

Flexible Working Hours: Balancing Opportunities and Challenges in the Modern Workplace

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Abstract

Flexible working hours have emerged as a transformative force in the modern workplace, challenging traditional employment norms and fostering innovation, adaptability, and inclusivity. These arrangements provide employees with autonomy over their schedules while enabling organisations to enhance productivity, attract talent, and improve operational efficiency. However, flexible work schedules are not without challenges, including blurred work-life boundaries, inequities in access, bad impact on organisational culture, monitoring & productivity issues, team collaboration and communication and impact on organisational culture. Drawing on recent studies within 2020 until 2024, this article critically examines the multifaceted benefits and challenges of flexible working hours, supported by evidence from diverse industries and practical case studies. The findings emphasise the need for inclusive policies, technological investment, and results-driven management practices to fully realise the potential of flexibility while addressing its inherent complexities. This study contributes to the evolving discourse on flexible work as a strategic imperative for shaping the future of work.

Keywords: Flexible Working Hours, Flexible Working Arrangements, Work-Life Balance, Organisational Productivity, Results-Oriented Management

Introduction

This year marks 4 years since the COVID-19 pandemic began. According to a 2021 survey by Ernst & Young Global Limited Malaysia (EY), only 22% of Malaysia employees prefer to work from the office full-time, post pandemic while 78% demand flexible working hours. The EY 2021 Work Reimagined Employee Survey found that nine in ten of Malaysia employees seek flexibility in both their work location and working hours. Before the pandemic, a survey by the World Economic Forum found that fewer than 24% of employees globally worked mostly from home.

Flexible working hours, defined as adaptable work arrangements, have become integral to contemporary workforce strategies (Rahman et al., 2022). These arrangements, including options such as compressed workweeks, flexitime, and telecommuting, cater to the growing demand for work-life balance, autonomy, and mental well-being (Zhang et al., 2024; Perry et al., 2024). Flexible schedules reflect a significant departure from the rigidity of traditional 9-to-5 frameworks, aligning with the evolving needs of a diverse workforce. In today's dynamic working culture, flexible working hours are designed to accommodate personal preferences of the employees including family commitments and peak productivity periods (Rahman Ahmad et al., 2013).

Flexible working hours offer numerous benefits to employees, organisations and society. They help employees achieve a better work-life balance, reduce stress, and align work schedules with personal commitments (Abid & Barech, 2017). For organisation, flexible arrangements enhance employee engagement, increase productivity, and lower turnover rates (Magda & Lipowska, 2021). On a broader societal level, these arrangements play a huge role in supporting Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) where they contribute to reduced traffic congestion during peak hours and lower carbon emissions, supporting environmental sustainability (Ciarniene et al., 2018).

However, flexible working hours also present challenges. Employee may struggle to separate work from personal life, face isolation, and risk overwork due to unclear boundaries (Singg & Gomez, 2024). Employers, may find it difficult to monitor productivity, ensuring collaboration, and maintain a cohesive workplace culture. Additionally, access to flexibility can vary by job type or industry leading to inequality (Mishra et al., 2024).

The adoption of flexible work arrangements has accelerated, driven by technological advancements, globalization, and shifting workforce expectations. The COVID-19 pandemic was a critical inflection point, compelling organisations to adopt remote and hybrid work models. According to International Labour Organisation (2023), by 2023, an estimated 60% of global organisations had integrated some form of flexible scheduling, citing improvements in employee engagement, operational resilience, and productivity.

This article critically examines the benefits and challenges of flexible working hours, providing actionable insights for organisations seeking to optimize these arrangements. Drawing on robust empirical evidence and diverse case studies, the discussion offers a comprehensive framework for implementing flexible work policies effectively and equitably.

Flexible Working Hours

Advantages of Flexible Working Hours

Employee-Centered Advantages: Work-Life Balance and Mental Health

Flexible working hours (FWH) are widely seen to improve work-life balance. This balance is a key factor in employees' well-being, especially in today's labor market. Indeed, the research consistently has shown that employees who have a say in their scheduling are better at managing personal or health-related issues as they arise, as opposed to succumbing to the time pressure associated with traditional office hours (Zhang et al., 2024). Research indicates that employees in flexible work environments can manage caregiving more effectively, alleviating the stress that often comes with competing work and family demands

(Cajner et al., 2024). For example, when Deloitte adopted flexible work policies in Australia, 80% of the work force noted improvement in work-life balance along with reduced stress levels and increased job satisfaction (Deloitte, 2023).

