Job redesign: The missing link to improved work-life balance

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ABSTRACT

Strategies for improving work-life balance have traditionally related to changes to work scheduling and location of work. In this paper we argue that a missing approach is to examine the design of jobs and how they can be improved for better work-life balance. Interview data is presented in this paper which shows that even employees who are currently using flexible work arrangements, in an organisation which is very supportive of work-life balance initiatives, are hesitant to make changes to the way in which they do their job – beyond aspects of timing and location. We argue that a new research and practice agenda needs to develop which integrates job redesign into work-life balance strategies.

Key words: work-life balance, job design, flexible work

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Work-life balance has been shown to be important for both individual and organisational well-being. Work flexibility has long been established as a way for improving work-life balance. However, one issue which has received little attention is job redesign in association with work flexibility improvements, in order to improve work-life balance. This paper will introduce the importance of considering redesigning jobs to provide greater work-life balance. Interview data will be presented which demonstrates that people using flexible work arrangements are hesitant to include redesign in their jobs to allow greater flexibility. This seems to be because they feel that would mean they were not adequately doing their jobs. However, we will argue that job redesign is one very important aspect that should be receiving greater consideration, and would greatly improve outcomes for both organisations and individuals.

The importance of flexible work arrangements for greater work-life balance

Work-life balance is defined as a satisfactory level of involvement or “fit” between the multiple roles in one person’s life. Although definitions and explanations vary across sources, work-life balance is generally associated with equilibrium, or maintaining an overall sense of harmony in life (Clarke, Koch & Hill, 2004). The examination of work-life balance involves the investigation of people’s ability to manage the demands from various domains in their life (e.g., Hill, Hawkins, Ferris & Weitzman, 2001; Marks, Huston, Johnson & MacDermid, 2001; Tausig & Fenwick, 2001).

Although work-life balance has traditionally been assumed to involve equal amounts of time given to paid work and non-work roles, more recently, the concept has been recognised as being more complex and developed to incorporate a number of different components. A recent study which explored three aspects of work-life balance measured: 1) time balance, which involves the amount of time devoted to work and non-work roles; 2) involvement balance, meaning the level of psychological involvement in, or commitment to work and non-
work roles; and 3) satisfaction balance, or the level of satisfaction with work and non-work roles (Greenhaus, Collins & Shaw, 2003). This is a much more useful conceptualisation of the issue of balance in relation to work and non-work roles.

**Conflict – an absence of balance**

The balance between work and life is considered to be in conflict when the role pressures from one domain make it more difficult to comply with the demands of the other roles (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985). What this means for an individual is that if they do not feel they have what for them is a ‘good’ mix and integration of their work and non-work roles, they may experience negative or conflictual outcomes (Frone, Russell & Barnes, 1996; Frone, Yardley & Markel, 1997). Work can interfere with non-work responsibilities (work-life conflict) and non-work aspects of life can interfere with the work domain (life-work conflict).

Employees who experience increased levels of stress due to work and life conflict, and have decreased perceptions of control over their work and non-work demands, are less productive, less committed to, and less satisfied with their organisation and more likely to be absent or leave the organisation (Adams, King, & King, 1996; Boles, Howard & Donofrio, 2001; Frye & Breaugh, 2004).

Much research has shown the benefits to organisations from having good work-life balance arrangements. The established link between the provision of flexible work options and reduction in turnover (Capelli, 2000; Nord, Fox, Phoenix, & Viano, 2002) means that the work-life balance agenda is now a strategic human resource issue. Organisational environments which support employees’ work-life balance have been found to improve organisational commitment (Allen, 2001). Closely related to organisational commitment, job satisfaction has also been shown to increase with the utilisation of work-life balance strategies (Bedeian, Burke & Moffett, 1988). Studies have also found that the provision of alternative work practices may benefit organisations by reducing absenteeism (e.g. Baltes, Briggs, Huff, Wright & Neuman, 1999). It is therefore well established that improving work-life balance
has good individual and organisational outcomes. We will now discuss the traditional approaches to improving work-life balance, and job redesign as the missing link.

