

FLEXITIME AS A MECHANISM TO REDUCE EMPLOYEE STRESS

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Abstract

Flexible working arrangements have been identified as a critical factor of balancing work and personal commitments to reduce employees stress. The study aims to investigate the effect of flexitime as a potential moderator to reduce the administrative employee stress. The study was conducted using a sample of 97 employees in a tertiary environment. The data was collected using a precoded questionnaire and reliability was assessed using Cronbach's Coefficient Alpha. Data was analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics. Results were compared and contrasted with that of other researchers. The hypotheses were tested using correlations and multiple regression and significant associations with stress and flexitime are reflected in this study. The findings indicate that stress can be reduced through the moderator, that is, flexitime.

Keywords: Flexitime, Stress Reduction, Work-life Balance, Flexible Working Arrangement

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Introduction

The recent decades have witnessed changing market conditions compelling companies to achieve better economic efficiency. However, changes in technology, work overload and fear of job losses have instigated stressful work environments. Robbins and Decenzo (2001) indicate that the common stressors are organizational and personal (Robbins & Decenzo, 2001), and stress and burnout lean toward performance interference (Taris, 2006 cited in Grzywacz, Carlson & Shulkin, 2008). Hence, employers are allowing flexible work arrangements to minimize work pressure, stress and burnout to accommodate health related problems. Ridgley, Scott, Hunt and Harp (2005) assert that flexible work schedules have been accepted globally, providing potential benefits for employers and employees, and it is advantageous if well managed. In today's environment, people and organizations are focused to do more with less and they need to respond rapidly to external stress and ongoing changes (Odendaal & Roodt, 2002). Advocates opine that flexibility reduces stress and helps workers to balance their work and family lives (Corporate voices for Working families & WFD, 2005 cited in Grzywacz, Carlson & Shulkin, 2008). Hence, employees are more focused and conscious of their work; resulting in more organizational productivity and creativity. Flexitime may, therefore, be a moderating factor for stress.

Theoretical Framework

With flexitime employees are permitted to select their own working hours, provided that they work within specific limitations determined by their employers (Mondy & Noe, 2005). This changeable work plan is different from customary work agreements as time is highly valued. Also, flexitime is a human resource department strategy and has been identified as a value adding strategic factor in human resource management. A flexible work schedule equips employers with a framework in which to recruit new employees and retain highly skilled and qualified employees (Mondy & Noe, 2005). A compressed working week allows employees to work more hours than usual per day and fewer days per week (Internet 1). A salient feature of flexible work hours is that it can reduce the 'morning tension'; worrying about childcare, symptoms of stress and 'interrole conflict' (Pierce, Newstrom, Dunham & Barber, 1989 cited in Lucas & Heady, 2002). In addition, job-sharing contributes to the learning of a wide range of skills. A salient point by Grzywacz et al. (2008) is that flexitime may benefit the health of the worker, yet the 'potential benefit' of compressed workweek becomes questionable.

A common option of flexible work practice is to work from home and managers can retain qualified and experienced older workers (Pieter et al., 2006) who are likely to leave the organization. Hence, output may be significant as it decreases traveling hours, with fewer discontinuities in work. This allows older workers to ease their work demands, and yet be productive. Some benefits include increased

autonomy and reduced hostility toward managers (Robbins, Tudge, Odendaal & Roodt, 2009). A major drawback is that it is not applicable to every job. With job sharing, more talents surface, but a drawback is to find compatible employees who can be effective in the coordination of intricate jobs (Robbins et al., 2009). Evidently, with telecommuting there is higher productivity, reduced office space costs, and selection from a larger labour pool (Robbins et al., 2009), including groupware networking and electronic mail (Grobler, Warnich, Carrell, Elbert & Hatfield, 2006). In this scenario, there is less direct supervision of workers and the hindrance in coordinating teamwork (Robbins et al., 2009). Furthermore, the loss of visibility at work can cause a slide with career progression (Grobler et al., 2006). The five main motives for introducing flexible work practices is to achieve work requirements; to attain family friendly objectives; administrative plans; fairness programs; and management of skills deficiencies, employee retention, prevention of a stressful workplace and reduction in absenteeism (Lewis, 1997 cited in Brien & Hayden, 2008).