While these benefits seem apparent, there is a danger of interpreting flexibility as an absolute good without critically examining why, in some cases, flexibility may not translate into performance in the desired manner. Singg and Gomez (2024) warn that flexible work arrangements, especially isolation-inducing remote work, can foster an “always on” culture where employees struggle to turn work off. The merging of work and life roles can still result in cognitive overload, negating some of the positive effects of flexibility (Shockley et al., 2024). Flexible schedules are associated with reduced stress, anxiety, and burnout, particularly when employees have autonomy over their work hours (Belias et al., 2024). However, new research suggests the mental health benefits are dependent on the psychosocial support organisations provide. For flexibility to work effectively - organizational support through clear expectations, regular check-ins, and mental health programs is crucial (Harris et al., 2024).

As flexible work schedules often demand greater self-regulation, employees lacking robust coping mechanisms or organisational support may find it challenging to handle the pressures of managing such an unorthodox work routine (Harris et al., 2024). Therefore, while flexibility can be helpful in improving mental health outcomes, its effect is complex and depend on various individual and organisational features.

Employee Impacts: Work-life Balance, Productivity, and Mental Health

As discussed earlier, improved work-life balance from flexible schedules allows employees to manage personal responsibilities effectively, leading to increased job satisfaction. Flexible schedules help employees achieve a better work-life balance by working when they are free; attending to family responsibilities, hobbies and health (Zhang et al., 2024). The freedom to adapt work hours is a precious blessing for parents, care and obligatory people who can help improve the level of satisfaction with the job done and quality of life (Cajner et al., 2024). According to Perry et al. (2024), of those who had flexible work arrangements, 78% reported an overall improvement in their quality of life, highlighting just how personal the impact can be on overall well-being.

As highlighted earlier, improved mental health outcomes are a key benefit of flexible schedules, contributing to a healthier workforce. Employees who had a flexible schedule experience less psychological pressure, especially those employees, who feel they have the freedom to determine when they work when during the day they are more productive. Since autonomy-supportive work environments are associated with lowered workplace stress and therefore substantially improved mental health outcomes, we are left with a healthier, more resilient workforce.

Moreover, employees benefit in the cohabitating production stage of automation can be productive augmented tech workers — Flexible schedules allow employees to work during their peak productivity hours, leading to improved individual performance (Rodriguez & Cavallo, 2024). This enables employees to ride the wave of their natural productivity rhythms, and organisations to do the same. But as emphasized by Shockley et al. (2024), the ultimate

productivity increases only arise if people self-manage and eliminate distractions, which also highlights the case for sufficient training and organisational support for employees.

Strengths for Employers: Acquiring, Retaining and Keeping Talent

For employers, flexible work hours are a way of adopting a more strategic approach to improving the acquisition and retention of talent. As we previously mentioned, the job market is becoming ever-more competitive, especially among younger generations, many younger workers are saying that flexibility is a determining factor for them with potential employers. In fact, according to research conducted by Syed et al. (2024), flexible work policies are among the most highly valued by 85% of Millennials and Gen Z candidates when vetting potential job offers. Providing such flexibility allows organisations to gain a considerable edge in attracting and retaining the best talent available, especially those desiring greater autonomy and work-life integration.

In addition, flexible work policies help keep employees in the company. The companies can improve job satisfaction, reduce turnover rates, and decrease recruitment expenses by providing more control over work schedules (Mishra et al., 2024). In fact, an experiment in Microsoft Japan with a four-day workweek demonstrated that not only did employees enjoy greater satisfaction at work, but the company also witnessed a 40% boost in productivity, indicating how flexible schedules can enhance employee commitment and also complement organisational goals (Microsoft, 2024). Therefore, flexible work can be seen as an investment in human capital; employees who feel supported and trusted are likelier to remain loyal to their employers.

On the other hand, organisations need to be aware of the investment needed e.g. digital tools, and training programs to ensure that flexibility is working and that cyber security protocols are good enough to support remote work (Rodriguez & Cavallo, 2024). These investments have significant upfront costs, which can pay off in the long run in the form of higher productivity, lower turnover and reduced operational costs.