**Job design.**

Almost all of the approaches to work-life balance arrangements focus on flexibility in terms of scheduling, or flexibility in terms of where the work is carried out. The most common flexible arrangements include working reduced hours per week, flexitime, job sharing and telecommuting. These all rely on greater control over timing or location. But this only addresses the timing dimension of achieving good work-life balance. The one study that we could find which examined job design and work-life balance still discussed it in terms of scheduling. Brewer (2000) writes about the importance of place, distance and time. She believes that changing managerial assumptions about these issues is at the heart of using work redesign to better enable flexible work scheduling. This goes someway toward examining work redesign for greater flexibility, but it is still constrained to the issue of scheduling, not job redesign more broadly. We propose that a focus on other dimensions of job redesign as well, will make work flexibility easier, resulting in the potential for better work-life balance.

Our study aims to investigate the current ways in which people who are using flexible work arrangements make changes to their jobs beyond timing, and location. We propose that the people at the frontline have an important perspective on how changes can be made to successfully manage a good balance between their work and non-work lives. The following two research questions are proposed:

**RQ1:** What types of changes are people making to their jobs when they utilise flexible work arrangements?

It is expected that the main type of change that people currently use will be ones based on timing and location – that is, when and where they work.

**RQ2:** What aspects of the job could be changed to improve work and life outcomes?

It is expected that the people currently using flexible work practices will be able to identify job redesign approaches that they have either already made, or can suggest would be useful.
METHOD

Sample
The participating organisation was a government department. Interviews were conducted with 22 employees (13 women, 9 men) who were utilising available work-life policies under a formal agreement (10 part-time; 6 job-sharing; 6 telecommuting). These categories of alternative / flexible work arrangements were chosen to reflect substantial accommodations to work for the purpose of balancing non-work commitments rather than simply flexible start and finish times (‘flexitime’). The range of primary reasons given for working alternative arrangements were rather broad and included responsibility for dependent children (13), elder care (1), tertiary study (4), personal ill-health (1) and general lifestyle reasons (3). The sample was aged between 25 and 67 (mean 39.5 years) and had worked for the organization between two and 22 years. Fourteen respondents had tertiary-level education.

Procedure
In order to select the sample, the human resource data group ran a report on staff employed in the relevant flexible work option categories (part-time, job share and formal work from home categories). The report included 105 staff. Of these, 14 were in the part-time category, 15 in the job share category and 76 in the formal work from home category. Although we attempted to include both blue and white collar workers in the sample, only two individuals from the initial list of 105 were blue collar staff. One was about to leave the organization and the other worked in a location that was too logistically difficult to access for an in-depth interview. Therefore, the findings are based on staff employed only in a white-collar capacity. The final group of 22 who agreed to be interviewed was chosen on the basis of categories that reflected as broad a range of experiences and perceptions of alternative work arrangements as possible. We interviewed each person in their place of work, or at a convenient location. Permission to record and transcribe the interviews was sought during the initial contact. Interviews lasted approximately 30 – 45 minutes.
Interviews

The interviews asked questions about people’s current experiences with flexible work arrangements, as well as suggestions for improvements. Questions included: “In what ways have you changed the way you do your job since before you moved to flexible working conditions? (probe for changes to method rather than timing)” and “How do you believe your job could be further changed to help you pursue flexibility, while still meeting the organisations needs?”

RESULTS and DISCUSSION

The two research questions related to the identification of changes employees had already made to how they did their job, and suggestions for further improvement. However, the strongest finding that came through was that people were extremely reluctant to report that they had made any changes, other than to timing or location. No matter how we asked the questions, or approached the topic, we were generally met with a hesitance to report any changes. Interview respondents indicated that they changed very little about how they do their jobs when they started using a flexible work arrangement.