Health is critical for work performance and employees are stronger and more resistant to stress when their needs are supported. Considering the alteration of work arrangements, the policy of International Business Machines (IBM) is of measuring output which is opposed to the number of hours in the office (Robbins et al. 2009). Employee moods can be improved by increasing their energy, making them feel as though they are back in the driver's seat. A one step at a time process creates a more optimistic way of life, and employees will see a visible decrease in their stress levels at home and at their workplace (Segal, Horwitz, Smith & Segal, 2008). A suitable work/life balance is attained when the work does not dominate the person's life and cause harm through the effects of negative stress. According to Bird (2006), with a greater work/life balance workers will be much more responsible and confident in their job and the organization will take cognizance of the increase in his/her personal output.

Stress is helpful, yet obstructive when it is uncontrolled. Also, senior staff need to ensure that employees are productive under strenuous situations, and that they be allowed to control their own work arrangements. This creates a plausible means by which companies improve overall work practices. Flexitime contributes to employee morale, productivity and eases commuting arrangements. This generic concept of flexitime is for "work-hours programs" which allows flexibility with "starting and quitting times" (Lucas & Heady, 2002: 566).

Objectives of the study

- To determine the perceptions of administrative employees regarding flexitime and employee stress in a tertiary institution.

- To determine whether flexitime as a tool can reduce the stress of administrative employees in a tertiary institution.

Methodology

Respondents

The population comprised of administrative staff in a tertiary environment in Kwa-Zulu Natal in South Africa. The sample of 97 subjects (managers, supervisors and employees) was drawn using a stratified random sampling technique to ensure proportionate representation from the strata of the designated groups of interest, that is, administrative staff. In terms of the composition, 3% of the sample consisted of managers, 10% were supervisors and 87% were employees.

Measuring Instrument

Data was collected using a questionnaire consisting of two sections. Section A related to the biographical data, which was measured using a nominal scale with pre-coded option categories. Section B comprised of 30 items pertaining to stress and flexitime, and was measured using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. The questionnaire used in this study was developed by adapting items from Brien and Hayden (2008) and from Wickramasinghe and Jayabandu (2007) to measure perceptions of flexitime and stress scales, respectively. Pilot testing was carried out using the same protocols that were used for the larger sample. The feedback confirmed that the questionnaire was suitable in terms of relevance and construction.

Research procedure

The study was conducted after ethical clearance was granted for the study.

Measures/statistical analysis of the questionnaire

The reliability of the questionnaire was determined using Cronbach's Coefficient Alpha. The overall alpha coefficient was 0.85 for flexitime reflecting a high internal consistency and a high reliability; and 0.89 for stress, thereby reflecting a high internal consistency and hence, a very high level of reliability.

Administration of the questionnaire

The questionnaires were administered over a two month period and subjects were expected to respond using the scale provided.

Statistical analysis

Descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations) and an inferential statistics will be used to evaluate objectives and hypotheses of the study.

Results

Staff were required to respond to the items assessing flexitime and stress reduction using the 5 point Likert

scale, which were analysed using descriptive statistics (Table 1).

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of flexitime and stress

Dimensions	Mean	Standard deviation	Minimum	Maximum	Critical range
Flexitime					
Benefits of flexitime	3.6	0.8	1.8	5.0	4.2 - 3.0
Flexible work practices	3.8	0.8	1.0	5.0	4 - 3.2
Drawbacks of flexitime	3.0	0.6	1.4	5.0	2.6 - 3.2
Employee Stress					
Stress reduction	3.6	0.7	1.8	5.0	3.2 - 4.0
Work/life balance	3.2	0.8	1.4	5.0	2.6 - 3.8
Employee commitment	3.7	0.7	2.0	5.0	3.2 - 4.2

The mean score values in Table 1 are compared against a maximum attainable score of 5. Hence, the higher the mean score value, the greater the perceptions of employees on flexitime and the higher the level of reported employee stress.