Organisational Performance and Innovation: How Flexibility Affects Team Dynamics

Greater autonomy not only improves individual productivity but also fosters collaboration and innovation within teams (Wise, 2024). For example, a lengthy case study detailing Google's internal work culture found that flexible work arrangements improved team performance metrics by 85% in collaborative teams with high performance quotas requiring constant innovation (Google, 2023). This case study offers lessons in how to use flexibility to generate ideation and collaboration in knowledge-based service environments where creative minds need motivation to engage mentally.

But the direct effect of flexibility on innovation is not universal, and is contingent on the organisational conditions, job characteristics, and the level of support offered. The key to achieving the benefits of flexible work hours is by introducing result-based work environments, where performance is evaluated based on outcomes rather than hours worked. Without systems such as this, employees may find it difficult to adhere to flexible schedules that work to the benefit of the organisation. Furthermore, Mishra et al. (2024) warn that flexible work can widen gaps between types of jobs, especially knowledge workers and those on the frontlines, who do not always enjoy such flexibility in their day-to-day schedules.

This means that organisations should develop inclusive policies that make flexible work arrangements available to all employees.

Conversely, there are other organisations that have experienced difficulty delivering business performance outcomes at an organisational level. For instance, Amazon, though they offer flexible hours in some departments, has been criticized for employee burnout and disengagement, especially among remote workers (Amazon, 2024). This means that flexibility is a powerful tool for improving performance but only if it is well managed, has the right support systems and has the right culture within the organisation.

Challenges and Drawbacks

Challenges for Employees – Blurred Work-Life Boundaries

Flexible work arrangements have redefine how employees manage their professional and personal life, but they often have blurred work-life boundaries, leading to overwork, stress, and burnout. Research by Shirmohammadi et al. (2021) underscores the adverse effects of poorly defined boundaries on mental health which found that employees who struggle to disconnect from work often experience compromised well-being. Building on this, the research by Kang et al., (2020) and Barbieri et al. (2021) noted that flexible schedules can foster "always-on" behaviors which disrupting personal time, exacerbating stress and anxiety, particularly for working parents who face heightened emotional strain. In remote work environments, this challenge is amplified by the lack of physical separation between work and home spaces (Ghar, 2024).

To address these issues, employees and organizations must collaborate on proactive strategies like establishing fixed work schedules to demarcate working and non-working hours (Kossek et al., 2023), creating designated workspaces to reinforce mental and physical boundaries (Pascal, 2023), incorporating structured breaks and time off to prevent burnout (Rahman et al., 2020), and practicing technology-free time by disabling work-related notifications during personal hours (Yunus et al., 2018). While these measures empower employees, they may be challenging to implement consistently, particularly in cultures that prioritize availability over boundaries.

Challenges for Employees – Isolation and Reduced Social Interaction

Flexible working arrangements often face a lack of in-person collaboration, which can negatively impact morale, team cohesion, and overall well-being (Cajner et al., 2024).. The absence of spontaneous and in-persons interactions exacerbates feelings of disconnection, leaving employees with diminished engagement and psychological health (Barbieri et al., 2021). Additionally, flexible arrangement workers often miss out on critical opportunities for mentorship and professional development where they may struggle to access informal guidance due to limited face-to-face interactions, which are crucial for self-development and career progression (HRNZ, 2024).

While virtual team-building activities and online collaboration tools have been introduced as potential solutions, they often fall short of replicating the spontaneity and depth of in-person interactions. Hybrid working models, which include regular in-office gatherings, have proven to be more effective in maintaining engagement, trust, and innovation (Belias et al., 2024). Additionally, actively participating in virtual meetings, group

discussions, or collaborative projects can help recreate the dynamics of an in-office setting, enhancing team engagement and reducing feelings of isolation (Indradewa & Prasetyo, 2023).

To further address isolation, employees should consider initiating virtual coffee breaks or casual catch-ups with colleagues to foster relationships beyond work tasks, helping to create a more personal and supportive environment (Aruldoss et al., 2020). However, social interactions should not be limited to workplace relationships. Indradewa and Prasetyo (2023) suggest that employees ought to prioritize socializing with friends and family outside of work by balancing between professional and personal social connections, employees can achieve greater work-life harmony and job satisfaction.

Challenges for Employers – Monitoring & Productivity Issues

Flexible work arrangements have proven to enhance employee productivity by providing greater autonomy and work-life balance. However, they also present significant challenges for employers, particularly in supervising and monitoring workforce performance. The absence of real-time supervision can result in inconsistent work patterns, especially for roles that require on-site collaboration or continuous teamwork. For example, tasks involving shared physical resources or immediate problem-solving often suffer under flexible arrangements, where employees are distributed across various locations (Chiguvu et al., 2023).