“I don’t do anything differently – I’m just not in the office one day”

(Telecommuter)

As had been expected, the changes identified related only to changes to when and where people conducted their work. Little had been changed in relation to how jobs were performed. We had expected that people who are using flexible work arrangements would be ideally placed to identify changes that could be made to their jobs to better enable them to do their jobs efficiently, and to allow better work-life balance. Through our interviewing process however, it fairly quickly became obvious that these people were not going to identify changes they had made in their job. Probing and examples led to some respondents reporting minor changes they had made. These included

“I suppose that the major difference is that I prepare myself when I come in to work for the days I will be at home. Maybe I’ll be printing out some work and sending stuff I’ve
been doing from home in here (the workplace) so as I can be organised for getting copies of it...I don’t have a printer at home”

(telecommuter)

They seemed to feel that because the organisation was letting them have this flexibility, the least they should do is their job in the same way. When probing a respondent’s statement that they had made no changes, the interviewer repeated that “the job wasn’t changed in anyway to allow you to work flexibly within it?” and the respondent replied

“No, and I don’t think it should be either”

(part-time worker)

They felt that if they changed the manner in which they did their actual tasks, or the way they structured their tasks, that this would be something the organisation would not like. Because they believed the organisation was doing the right thing by them, they didn’t want to do what they considered to be the wrong thing by the organisation. This needs to be considered in the context of Australian organisations. De Cieri, Holmes, Abbott and Pettit (2005) investigated the extent of work life balance strategy utilisation in Australia and found that 50% of organisations have less than 20% using the available strategies. This may be a contributor to why these staff feel ‘privileged’ in being given the opportunity, as many Australian workers are NOT using flexible work arrangements.

Brewer writes about the problem of ‘presenteeism’ as one of the barriers to work redesign. This is the belief that people’s physical presence in the workplace is of paramount importance. It seems that employees who are not doing this, feel that they in some way they are indebted to the organisation. Brewer also identifies power structures as an important issue for changing work practices. Again, in the current research, it may be that employees feel they have already changed the power balance enough by changing when or where they work, so they feel they had better not ‘push their luck’ by trying to take even more power over their work life.
It became apparent that a very strong theme in the interviews was the sense of gratitude that many respondents felt and reported. Even though they worked in an organisation where the policies and practices of flexible work arrangements were legislated and available to all organisational members, most reported that they were lucky to be able to work flexibly. This gratitude seemed to relate to an attitude of not changing how they do their job, as this would be a bad thing.

This is a very interesting and somewhat unexpected finding. The belief that changing how they did their work would only benefit them individually and not the organisation as well is an attitude we believe should be challenged. The job redesign literature is based on changing jobs to benefit both individuals and the organisation. Parker, Wall and Cordery (2001) review the job design literature and discuss how many changes in organisations today still make job design an important issue. The changes they identify included: greater numbers of ‘knowledge workers’; a greater need for organisational flexibility; developments in information technology; and the composition of the workforce. Improving work-life balance is established as an important and worthwhile endeavour for both individuals and the organisation. To date, most of the research and practice has focussed on the timing and location issues, and the findings from the current research support this emphasis. However, these changes can only take things so far. To make more substantial improvements it may be useful to redesign how the work itself is actually conducted, or change the distribution of tasks between jobs. These changes can contribute directly to improved work life balance in two ways. The first is that the work may be designed more efficiently, so balancing work and non-work aspects of life becomes easier. The second aspect is that jobs that are redesigned well should become more meaningful to the person conducting the job. When someone finds their work more meaningful, they are likely to be more engaged with it, get more enjoyment from it, and have better work and life outcomes.
This type of change would actually allow the improvement of all three aspects of work-life balance suggested by Greenhaus et al. (2003). If the work is performed more efficiently, then there is more available time, which is the first element. If the work becomes more meaningful, then both involvement and satisfaction with the work should improve, which are the other two elements of work life balance.

In conclusion these results show that job redesign can play an important role in providing greater flexibility for improved work-life balance, but that this agenda needs to be much further developed. Currently, employees are indicating that they are hesitant to contemplate job redesign, so this emphasis is going to need to come from employers and managers. Further research is needed for how this may best be accomplished; however, we suggest that human resource management researchers and partitioners are crucial to developing improvements in this area.
References