The mean score value for the sub-dimensions of flexitime (Table 1) is such that flexible work practices has the highest mean (Mean = 3.8), followed by the benefits of flexitime (Mean = 3.6) and lastly, drawbacks of flexitime (Mean = 3.0). Table 1 indicates that there are varying levels with the administrative employees' perceptions on flexitime and employee stress. Employees have a greater perception regarding flexible work practices in the organization and they support flexibility with work. They perceive the benefits of flexitime moderately.

In terms of the sub-dimensions of employee stress (Table 1), employee commitment has the highest mean (Mean = 3.7), followed by stress reduction (Mean = 3.6) and lastly, work/life balance (Mean = 3.2). In terms of employee stress, there is clear indication that employee perceptions are higher with employee commitment and stress reduction in comparison to a moderate perception with work/life balance.

With regard to the dimensions of flexitime, flexible work practice had the greatest impact on employees, followed closely by the benefits of flexitime and lastly the drawbacks of flexitime. The discussions are based on input from the mean for each variable. When assessing employee perceptions on the benefits of flexitime, it was found that the benefits of flexitime was second out of the three sub-dimensions of flexitime. This implies that the administrative employee perceptions in this regard are at a moderate level in this organization.

However, against a maximum attainable score of 5, benefits of flexitime (Mean = 3.6) reflect that employees have some reluctance and are skeptical.

Ridgley et al. (2005) indicate that globally, flexible work schedules have been increasingly accepted and provide potential benefits for both employers and employees. Also, the use of flexitime is extremely important and it is easy to reach agreement on it. The opportunity to set their own start and end times for their working day improves employee morale and productivity, as employees are able to attain a greater fit between their workplace and personal commitments. Mondy and Noe (2005) assert that workplace flexibility can be an important strategic factor in keeping a good number of brilliant employees. The advantages of a flexible workplace, productivity and better recruitment and retention of staff provide the company with a better image.

When assessing employees' perceptions on the introduction of flexitime in the organisation, it was found that flexible work practice was first out of the three sub-dimensions of flexitime. Against a maximum attainable score of 5, flexible work practices (Mean = 3.8) reflect that employees perceive flexible work practice with potential value. According to Brien and Hayden (2008), over the past 20 years, there has been several reasons why flexible work practices (FWP) have emerged so hastily. Administrations which inspire work market flexibility had a good result, as they identify methods of flexible work which make the job easier, for instance teleworking and accessing control. Brien and Hayden (2008) have identified five major reasons for the introduction of flexible work practices: to achieve work requirements; to attain family friendly objectives; administrative plans; fairness program; and management with skills deficiencies, employee retention, and prevention of a stressful workplace and to reduce absenteeism. Flexible work options helps to attract qualified, experienced employees who would not ordinarily join an organisation, retain those who may want to leave (Drew & Murtagh, 2005), and the

resultant effect would be decreased employee turnover and secure personnel. Furthermore, managers are making a considerable effort in terms of work investment, training and career development.

Furthermore, the drawbacks of flexitime surfaced third. This implies that employees are cautious. However, against a maximum attainable score of 5, drawbacks of flexitime (Mean = 3.0) reflect a high level of employee reservations as flexitime is non-traditional work and employees may be required to fill in for work colleagues who are on flexible leave. Ridgley et al. (2005) indicate that flexitime can create potential difficulties for employers when there is insufficient employee coverage during and outside core office hours. Employees need to note how many hours are accumulated or how much credit is built up during periods of increased workload, as employees may not be able to take all of the time off and hence, forfeit it. Depending on the designated core time period, employees who begin their workday very early may have longer hours, will not be able to start work early, and customers may call outside of the core working hours. Hence, a negative impact on business. The scheduling of meetings create difficulties because of the unavailability of all employees. Brien and Hayden (2008) identified possible barriers to the introduction of flexitime. This includes the lack of a definite policy regarding flexitime within the organization, a lack of resources, excess reliance on the optional feature of workplace flexibility, insufficient right to use the flexitime plan and a deficient understanding of the scheme.

