlling strategies in Rigid firms and the indirect controlling strategy of responsible autonomy in Flexible/contradictory firms. Accordingly, there were different implications for employees. In the remaining Flexible/favourable firm-type, employees were not only trusted and given leniency in their work but also had their work-life needs met. Notably, results provide support for Ram and Edward's (2003) argument that small firms are not neutral and consensus-based organizations.

This paper illuminates a difference between large and small firms that potentially has harmful consequences for small firm employees. Past research indicates that employees of large firms typically have FWP available to them through HR policies and that they approach their supervisor to make any requests to use them. Among the small IT firms studied, HR personnel and their policies were absent. In order to use FWPs, employees approached an owner. There is a greater power difference between owners and workers compared to managers and workers. The resulting implications appear different as well.

In large firms, this power imbalance may mean that employees will not use FWPs out of fear that they will receive poor performance reviews, a decline in pay, no job advancement, or no raise (Blair-Loy and Wharton, 2004; Collinson and Collinson, 2004; Hochschild, 1997). Among the small firms studied, the consequences are risky and variable. In Rigid firms, employees were unhappy with their employers' inflexibility but they seemed uneasy about requesting FWPs. The possibility of resulting job insecurity and interpersonal conflict may have deterred them. For instance, employees of the firm used as a case example were aware of the owners' expectations that they would work at the office during the business day. There was also some paranoia among them following the arbitrary decision to change the number of sick days available. These circumstances make approaching firm owners face-to-face to request FWPs undesirable. In contrast, at Flexible firms, the owner-worker power dynamic did not discourage employees from approaching owners about FWPs but did influence the reciprocal exchanges that occurred. Instances of responsible autonomy were apparent at these firms whereby owners indirectly convinced employees to work in the interests of the company by *being flexible* through overtime hours and/or *getting their work done* in time for the firms' deadlines. Employees of the two firms used as case examples described these exchanges in naturalized, matter-of-fact ways that were perceived as part of their social contract with the owners. Repercussions ensued in the form of high workloads and hours. Or in some firms, potential job loss was looming if firms did not generate enough workload. Owners are highly dependent on employees in small firms, which may enhance employees' willingness to comply with the reciprocal exchanges, thus possibly heightening the owners' relative power.

There is much to be learned regarding employees' experiences of FWPs in the context of small firms. This analysis was based on small firms that operated in the IT industry, which is an exemplar of new economy industries. Accordingly, it is possible that the responsible autonomy strategies employed and the resulting flexibility are exaggerated. Research on small firms in other industries is needed. However, even if less variation occurs among employees' experiences than documented in this paper, the vulnerability of employees in their employment rela-

tionships with small firm owners is likely present. A greater understanding of this power difference and the resulting implications are needed before sound policy recommendations can be made with regard to employment regulations.

In closing, this paper illustrated that small firms may be more flexible than assumed in the literature. It showed variation among employees with regard to their experiences of flexible workplace practices based on different workplace contexts marked with intersecting power relations. Also presented was the potential vulnerability of employees who work within small firms because of their relationship with the owners.

## Notes

- 1 Ontario's Employment Standards Act exempts small firms (fewer than 50 employees) (Service Ontario, 2000) and Alberta's Employment Standards Code does not include personal medical leaves like sick days (Province of Alberta, 2010).
- 2 The exact ages were not provided for two owners but age ranges were documented by the interviewers.

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## SUMMARY

### Flexible Workplace Practices: Employees' Experiences in Small IT Firms

This paper examines how employees experience flexible workplace practices (FWPs), such as flex-time, in the context of small firms. Past research consistently documents that employees' experiences vary according to whether or not the workplace culture is supportive of FWPs and work-life balance needs. Studies, however, typically use individual level data or focus on large companies. Little research has focused on the experiences of employees of small firms. Possibly, employees of small firms have somewhat unique experiences of FWPs because of the workplace context. Like past research, this paper considers how gender and age relations structure the workplace. Also taken into account are the control strategies that management employs over the workforce.

Data are taken from a Canadian study on small information technology (IT) firms that employed between four and 21 individuals. A multiple case study of 17 firms is conducted using web-surveys, semi-structured interviews, case study reports, field notes, and HR policy documents. Three different workplace contexts emerged among study firms based on their flexibility and workplace culture with respect to time. Some of these workplaces reproduced hegemonic gender, age, and class expectations, whereas others somewhat challenged them. The three firm-types did not vary according to firm-specific characteristics, such as business specialization, but patterns with regard to age and gender characteristics of the owners and employees were evident. Employees' experiences varied according to where they worked. The findings suggest that similar and different processes occur in small firms compared to the large companies often studied in the literature. Like large firms, small firms are not neutral or based on a consensus. Small firm employees, however, may be considerably more vulnerable.

