

# FLEXITIME AND STRESS REDUCTION: BIOGRAPHICAL INFLUENCES

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## Abstract

This aim of this study was to determine the biographical influences on flexitime and stress in an educational environment. The study was conducted using data which was collected using a measuring instrument and analyzed using both descriptive and inferential statistics. Reliability was also determined. A sample of 97 employees was drawn using the stratified random sampling. Significant differences were found with the sub-dimensions of flexitime and some biographical factors. On the contrary, no significant differences surfaced with stress and the biographical profiles. Gender did not appear to be significant in this study. The study also lends support for organizations to strategise and institute flexitime, to rethink their organizational policies, and to focus on productivity and organizational performance.

**Keywords:** Workplace Flexibility, Stress Reduction, Administrative Employees, Organizational Performance, Biographical Factors

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## Introduction

The pressure in today's work environment is high levels of performance, cost effectiveness and output. As a result, employees are becoming aware of the potential benefits of flexitime and work-life balance. Flexitime, often perceived as employee fluidity in a work environment allows employees to control their work patterns. High work demands result in work-related stress levels and reduced interest in the workforce. Work-related stress affects all nations, all professions and all categories of employees. Several studies confirm the detrimental effects of stress on our health. The American Institute of Stress (AIS, 2001) found that about 90% of all health problems are related to stress. Hence, the need for flexible work practices, such as flexitime, job sharing, compressed work week, telecommuting/telework, and work sharing is to make organizations less rigid, and have policies for managers and employees to be more productive (Odendaal & Roodt, 2002). Many scholarly views emphasize the importance of ameliorating stress. This study assesses the influence of biographical factors on flexitime and stress.

## Literature Review

Flexitime, a changeable work plan is different from customary work agreements. As a human resource

department strategy flexitime determines workers time so that the ultimate focus is improved productivity, creativity, goal attainment and motivated employees. According to the studies of Olorunsola and Ibegbulam (2003, cited in O'Brien & Hayden, 2008), 78% of Jamaican librarians agreed that flexible work practices reinforced and encouraged one's independence. The reinforcement of novel methods is to attract, encourage and build workers with their careers, including stability with work/life balance.

With flexible work plans, employees perform the same amount of work for the same number of hours that they would if working according to a normal schedule. A normal schedule could comprise of a workday from 8am to 4pm, but instead an employee could work from 6am until 2pm (Mondy & Noe, 2005). Core time represents that part of the day when all employees are required to be present, and flexible time is around the core time period so that employees may vary their schedules.

According to Cunha and Cooper (2002, cited in McGuire & McLaren, 2009) the cost of a stressful climate may include physical ill-health symptoms (cardiovascular and gastro-intestinal problems) and cerebral ill-health symptoms (pressure, nervousness and despair). Furthermore, Guest and Conway (2004, cited in McGuire & McLaren, 2009) relate employee well-being to six categories: a convenient workload; a certain individual control over the work; a carry

from co-workers and employers; positive relations at work; a logically obvious function; and a feeling of supervision or participation in workplace modifications. Lewis (1997, cited in O'Brien & Hayden, 2008) has identified five main motives for introducing flexible work practices:

- to achieve work requirements;
- to attain family friendly objectives;
- administrative plans;
- fairness program; and
- management with skills deficiencies, employee retention, prevention of a stressful workplace and to reduce absenteeism.

Evidently, a pilot study conducted at a French company indicated that employees of a particular department demonstrated increased pride in their department because of flexitime practices; and as a result they became more relaxed and co-operative, and there was a significant reduction with absenteeism (Ridgley, Hunt, Harp & Scott, 2005). Flexitime is still utilised across Europe, Asia and America (Ridgley et al., 2005). Pierce, Newstrom, Dunham and Barber (1989, cited in Lucas & Heady, 2002) affirm that flexibility with work hours can reduce morning tension and concerns over childcare, amongst others. Furthermore, commute stress relates to problems at work, sleep and health issues (Gulian, Matthews, Glendon, Davies & Debney, 1990 cited in Lucas & Heady, 2002).

According to Mondy and Noe (2005) employees' stress focuses on balancing employees' work needs and their lifestyles. Nowadays, more and more employees are asking for flexible advantages, which include telecommuting from home, flexitime, and a compressed work week. Furthermore, with employers' stress, flexibility in the workplace can be an important strategic factor in keeping a good number of brilliant employees including a better recruitment and retention of staff.