When assessing perceptions on employee commitment, it was found that employee commitment was the first out of the three sub-dimensions of employee stress. This implies that employees perceive employee commitment as a critical factor for a more harmonious work environment. However, against a maximum attainable score of 5, employee commitment (Mean = 3.7) reflects that these employees perceive employee commitment and stress reduction positively. McGuire and McLaren (2009) highlight that employee commitment may enhance their comfort by assisting an employee to deal with a stressful circumstance. Secondly, it may facilitate workers to develop a new, positive perception of a stressful condition; and it may reduce the emotional distress connected with a difficult situation. According to Wayne et al. (1997, cited in McGuire & McLaren, 2009), employees who have a sense of being sustained in the workplace have been identified to have excellent commitment and are more likely to be excellent performers.

Furthermore, employee commitment was followed closely by stress reduction and lastly by work/life balance. The discussions are based on input from the mean score for each variable. With stress reduction surfacing second, this implies that the administrative employees view stress reduction with discretion and awareness in this organization. Against a maximum attainable score of 5, stress reduction (Mean = 3.6) reflects that employees view stress reduction with moderation. Segal, Horwitz, Smith and Segal (2008) state that when an employee's needs are supported, the incumbent is stronger and more resistant to stress. A good employee will be able to deal with stressful work without becoming overwhelmed. Employee moods can also be improved by small things, such as increasing their energy level, making them feel as though they are back in the driver's seat. In order to reduce stress, employees are to be suited to their jobs and they need to appreciate the extent of their authority (Robbins & Decenzo, 2001). Redesigning tasks can also help ease stressors connected to working too hard. Employees should also have some input in redesigns that affect them, and hence they are less stressed.

Furthermore, with work/life balance surfacing third out of the three sub-dimensions of employee stress, this indicates that employees have reservations, are not supportive and associate barriers to this sub-dimension. However, against a maximum attainable score of 5, work/life balance (Mean = 3.2) may address a critical issue of compatibility with certain positions in this organization. Williams (2010) identified work/life balance as the balance between the demands, time and effort required by work and the workplace, and the effect that it has on individual, family and social life, and vice versa. A suitable work/life balance is attained when the work constituent does not dominate the person's life and cause harm through the effects of negative stress. Bird (2006) shares the same sentiment as William (2010) with regard to balancing lifestyle and work needs. In addition, with a good work/life balance, employees will be able to improve their productivity, and there will be less stress (Bird, 2006).

Inferential statistics

Hypothesis 1

There exists significant inter-correlations amongst the sub-dimensions of flexitime (benefits of flexitime, flexible work practices and drawbacks of flexitime) and the sub-dimensions of employee stress (stress reduction, work/life balance and employee commitment), respectively (Table 2).

Table 2. Inter-correlation amongst the sub-dimensions of flexitime and employee stress

Sub-dimensions of flexitime and employee stress	Benefits of flexitime	Flexible work practice	Drawbacks of flexitime
Stress reduction			
r	0.421	0.422	-0.090
p	<0.001**	<0.001**	0.379
Work /life balance			
r	0.190	0.309	-0.028
p	0.062	0.002**	0.784
Employee commitment			
r	0.558	0.462	0.001
p	<0.001**	0.001**	0.994

**p<0.01

Table 2 indicates that:

The benefits of flexitime significantly correlate with stress reduction and employee commitment, respectively, at the 1% level of significance. Flexible work practice significantly correlates with stress reduction, work/life balance and employee commitment, at the 1% of level of significance. However, Table 2 indicates that there are no significant inter-correlations between benefits of flexitime and work/life balance, and between the drawbacks of flexitime and sub-dimensions of

employee stress (stress reduction, work/life balance and employee commitment) respectively. Hence, hypothesis 1 may be partially accepted.

