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Addressing the implementation gap in flexiwork policies: the case of part-time work in Singapore

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This article addresses the implementation gap in the provision of work–life policies in Singapore. While both employers and government in principle endorse the ideology of flexibility in the work place, this has not yet translated into widely adopted policies. This study examines barriers and facilitators to part-time work, and highlights organisational and managerial factors contributing to the implementation gap. It is imperative in ageing societies with declining fertility rates that flexibility be mainstreamed to encourage optimum labour force participation. For both married women with childcare responsibilities and older adults, flexiwork is central to their continued economic participation. In particular, part-time work enables mothers to meaningfully integrate work and family responsibilities, and allows older adults to reap the benefits of economic engagement post-retirement.

Keywords: flexible work, middle management, organisational culture, part-time work, performance evaluation systems

Key points
1 Organisational culture is a key factor in addressing the implementation gap in the provision of work–life policies.
2 There has been little attempt to normalise and formalise flexiwork so that there are clear channels for application, approval and assessment.
3 Flexiwork (in this case, part-time work) comes at significant personal costs to employees, particularly in terms of remuneration and career advancement.

Introduction

Developed in the euro-American context, the concept of a 'flexible work arrangement' (FWA) is a ubiquitous term that seems to resonate well in ultra-capitalist societies where new paradigms are needed to facilitate commitment to the multiple work–life

responsibilities of employees (McDonald 2005). While the ideal of flexiwork seems sensible and appealing, the take-up data reflects a different appreciation on the ground (Williams, Blair-Loy, and Berdahl 2013). In small city-states with tight labour markets like Singapore, FWAs must be mainstreamed to maximise labour force participation (Singapore Ministry of Manpower 1999). Through an in-depth examination of the implementation gap in flexiwork policies, this study addresses why Singapore employees are not taking up flexiwork options encouraged by the state and offered by organisations. This study identifies several intra-organisational factors explaining why flexiwork policies have not translated into feasible options for employees.

Flexiwork arrangements include flexibility in the various dimensions of the conduct of work, be it workplace (teleworking or home-based work), work hours (flexible start-stop, compressed work week or annualised hours), or workload (part-time or job-sharing; Liddicoat 2003; Timms et al. 2015). Research highlights numerous benefits of FWAs for employees, families and business organisations. FWAs have been attributed to improved productivity, talent retention and employee engagement (Casey and Chase 2008; Solomon and Temple 1993). FWAs have also advanced work–life balance, especially for working mothers (Skinner et al. 2014; Sullivan and Lewis 2001).

The significance of flexiwork in a small city-state like Singapore is accentuated by a sustained below-replacement fertility rate and a fast-ageing society (Singapore Department of Statistics 2014). Tight labour conditions pushed the government to introduce several policies to address the labour constraints. Noteworthy are initiatives that encouraged mothers and retirees to return to the workplace. A host of pro-family policies leveraged on tax incentives to encourage married women with children to stay economically active (Hey Baby 2013; Singapore National Population and Talent Division 2013). The 2012 Retirement and Re-Employment Act required employers to offer re-employment to eligible employees who reached the statutory minimum retirement age (Singapore Ministry of Manpower 2014c). For both married women with domestic responsibilities and older adults, FWAs are central to their re-entry into the labour force. Yet, despite strong state-sponsored initiatives to promote part-time work and other FWAs, the take-up rate remains low.

A popular FWA for parents with childcare responsibilities as well as post-retirement adults who seek extended employment is part-time work. This paper draws on in-depth interview data with Singapore employees who successfully negotiated for part-time work to examine the complexities involved in implementing flexiwork arrangements. While the structural impediments to flexiwork within and across organisations are well known, it is less clear how individual employees negotiate FWAs with their supervisors and co-workers. This paper seeks to address the perceived social and organisational cultural barriers that impede the take-up of part-time work as a flexiwork option.

Flexiwork in Singapore
Research on flexiwork options in Singapore is significant for two main reasons. First, given the demographic constraints, flexiwork is key to maximising labour capital potential

in the resource-scarce nation-state (Singapore Ministry of Manpower 1999). While FWAs are highlighted as important, employers are not mandated by legislation to provide flexiwork options. FWAs remain options that have to be negotiated between employees and employers (Ryan and Kossek 2008). Second, the prevalent work culture continues to privilege a traditional model of overinvestment in face time, which renders a debunking of outdated ideals of work critical for effective translation of flexiwork practices (Lawrence and Corwin 2003). Until recently, employers have not felt a labour crunch because of augmentation from lower cost foreign labour from the region. As a result, there has been insufficient attention paid to enabling FWAs. However, as the government moves to tighten the inflow of foreign labour (Woo 2014), FWAs will be increasingly important for attracting and retaining human resources.