However, the study notes that barriers do exist. According to O'Brien and Hayden (2008) a lack of resources, a lack of definite policy, and excessive reliance on the optional feature of workplace flexibility are possible barriers. Hannabuss (1998, cited in O'Brien & Hayden, 2008) makes reference to communication as another main challenge for managers and workers, that is, communication transfer, dissemination of information and communication among employees.

According to Robbins and Decenzo (2001) the first approach to reducing stress is to confirm that employees are correctly suited to their work and that they appreciate the capacity of their ability. By communicating what is expected of them, role conflict and ambiguity can be reduced. Redesigning tasks can also help ease stressors from working too hard, and employees should have some input in redesign that affects them. No matter what is done to eliminate organisational stressors, stress may be evidenced due to personal factors which they have

little or no control over (Robbins & Decenzo, 2001). Segal, Horwitz, Smith and Segal (2008) emphasize contributory factors to decrease workplace stress: offer rewards, cultivate a friendly social climate, consult your employees and improve communication. Williams (2010) also affirmed that ongoing awareness in dealing with stress effectively and maintaining an adequate work/life balance has led to maintaining this balance. Time management, stress management, work/life balance, the management of personal growth, coaching and mentoring, amongst others are effective tools in this scenario.

Ridgley et al. (2005) highlight salient points pertinent for flexitime and stress reduction:

- To set start and end times for the working day improves employees' morale and productivity. This creates a greater fit between their workplace and personal commitments.
- Absenteeism is reduced as employees personal commitments, for example, travel times, childcare facilities, doctors appointments can be accommodated.
- The issue of poor punctuality is mitigated because there is a core time, which forms part of the flexitime schedule, when an employee must be at work.

Flexible work options contribute to attract and retain qualified and skilled staff who would not like to leave the organization, hence creating secure personnel. Incidentally, flexibility allows for the employment of employees on a project-based or seasonal basis. Sheridan and Conway (2001, cited in O'Brien & Hayden, 2008) affirmed that corporate issues also was the main cause for implementing the option of different work arrangements. Lewis (2001) maintains that traditional opinions about profession and gender are also the realities of the labour market. Furthermore, the person-environment fit argues that those employees who are in formal flexible work arrangements give an indication of less stress, hence contributing to good health and performance (Grzywacz, Carlson & Shulkin, 2008).

However, some authors agree that undesirable insights regarding work/life balance do exist. This may reflect on a manager's incompetency or unsuitability to carry out such arrangements. The resultant effect could be hurting their career or having consequences on their status and their investments. The awareness that there could be a development or elevation of cost is a genuine and major barrier (Stennett, 1994 cited in O'Brien & Hayden, 2008). Ridgley et al. (2005) have identified potential drawbacks of flexitime, and long-standing regular meetings as a result of the unavailability of all employees at the required times. A consistently heavy workload could also result in employees readily accumulating credit or hours, but being unable to book flexi leave because of workload constraints.

The goal of this study was to address biographical influences on flexitime and stress

reduction in a work environment. Social role theory provides a suggestion that women and men acquire different beliefs and skills as their societal roles may be distinct, and furthermore these beliefs and skills immerse into the way both women and men assess their work and family life demands (Eagly, 1987; Pleck, 1977 cited in Grzywacz, Carlson & Shulkin, 2008). Furthermore, women may get more benefits from flexible work arrangements as they are 'socialized to ascribe' importance to family life and provide more time for the family (Grzywacz, Carlson & Shulkin, 2008).

### Objectives of the study

- To determine the influence of biographical variables (age, gender, marital status, educational qualification, job category and number of years in company) on flexitime.
- To determine the influence of biographical variables (age, gender, marital status, educational qualification, job category and number of years in company) on stress.
- To determine the extent to which 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) is influenced by the key dimensions of the study.

### Methodology

#### Respondents

The population comprised of administrative staff in an educational environment in Kwa-Zulu Natal, 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. Of the total sample, 54% were female and 46% were male. In terms of age, 13%

were 20-29 years, 28% were 30-39 years, 38% were 40-49 years and 21% were 50 years and over. With regard to educational qualification, 11% have standard 8-10, 29% have diplomas/certificates, 25% have undergraduate degrees and 35% have postgraduate degrees. The majority of the administrative employees have qualifications.