To address these supervisory challenges, a shift toward results-oriented performance metrics is essential. Rodriguez and Cavallo (2024) highlight the importance of transitioning from traditional systems that track hours worked to ones that evaluate outcomes. Such systems prioritize employee contributions based on measurable deliverables rather than physical presence or time logged. Building on this, Rohayu and Michael (2023) argue that results-driven frameworks are better suited to flexible work models, as they offer clearer benchmarks for assessing productivity without requiring constant supervision. Furthermore, Brega et al. (2023) emphasize the need to redefine productivity metrics, suggesting that timeliness and the quality of deliverables should become the central focus of performance evaluations.

While results-oriented metrics address many challenges, they are not without limitations. Overemphasis on outcomes may inadvertently place excessive pressure on employees, leading to burnout or the prioritization of speed over quality. Additionally, poorly defined performance expectations or inconsistent feedback can undermine the success of these frameworks, leaving room for misaligned objectives and unmet deliverables. To counteract these issues, organizations must adopt a holistic approach that complements results-based systems with robust communication, structured feedback processes, and collaborative tools. For example, investments in project management software can provide visibility into progress toward shared goals, while regular one-on-one check-ins facilitate alignment and support. By integrating these strategies, employers can create a work environment that supports autonomy without sacrificing accountability or performance standards.

Challenges for Employers – Team Collaboration and Communication

Flexible schedules, while offering employees greater autonomy, present a significant challenge for employers in maintaining effective team collaboration and real-time communication, particularly in asynchronous work environments. When team members work on different schedules, communication breakdowns often arise, disrupting workflows and negatively impacting productivity. For instance, reliance on internet-based communication becomes problematic when employers fail to provide adequate internet infrastructure or support, as highlighted by Chiguvi and Bakani (2023). These communication barriers can lead to delayed decision-making and disrupted project timelines, which compromise team efficiency.

However, flexible working arrangement also offer opportunity to enhance team dynamic when manage effectively. Advanced digital collaboration tools can bridge communication gaps by enhancing connectivity and coordination across diverse schedules and time zones. Platforms such as project management software (e.g. Trello, Asana and Slack), messaging apps (e.g. Teams, WhatsApp and Telegram), and shared dashboards provide centralized spaces for updates, document sharing, and task tracking (Rohayu et al., 2023). These technologies enable teams to stay aligned, even when working asynchronously. Additionally, to adopt collaboration tools, clear and regular communication strategies are essential. Employers should encourage practices such as documenting decisions and discussions in a shared repository to ensure transparency and clarity, using shared calendars to identify overlapping availability and plan synchronous touchpoints, scheduling regular team meetings during hours that work for the majority to promote alignment and connection (Schwarz Müller et al., 2018).

Nonetheless, the reliance on digital tools is without drawbacks. Over-reliance on digital tools may lead to employee fatigue from constant notifications and an overwhelming volume of updates. Moreover, scheduling synchronous meetings may not always accommodate every team member, especially in global teams with vastly different time zones. Employers must therefore strike a balance by tailoring communication practices to their team's unique needs, ensuring that flexibility does not compromise team cohesion or workplace morale.

Recommendations for the Future Flexible Working Hours

Meta Development of Real-Time Cortical Interfaces

Cognitive development is becoming the most important factor determining the outcome of the work, that's why neurotechnology is implementing new trends to potentially boost employee productivity. Neurotechnology tools could monitor brain activity, giving employees an alert when they are approaching the danger zone of burnout or cognitive overload. Wearable devices, for example, could help monitor brainwave activity and give suggestions about whether employees need to take a breather from work or should switch tasks or spend some time rewinding to keep working at full speed throughout the day.

This would constitute the most extreme form of workplace surveillance, and it may raise significant employee autonomy and privacy issues. Neurotechnology is predicated on the sampling of extremely sensitive data, the mishandling of which could not only result in ethical transgressions but a loss of trust. In addition, organizations need to make certain that

participation is consensual, data is de-identified, and employees are crystal clear as to how their data will be used.” And neurotechnology may help performance individuals, yet a cohesive workplace environment and effective work team functionality cannot be bypassed. The key is to facilitate neurotechnology as part of a bigger mental health and well-being approach among employees, who can enjoy resources to help relieve stress and function productively.

