

Effects of work flexibilisation: The role of interruptions and unfinished work tasks

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THE WORK IN CONTEXT

The organisation and management of work is constantly changing. The growing impact of information and communication technology (ICT) and the growing importance of knowledge-based services have enabled an increase in individual flexibility at work. Core elements of flexible work are flexible time schedules, with or without core times, flexibilisation in work locations, ranging from conventional telework to highly flexible mobile work, and flexibility in work organisation. Many studies examined the effects of these different aspects of work flexibility on quality of working life indicators, showing a wide range of – often contradictory – results. Some studies found mostly positive effects of flexibility at work, for instance on work-life balance or job satisfaction, whereas other studies reported work intensification and/or increases in employees' strain due to work flexibility. Paradoxes, such as the telecommuting paradox, the connectivity paradox and the autonomy paradox are sometimes used to explain these results. These paradoxes describe phenomena which unexpectedly contradict what is generally expected in a certain situation or which lead to a contradiction (for example, positive and negative effects at the same time). A similar paradox is the relation between flexibility at work and work interruptions. On the one hand, flexibility at work may reduce work interruptions by the possibility to select undisturbed work locations and by using time slots uninterrupted by meetings and coworkers. On the other hand, flexible work organisation may increase work interruptions, because of increased ICT use and increases in communication efforts. Work interruptions are important work stressors, which may result in unfinished work tasks and finally in reduced detachment from work and decreases in wellbeing.

KEYWORDS

Flexible work, work interruptions, unfinished tasks

A brief outline of the work carried out

The goal of the current study is the investigation of the effects of work interruptions in flexible work settings. Based on the stressor detachment model (Sonnentag and Fritz, 2014) and the well-researched effects of the Zeigarnik effect (Zeigarnik, 1927) a working model was developed linking work interruptions in flexible working conditions to reduced work detachment and finally reduced wellbeing by a mediating mechanism of an increase in unfinished tasks.

A diary study was designed, measuring perceived work interruptions (daily at 1 PM and 6 PM, unfinished tasks (daily at 6 PM) and detachment and wellbeing (daily at 9 PM) over a period of 10 work days. 141 employees working at least 20 hours in flexible working conditions (age: 32.4 years; 23% managers) participated in the study.

Findings/solutions

Using multilevel analyses, we were able to confirm the working model. Unfinished tasks mediated the negative effects of work interruptions during the day on detachment and wellbeing in the evening. Time pressure was found to moderate these relations.

Impact

The study confirmed that – even as the selection of certain work locations and certain work times in flexible work settings may reduce work interruptions, there are at the same time negative effects of work interruptions to be expected. Work interruptions may finally result in an increased number of unfinished tasks and therefore in decreases both in productivity and the quality of working life. Employees in flexible working conditions thus should be careful in planning their work locations, work times, and communication opportunities to utilise the potential positive effects of flexibility and to minimise the negative effects. Possible negative effects of work intensification and/or increases in time pressure should also be taken into consideration. The increased interruption rate in modern work settings calls for organisational policies regarding uninterrupted work and individual coping strategies.