#### 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 (1), disagree (2), neither agree/nor disagree (3), agree (4) to strongly agree (5). The questionnaire used in this study are instruments which was adapted from Brien & Hayden (2008) and from Wickramasinghe & Jayabandu (2007), relating to perceptions of flexitime and stress scales, respectively. Pilot testing was done which confirmed that the questionnaire was suitable in terms of relevance.

#### Measures

The reliability of the questionnaire was determined using Cronbach's Coefficient Alpha. The overall alpha coefficient was 0.850 for flexitime reflecting a high internal consistency and a high reliability; and 0.890 for stress, thereby reflecting a high internal consistency and hence, a very high level of reliability.

#### Statistical analysis

Descriptive statistics, using percentages, mean analyses and standard deviations were utilized to determine biographical influences on flexitime and stress reduction. Inferential statistics included analysis of variance, Scheffe's test and t-test.

### Results

Staff was 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
<b>Flexitime</b>					
Benefits of flexitime	3.6	0.8	1.8	5.0	3.0 - 4.2
Flexible work practices	3.8	0.8	1.0	5.0	3.4 - 4.2
Drawbacks of flexitime	3.0	0.6	1.4	5.0	2.6 - 3.2
<b>Employee Stress</b>					
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 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). The analysis of the flexitime sub-dimensions as indicated in Table 1 reflects that there are varying levels with the administrative employees' perceptions. Hence, the administrative employees have a greater perception regarding flexible work practices in the organisation and they support flexibility with work. Overall, employees' perceptions are moderate in this organisation. This is verified when the mean score value is compared against a maximum attainable score of 5.

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). The analysis of employee stress sub-dimensions in Table 1 reflects that there are varying levels with the administrative employees' perceptions. The analysis of the stress variables as indicated in Table 1 reflects that the administrative employees' perceptions are also moderate and a level of skepticism prevails. Globally flexitime has been accepted.

Ridgley et al. (2005) assert that flexitime is trusted by employees because it has given them some control over their working conditions. With flexitime, employees are less stressed when dealing with emergencies because they are able to work any time taken off to deal with these situations. In addition, employee stress levels are usually reduced, and their morale is increased as they enjoy their work more, and feel more valued. Therefore, they are likely to be more supportive of their organization.

According to McGrath (1976, cited in McGuire & McLaren, 2009), stress can be a strain with employees' working conditions, hence threatening their capabilities. However, perceived control leads to reduced stress levels and enhanced employee health. Wayne et al. (1997, cited in McGuire & McLaren, 2009) state that employee empowerment and involvement can augment an employee's sense of

control and develop employee health and well-being in the organization. Fisher (2002) suggests that employee affective commitment is vital for endorsing employee and organizational fitness. Organizations and supervisors may encourage this if they support employee well-being in the workplace.

Lewis (2001) states that increasing flexible work practices in the labour market have become essential, as employees have a need to solve several non-work commitments. Furthermore, from this literature key causes for the endurance of work flexibility practices are the control of variable workloads, ensuring office cover during weekend hours, and retaining qualified employees with experience.

According to Mondy and Noe (2005), to prosper with a diverse workforce, the organization needs to develop workplace flexibility for workers to remain with their organization and be productive. Flexible work practices seem to be the solution to achieve the job in a climate characterized by the freedom to choose your own working hours, trust in the system, acceptance of individual responsibility and assessment. Some organizations had a re-think and changed their traditional approaches with jobs, with the aim to reduce costs, resolving the conflict between work and family responsibilities, and motivating and retaining qualified employees. When these objectives are achieved, organizations become more creative and globally viable.

Muse, Harris, Giles and Field (2008) mention that in order to predict emotional commitment openly or by an arbitrating role of contentment practitioners are provided with possible ways to take action in support of a happier, more committed and productive personnel. Ridgley et al. (2005) indicate that flexitime will help employees to deal with their stress and be more focused and conscious of their work, resulting in higher levels of productivity, creativity and goal attainment.

*Hypothesis 1:* There is a significant difference in the level of employee perceptions on flexitime varying in biographical profiles (age, gender, marital status, job category, academic qualification and years in company) respectively (Table 2 and Table 3).