Designing Hybrid Workspaces for Humans

Human-centered hybrid workspaces could be the answer to meet the increasing need for flexibility, along with in-person collaboration. Comments like “work from anywhere” and the gathering of people working at home would bring together the advantages of remote work, while adding the creative dynamics of commerce in a space charged by other humans. Hybrid workspaces could use immersive technologies such as virtual reality (VR) and augmented reality (AR) to simulate in-person collaboration, empowering remote workers feel even more plugged into their teams.

For instance, workgroups could gather in a virtual conference room with avatars and go about their day as if they were there in the flesh. By mimicking these serendipitous and dynamic conversations that can be lost in conventional virtual workspaces, this method would not just encourage creativity and innovation but also better team cohesion and problem-solving.

Although hybrid workspaces present exciting opportunities, they are also a cause for concern regarding accessibility. VR and AR devices demand specialized hardware and software that may not be accessible to all employees (especially those lower-income, remote workers). However, long-term exposure to immersive technologies can also cause physical discomfort and digital fatigue that limits the utility of these tools over time. Organizations have to find a balance between maximizing technological advancements and making those tools accessible for Hybrid work, so all employees can equitably access the necessary tools relative to myriad remote working situations.

Remote Work and Decentralized Autonomous Organizations (DAOs)

DAOs (Decentralized Autonomous Organizations): A radical new model for remote work DAOs function without traditional hierarchical systems, enabling workers to self-organise and decide together. Using blockchain technology, DAOs might allow remote teams to prioritize projects, allocate resources, and determine performance without requiring managerial oversight. It would grant employees greater control over their endeavours, increasing agency and motivation.

Though DAOs have great potential, they pose governance and accountability challenges. With no traditional management hierarchies, decision-making is often more scattered, and conflicts can crop up in teams. In addition, the technology that powers DAOs are complex and may not be familiar to all employees, meaning organizations will have to invest heavily in training and infrastructure. For DAOs to be implemented successfully, organizations also have to create clear governance frameworks, and the employees must also possess the skill set that would help them thrive in such a decentralized environment.

To Summarise, innovative and tech-driven solutions are going to help in future of flexible working hours while prioritizing both efficiency and employee well-being. Although these prospective recommendations have great promise, their implementation requires more than awareness of the ethical, social and practical challenges associated with them. Only by striking a balance between technological advancements and modeling human-centered work in practice will organizations realize that lucrative opportunity and redefine flexible working from a productivity enabler to something more emotionally significant: a measure of healthy almost human connection. Future research should further investigate the ongoing implications of such innovations, to secure a future of work which is adaptive, equitable and sustainable for all workers.

Conclusion

To summarise the potential of flexible working arrangements is immense and can serve as a significant performance driver at both the individual and organizational level, but their effective rollout calls for a broader lens that addresses key challenges through creative solutions. For good flexible working hours to happen, organizations will have to build the right data infrastructure, instil a culture that supports flexibility and focuses on employee well-being. Future studies should focus on the long-term consequences of these advances, making certain flexible functioning is still effective, equitable and maintainable in an altering recipient workplace. By adopting this balanced approach — combining flexibility with accountability, autonomy with collaboration and productivity with well-being — employees and employers can thrive in the ever-changing world of work.

Building upon these insights, it is critical to understand the broader theoretical and contextual significance of this study. This research contributes meaningfully to the evolving discourse on flexible working arrangements by bridging theoretical insights with practical implications. Theoretically, it extends the understanding of work-life integration and organisational performance, particularly in the context of post-pandemic workforce transformations. By synthesizing recent evidence across diverse sectors, the research underscores the interplay between autonomy, productivity, and well-being, highlighting the nuanced dynamics of flexible work environments. Contextually, the findings offer actionable guidance for organizations navigating the complexities of modern workplace demands. The study's insights are particularly relevant in addressing global challenges such as sustainability, equity in workplace practices, and technological adaptation, thus positioning flexible working hours not merely as an operational strategy but as a pivotal element in shaping the future of work.

Future studies should focus on the long-term consequences of these advances, ensuring that flexible working remains effective, equitable, and sustainable in an evolving workplace. By adopting this balanced approach—combining flexibility with accountability, autonomy with collaboration, and productivity with well-being—employees and employers can thrive in the ever-changing world of work.

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