



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Workplace Flexibility and Worker Agency

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Introduction

Our discussion of work-family flexibility is based on work-family research at a mid-sized factory that we call “Sylvania.” For more than two years, a research team interviewed employees, reviewed documents, and engaged in participant observation at this Midwestern auto-parts plant. Our goal was to understand a range of issues related to how workers thought about and dealt with their work, their family and community situation, and the conflicts experienced in meeting family obligations in the face of the demands of the workplace. A key part of our efforts was to explore and document how workers sought work-family balance in a setting characterized by team-based operations, shift work, and challenging production quotas. Hence, this paper is not about the experiences of manufacturing workers per se, but rather about workers whose time at work, and the timing of that work, is directly managed if not uniformly observed.

“Worker agency” refers to the capacity of workers to informally arrange their work schedules – sometimes (but not always) with the support of managers, and often (but not always) with the support and assistance of co-workers – in order to tend to family obligations and interests that conflict with work schedules. In the course of our interviewing, we found that “worker agency” was a major part of dealing with work-family conflict. When flexibility wasn’t built into the workplace, workers developed informal coping mechanisms to meet pressing family obligations.

Findings

Because of the nature of the production process, which included assembly lines, work teams, coverage demands, and high production targets, we were particularly struck by the challenges involved in getting short-term time off. Short-term flexibility is particularly problematic for lower-status workers. Managers and professionals tend to have greater control of their time, in the sense that although they may work long hours, they more often can flex their time. In contrast, workers in line positions and with coverage responsibility – whether in manufacturing or service jobs – have particular challenges. (Baltes, et. al, 1999). Hence, short term flexibility is more than a minor inconvenience in these work sites. To the contrary, it is a source of considerable disruption to the productive process itself.

The reliance upon co-workers to assist in the informal implementation of worker flexibility is rooted in the culture of the workplace. In explaining that culture, many workers said that the plant maintained a “family” atmosphere. Co-workers would simply work out a way to cover for someone who wanted to slip out briefly to make an appearance at a child’s event.

The coping mechanisms described – expressions of worker agency – suggest different levels of legitimacy and control. Having the cooperation of a supportive supervisor, even when it involves going against formal rules, tends to be the least disruptive to the operations of the organization. Although it may go against formal rules, it acknowledges the authority of the supervisor and, presumably, the

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involvement of the supervisor ensures that such actions are not excessively disruptive in terms of the work that needs to be done.

Creating flexibility by getting co-workers to help “cover” during an absence has less management control and a greater potential for disruption in the workplace. It also may reinforce a sense of competitiveness between the worker group and managers. The third method discussed – workers taking independent actions, possibly in direct defiance of the rules – has the least legitimacy within the workplace and has the potential to be severely disruptive.

We highlight both the impact that constraints place upon a certain sector of workers in their effort to manage the tenuous balance of work-family obligations and how a lack of workplace flexibility can result in individual and group responses that can have negative impacts on the workplace. Workers in an inflexible environment will seek to create their own flexibility when pressured by competing obligations.

Conclusion: Implications for Work-Family Policy/Practice

Our research suggests that worker agency should be an important part of consideration of policies and practices concerning workplace flexibility and work-family balance, more generally. Management has a primary responsibility for maintaining an effective workplace. However, attempts at control can be thwarted when they do not give adequate attention to the real pressures facing workers and the pressures on workers to actively seek ways to meet competing demands of work and family. How employers deal with these issues can go a long way toward influencing the positive dimensions of worker agency – commitment to the job, loyalty, and willingness to take initiatives beyond the basic requirements of the job. Consequently, efforts that target the kind of middle-level management that directly supervises employees may help meet the goals of developing worker commitments to productivity while enhancing the capacity of workers to meet family obligations and needs.