**KEYWORDS:** alternative work arrangements, flex-time, work-life balance, small enterprises.

## RÉSUMÉ

### Pratiques en matière de flexibilité en milieu de travail : expériences d'employés dans des petites entreprises des technologies de l'information

Cet article rend compte de la manière dont les employés vivent les pratiques de flexibilité en milieu de travail (PFMT), telle que le temps flexible, dans le contexte de petites entreprises. Les recherches passées rapportent continuellement que les expériences vécues par les employés varient selon que la culture organisationnelle offre un soutien aux PFMT et en fonction des besoins de conciliation travail-vie personnelle. Ces études, toutefois, recourent habituellement à des données au

niveau des individus ou encore se concentrent sur les grandes entreprises. Peu de recherche se sont consacrées à l'expérience vécue par les employés dans de petites entreprises. Ces employés connaissent peut-être des expériences uniques en matière de PFMT à cause du contexte de leur milieu de travail. Comme dans le cadre de recherches antérieures, cet article considère le rôle de l'âge et du genre dans la structuration des relations en milieu de travail. Sont aussi prises en compte les stratégies de contrôle de main-d'œuvre pratiquées par la direction.

Les données proviennent d'une étude canadienne sur les petites entreprises des technologies d'information (TI) qui emploient entre quatre et vingt et une personnes. Une analyse de cas multiple a été menée comprenant des sondages sur le Web, des entrevues semi-structurées, des rapports d'études de cas et, de la documentation sur les politiques de ressources humaines en vigueur. Trois types de milieu de travail différents ressortent parmi les entreprises étudiées sur la base de leur culture de flexibilité et d'organisation du milieu de travail par rapport au temps. Certains de ces milieux reproduisent les attentes d'hégémonie en matière de genre, âge et culture organisationnelle, tandis que d'autres les mettent plutôt au défi. Les trois types d'entreprises ne se distinguent pas selon leurs caractéristiques spécifiques tel leur domaine de spécialisation, mais des modèles sont apparus évidents selon les caractéristiques d'âge et de genre des dirigeants et des employés. Les expériences vécues par les employés varient selon l'entreprise pour laquelle ils travaillent. Ces résultats suggèrent la présence de processus similaires ou différents dans les petites entreprises comparativement aux grandes entreprises souvent retenues pour fins d'études dans la littérature. Comme les grandes entreprises, les plus petites ne sont pas neutres ou ne procèdent pas par consensus et leurs employés peuvent se retrouver en position de grande vulnérabilité.

**MOTS-CLÉS :** organisations du travail alternatives, temps flexible, conciliation travail-vie personnelle, petites entreprises.

## RESUMEN

### Prácticas de trabajo flexible: experiencias de los empleados de pequeñas empresas de tecnología de la información

Este artículo examina cómo los empleados experimentan las prácticas de trabajo flexible (PTFs), tales como el horario flexible, y esto, en el contexto de pequeñas empresas. Una investigación precedente documenta consistentemente que las experiencias de los empleados varían según que la cultura del lugar de trabajo apoya o no las PTFs y las necesidades del equilibrio trabajo-vida personal. Los estudios, sin embargo, usan típicamente datos de nivel individual o focalizan las grandes empresas. Pocas investigaciones han focalizado las experiencias de empleados de pequeñas empresas. Es posible que los empleados de pequeñas empresas tengan experiencias muy particulares de PTFs dado el contexto del lugar de trabajo. Como otras investigaciones, este artículo considera cómo las relaciones de género y de

edad estructuran el lugar de trabajo. Se toma también en cuenta las estrategias de control que utiliza la dirección sobre la fuerza de trabajo.

Los datos provienen de un estudio canadiense sobre las pequeñas empresas de tecnologías de la información que emplean entre cuatro y 21 individuos. Un estudio múltiple de casos de 17 empresas es realizada con encuestas vía internet, entrevistas semi-estructuradas, informes de estudios de casos, notas de terreno, y análisis de documentos de políticas de recursos humanos. Tres contextos diferentes de lugares de trabajo emergen del estudio de empresas basado en su respectiva flexibilidad y cultura interna con respecto al tiempo. Algunos de estos lugares de trabajo reproducen las expectativas de hegemonía de género, de edad y de clase, mientras otras cuestionaban a diferentes niveles estos valores. Las tres empresa-tipo no varían según las características específicas de empresa, tales como especialización comercial, pero los patterns relativos a las características de edad y de género de los propietarios y de los empleados fueron evidentes. Las experiencias de los empleados varían según el lugar donde ellos trabajan. Los resultados sugieren que procesos similares y diferentes se viven en las pequeñas empresas comparativamente a las grandes empresas que son estudiadas con más frecuencia en la literatura. Tal como las grandes empresas, las pequeñas empresas no son neutrales o basadas en el consenso. Los empleados de pequeñas empresas, sin embargo, pueden vivir una mayor vulnerabilidad.

**PALABRAS CLAVES:** arreglos alternativos de trabajo, horario flexible, equilibrio trabajo-vida personal, pequeñas empresas.