Hypothesis 2

The sub-dimensions of flexitime (benefits, flexible work practices, drawbacks) significantly account for the variance in determining perceptions of employee stress.

Table 3. Multiple Regression between stress and flexitime

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of Estimate
1.	0.485	0.227	0.227	0.54555
2.	0.529	0.280	0.265	0.53216
Model	Standardized Coefficients Beta	T	p	
1. Flexible work practice	0.556	6.026	0.000	
2. Drawbacks of flexitime	0.223	2.417	0.018	
3. Benefits of flexitime	0.230	1.787	0.077	

Table 3 indicates that the sub-dimensions of flexitime (benefits, flexible work practices, drawbacks) significantly account for 26.5% of the variance in its potential to reduce stress. This means that the 3 dimensions of flexitime only account for nearly a third of the stress experienced by employees. The remaining 73.5% of the stress may be reduced by other factors that lie outside the jurisdiction of the study. The results do indicate that flexitime does in fact contribute to stress reduction. The beta loadings reflect that the 3 dimensions of flexitime helped to reduce stress in varying degrees, which in descending level are flexible work practice, benefits of flexitime and drawbacks of flexitime. The beta value also indicates that the drawbacks of flexitime have the potential to increase stress (as indicated by the negative beta value).

Recommendations

The study reflects that there is a significant impact of flexitime on stress reduction in this organization. A significant number of respondents indicate a level of skepticism with the benefits of flexitime, and a strong emphasis should be placed on clarity with issues in this regard. Hence, management needs to have clear guidelines and transparency so that employees view the benefits of flexitime more positively.

Also, there are respondents who believe that flexible work practices may not balance their work and family lives better than if they had to work full time. To nurture flexible work practices, managers need to inform staff that flexible working also means that employees are under less stress and that there is reduced absenteeism. Of importance, flexible work practices contributes in attracting and retaining employees, and this important information should be communicated to all staff.

In this study, some respondents have considerable drawbacks with flexitime. It is important for managers or human resource personnel to evaluate the disadvantages of flexitime before introducing it, and to communicate this to employees as it affects them negatively. Managers need to balance the needs of employees with those of the organization.

In this study, a significant number of respondents have shown their support for stress reduction. A strong emphasis should be placed on, for example, employee assistance and wellness programs to assist employees to deal with stress as this affects employee health. Managers need to provide their input in terms of reducing stress at work. Organizations need to make every attempt to reduce employee stress rate and to take cognisance of core business objectives.

Employees in this organization feel that their work schedule conflicts with their family life. For a harmonious work environment, organizations need to practice work/life balance strategies, such as, flexitime to balance employees' work and family demands. Thus, performance is at an optimum level and productivity is evident. Also, numerous employees feel that with flexitime, employee commitment to organizational goals will be evident. It is imperative to institute flexibility for the purpose of reducing stress. Organizations need to note that with flexitime, employees are less stressed and it is important that they institute work/life balance practice in their organization.

Conclusion

The overall aim of the study was to explore flexitime as a tool to reduce stress. The administrative employees in a tertiary institution, in the KwaZulu-Natal province were the target population for this study. Staff perceptions revealed that there is a significant impact of flexitime on stress reduction. Organizations should consider stress reduction through flexitime as an important strategy. It can result in optimum functioning, high performing organizations and a motivated workforce, including reduced absenteeism. Furthermore, employer-employee relations, trust and communication, amongst others are critical factors for success, and co-worker support is essential. Hence, employees can perform to the best of their ability in a supportive work environment. An ongoing awareness must be created with managers on the advantages of introducing flexitime to reduce employee stress in a tertiary environment.

Recommendations for future research

For the enhancement of the generalisability of the results and reliability, future research can be conducted with a larger sample size. The respondents

surveyed in this study were limited to administrative employees from two campus sites of a tertiary environment. Future studies should focus on surveying employees from other similar institutions to obtain a wider focus with results. This enhances room for various comparisons with institutions. Future research can also focus on other related variables.

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