**Table 2.** Analysis of variance: Difference in flexitime based on biographical profiles

Biographical profiles	Benefits of flexitime		Flexible work practice		Drawbacks of flexitime	
	F	p	F	p	F	P
Age	0.84	0.477	1.09	0.356	1.71	0.171
Marital status	1.18	0.321	1.67	0.178	0.35	0.792
Job category	7.23	0.001**	3.23	0.044*	1.3	0.277
Academic qualification	1.02	0.402	0.37	0.828	3.42	0.012*
Years in company	1.02	0.403	0.86	0.494	1.2	0.316

\*\*p<0.01

\*p<0.05

Table 2 indicates that there is a significant difference in the benefits of flexitime sub-dimensions amongst employees varying in job category, at the 1% level of significance. In order to determine where these differences lie, the post hoc Scheffe's test was conducted (Table 3).

Table 2 indicates that there is a significant difference in the flexible work practice sub-dimension amongst

employees varying in job category at the 5% level of significance. Furthermore, there is a significant difference in the drawbacks sub-dimension of flexitime amongst employees varying in academic qualification at the 5% level of significance. In order to determine exactly where the differences lie, the post hoc Scheffe's test was conducted (Table.3).

**Table 3.** Post Hoc Scheffe's Test: Job Category, and Academic qualifications

<b>Sub-dimensions of flexitime</b>	<b>Job category</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Standard deviation</b>
Benefits of flexitime	Manager	4.867	0.231
	Supervisor	4.160	0.645
	Employee	3.521	0.781
Flexible work practice	Manager	4.733	0.306
	Supervisor	4.020	0.945
	Employee	3.686	0.773
<b>Sub-dimensions of flexitime</b>	<b>Academic qualifications</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Standard deviation</b>
Drawbacks of flexitime	Std 8-10	2.844	0.477
	Diploma/Certificate	2.977	0.656
	Undergraduate	2.918	0.435
	Postgraduate degree	3.193	0.599

Table 3 indicates that managers with the highest mean score in this organisation, perceived the benefits of flexitime positively, followed by the supervisors, whereas employees with a low mean score have some reservations and do not view the benefits of flexitime with great expectations as managers and supervisors.

Table 3 indicates that managers followed by supervisors support flexible work practice positively, whereas employees with a low mean score, were the least concerned and do not perceive flexible work practices positively as managers and supervisors.

Table 3 indicates that the administrative employees with postgraduate qualification have reservations as they have the highest level of drawbacks of flexitime. Employees with Standard 8-10 have the least level of drawbacks with the introduction of flexitime in this organisation.

Table 2 indicates that the other biographical variables (age, marital status and years in the company) did not influence employee perceptions of flexitime (benefits of flexitime, flexible work practices and drawbacks), respectively.

**Table 4.** t-test: Benefits, flexible work practices and drawbacks of flexitime based on gender

<b>Biographical profiles</b>	<b>Benefits of flexitime</b>		<b>Flexible work practice</b>		<b>Drawbacks</b>	
	t	P	t	p	t	P
Gender	0.296	0.768	1.147	0.254	1.670	0.098

The results presented in Table 4 indicate that gender did not impact on the sub-dimensions of flexitime (benefits, flexible work practice and drawbacks) respectively.

*Hypothesis2:* There is a significant difference in the level of employee perceptions on employee stress varying in

biographical profile (age, gender, marital status, academic qualification, job category and years in the company) (Table 5).

**Table 5.** Analysis of variance: Differences in stress based on biographical profile

<b>Biographical profiles</b>	<b>Stress reduction</b>		<b>Work/life balance</b>		<b>Employee commitment</b>	
	F	p	F	p	F	p
Age	0.55	0.6513	1.03	0.385	1.43	0.240
Marital status	0.85	0.469	0.26	0.855	1.67	0.179
Job category	0.39	0.677	0.46	0.633	2.64	0.076
Academic qualification	0.94	0.443	0.49	0.740	0.9	0.467
Years in company	0.52	0.718	0.21	0.931	0.7	0.596

The results presented in Table 5 indicate that there is no significant difference in the sub-dimensions of employee stress (stress reduction, work/life balance and employee

commitment based on biographical profiles (age, marital status, academic qualification, job category and years in the company) respectively.