Part-time work is consistently cited as a desirable option to facilitate work–life balance and enhance the employability of parents with childcare responsibilities and older workers, two major demographic groups highlighted in this study (Feldman 1990; Hill et al. 2004). The provision of part-time work in Singapore has continued to trend upwards over the past decade, up from 20.1% in 2007 to 36% in 2014, making it the most prevalent FWA (Singapore Ministry of Manpower 2014a). While these figures are encouraging, Chiu, So, and Tam (2008) found that Singapore employees utilise part-time work options less commonly than their counterparts in western and Asian advanced economies. In 2004, part-timers accounted for only 4.5% of the Singapore workforce, compared to 25.4% in the UK, 18% in the US, 14.2% in Japan, and 13.3% in Hong Kong (Chiu, So, and Tam 2008). The incidence of part-time workers in Singapore varies widely across industries (Singapore Ministry of Manpower 2014b), reflecting differing business and organisational needs and supporting findings elsewhere (e.g., Higgins, Duxbury, and Johnson 2000) that managerial and professional work remains largely the territory of the full-time working class.

Singapore is one of the fastest ageing nations with a sustained low fertility rate that has been below the replacement level of 2.1 since the late 1970s (Straughan, Chan, and Jones 2008). The proportion aged 65 years and older rose from 3.4% in 1970 to 11.2% in 2014 (Singapore Department of Statistics 2014), and would have been even larger if not for inflow of economically active immigrants. In light of Singapore's rapidly greying population, the state recognises the importance of supporting lifelong employability among other measures to prepare for the challenges of an ageing society. In January 2011, changes were made to the Retirement and Re-employment Act in order to allow older Singaporeans to continue working beyond the statutory retirement age of 62. Under the new legislation, elderly Singaporeans may opt to be re-contracted as part-time workers (Singapore Ministry of Manpower 2014c). This renders the mainstreaming of FWAs an important agenda under the new legislation for those post-65 years who may want to stay economically active.

A second group which appreciates flexiwork options is married women with family commitments. Of the 418 000 residents aged 25–64 years who are economically inactive, 336 000 are women (Employer Alliance (EA) 2013). To promote the adoption of FWAs,

the government and the Singapore National Employers Federation jointly established the Employer Alliance on Work and Family (EA). As part of its mission to promote better work–life integration, EA conducted several noteworthy projects that constitute an important part of the knowledge base on flexiwork in Singapore. The projects showcased the relevance of FWAs in small and medium enterprises and the role of supportive management in raising awareness of FWAs for older employees (EA 2008, 2010). Organisations with a culture of teamwork and trust, and which viewed human resource as strategic capital (as oppose to an operational expense) were more favourably inclined to adopt flexiwork options (EA 2009).

Two important government initiatives to raise uptake rates of work–life policies merit mention. The first, Flexi-Works!, administered by the Singapore Workforce Development Agency in partnership with the National Trade Union Congress (NTUC), helps companies hire new workers on part-time or other FWAs. The second, WoW! Fund, helps to defray costs incurred by organisations while introducing work–life measures (for details, see Singapore Ministry of Manpower 2013a, b). Despite the strong support from the government for mainstreaming FWAs, there is very low take-up both from employers and employees (Boon 2014; Enterprise One 2013; Singapore Ministry of Manpower 2008; Yahya and Tan 2014). It is important that we understand the barriers that continue to render part-time work a less attractive option for those seeking a better work–life balance.

Addressing the implementation gap
Although the benefits of flexiwork are widely agreed upon, the take-up rate is low in most organisations (McDonald 2005). In Singapore, the proportion of private sector flexiworkers in 2008 was only 7.4% (Singapore Ministry of Manpower 2008). While some reports suggest that more companies are offering flexiwork options (Half 2012), the perception of employees on the ground seem to indicate otherwise. A poll released by the NTUC in Singapore revealed that, of 5720 respondents, a majority of employees did not enjoy flexiwork options at their workplace (Enterprise One 2013).