**Table 6.** t-test: Stress reduction, work/life balance and employee commitment based on gender

<b>Biographical profile</b>	<b>Stress reduction</b>		<b>Work/life balance</b>		<b>Employee commitment</b>	
	t	p	t	p	t	P
Gender	0.863	0.390	0.681	0.497	-0.855	0.395

Table 6 indicates that there is no significant difference in the stress reduction, work/life and employee commitment sub-dimensions of employee stress varying in gender.

**Table 7.** Reliability: Flexitime

Cronbach's Coefficient Alpha
<b>0.850</b>

Table 7 indicates that the items in the Flexitime questionnaire have internal consistency and are reliable.

**Table 8.** Reliability: Employee Stress

Cronbach's Coefficient Alpha
<b>0.890</b>

Table 8 indicates that the items in the Stress questionnaire have internal consistency and are very reliable.

**Interpretation and Recommendations**

The purpose of this study was to determine the biographical influences on flexitime and employee stress in an educational institution. Significant differences have emerged with the biographical factors of job category and academic qualifications and all the sub variables (benefits of flexitime, flexible work practice, drawbacks of flexitime) of flexitime. Reilly (2001) maintains that flexibility benefits employees by enabling them to acquire more skills. Yet, Ridgley et al. (2005) posit that flexitime is trusted by employees as they have some control over their working conditions. More importantly, their stress levels are reduced, morale is increased, they feel more valued, and are likely to be more supportive of their organisation.

Furthermore, managers perceived both, the benefits of flexitime and flexible work practices more positively than supervisors and employees. If managers are supportive of flexitime and stress reduction, organizations should not waste time instituting flexitime. According to Stennett (1994, cited in Brien & Hayden, 2008) 90 percent of supervisors (both male and female) think that flexitime may have a negative influence on their career progression. To overcome career challenges or negative consequences, there is a need to concentrate on work achievement and not just workplace presence.

Other studies have found a relationship between the sub-dimensions of flexitime with gender. Casner-Lotto (2000, cited in Sylvia, 2009) comments on Ernst and Young' strategy on how they saved an estimate of \$17 million in turnover-related costs between 1997 and 1998, with the adoption of flexible working arrangements. It improved their retention rates, particularly among women, as about 65 percent of employees who were working flexibly had initially considered leaving the company earlier in the year.

The study indicates that the higher employee qualifications are, the higher the level of drawbacks with flexitime, which is contrary to the lowest

qualifications, that is standard 8-10 and the drawbacks of flexitime. Also, employees can upskill themselves with education and training to liaise with competitors and customers more effectively. For this reason, organisations should recognise the need for flexible working, and for a good return on investment. Other biographical factors (age, marital status and number of years) in the company) were not significant and influential. Furthermore, significant differences emerge in the sub-dimensions of the benefits of flexitime and flexible work practices amongst employees in the different job categories. Also, gender did not impact on the benefits of flexitime, flexible work practice and drawbacks of flexitime.

There was no significant difference in stress reduction, work/life balance and employee commitment based on biographical profiles in this organisation. This study did not indicate that any of the biographical variables (age, gender, marital status, academic qualification, job category and years in the company) have an influence on employee stress. However, other researchers did find a correlation between specific biographical variables and stress. Sulsky & Smith (2005) state that gender stands for a person difference, which can differentiate how persons observe and react to stress. In addition, males and females are trained to act in a different way and to have dissimilar outlook in life, resultant in the two sexes experiencing stress dissimilarly. Women tend to increase psychological stress reactions such as hopelessness and exhaustion; whereas men tend to increase physiological stress reactions, such as high blood pressure, heart illness and diabetes. In this study, a significant number of respondents revealed their support for stress reduction.

**Conclusion**

The aim of the study was to determine the biographical influences on flexitime and stress. Stress is an indicator of employee well being as it contributes to turnover. Stress reduction leads to other beneficial outcomes for both the employee and the

organization. The results provide guidelines for the future, and both flexitime and stress should be considered as strategic issues in an organization. Managers need to be proactive and ensure that employees remain with the organization, be productive and perform optimally in a supportive work environment. Of importance, the employer-employee relations and trust are critical factors in any organization. Globally, organizations are following the trend of creating a climate which is characterized by employees' freedom to choose their working hours.

### Recommendations for future research

Future research, with a larger sample may result in significant findings. In this light, significant results may surface with the remaining biographical influences on flexitime and stress reduction. Professional employees and employees other than administrative should be surveyed and explored at different institutions.

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