The literature which addresses the implementation gap is structured around three intra-organisational themes. The first theme is centred on the effects of organisational culture on the implementation of pro work–life balance policies (Callan 2007; Timms et al. 2015). The second highlights the role of managers as 'gate-keepers' who appraise employees' requests for FWAs (Rigby and O'Brien-Smith 2010; Thompson, Brough, and Schmidt 2006). The final theme emphasises the critical impact of performance appraisal systems and the direct and indirect messages these send on how the organisation views work–life integration (Levy and Williams 2004; Spence and Keeping 2011). It will be argued that the three dimensions of organisational culture discussed below may be a useful way of addressing the implementation gap within and across organisations.

The role of organisational culture
Callan (2007) detailed the layers of constraints within organisations that prevent a smooth implementation of effective work–life policies. These include unyielding middle

management who act as watchdogs for traditional expectations, imageries of the 'ideal worker' that permeate throughout the organisation, and organisational history that dictate which methodologies must be adopted for successful translation of work–life policies. As organisational culture and HR policies are shaped primarily by upper-middle class employees with strong family support, the voices of other family types (working-class employees, dual-income employees with childcare and eldercare responsibilities) have been sorely underrepresented (Callan 2007). Lewis (1997) observed that organisational responses to employees' family needs are constructed as benefits rather than rights, leaving employees feeling ambivalent about their flexiwork entitlement. Employee requests for FWAs can be perceived by supervisors and co-workers as violating the 'work devotion schema' that defines an ideal worker as one who demonstrates 'undivided and intensive allegiance' to his or her work (Blair-Loy 2003; Williams, Blair-Loy, and Berdahl 2013).

Middle management
Rigby and O'Brien-Smith (2010) reiterated the important role middle management plays and the dilemma the managers face. Typically, middle managers are expected to marry short-term expectations of increased productivity and long-term merits of pro work–life balance policies. As they also have to deal with the year-on-year staff evaluation system, they are inevitably drawn towards fulfilling short-term goals. Similarly, Den Dulk and De Ruijter (2008) observed that managers' attitudes towards flexiwork are dually influenced by disruptiveness and dependency arguments. Managers are concerned that FWAs will disrupt work performance, but they also understand that their employees have non-work commitments that require time and attention.

Performance appraisal systems
The interpretation of what constitutes a committed worker is partly reflected through performance appraisal outcomes (Levy and Williams 2004). Increasingly, research suggests that performance appraisal systems do not necessarily detail employee productivity objectively. Instead, assessors focus on using the appraisal proceeds to motivate and reward subordinates (Longenecker, Sims, and Gioia 1987; Spence and Keeping 2011). As employee well-being is much affected by the outcomes of appraisal systems, it is important to ascertain that the annual appraisal tool used is valid, reliable, fair and indicative of work done by the employee.

Much of the research on organisational culture and the implementation gap (like those discussed above) was conducted in the western cultural context. The topic has been has been understudied in Singapore, though organisations such as EA have made inroads in recent years. The prevalence of traditional work patterns (8 am–6 pm × 5 days every week), significance of face time, and the expectation of overtime continue to cast suspicion on non-conventional work patterns in Singapore (EA 2011, 2013), as observed elsewhere (Lawrence and Corwin 2003; Williams, Blair-Loy, and Berdahl 2013). Researchers comparing the organisational cultures of Singapore and the West have identified several dimensions shaping respective cultures, including levels of hierarchy, individualism–

collectivism, and power-distance (Hofstede 2001; Schwartz 2004). Thus, the authors concurred that elements of organisational culture in the West may be salient in the Singapore context, but hypothesised differences in the nature and degree. As the professionalisation of part-time work has yet to be entrenched in Singapore organisational culture, there is likely to be a gap between expectations of part-time employees (which will likely find congruence with that expressed by their counterparts in western cultures) and experiences particularly in areas of perceived recognition of their contributions. And given the adversity to overt confrontation in the Asian cultural context, many will choose to protest by staying within full-time employment, albeit experiencing stressors from their personal lives due to negligence of non-work commitments. This may explain the low take-up rate for part-time work and the constant struggle with below-optimum productivity in many sectors (Toh 2016).

New framework to address the implementation gap
After a careful review of the literature, we propose that a critical knowledge gap in the analysis of work–life integration is the dissonance between formal adoption of flexiwork policies and implementation of these policies. This study advances a new theoretical framework that outlines three distinctive intra-organisational factors that offers explanatory power for the implementation gap in flexiwork policies: organisational culture which determines the prescribed ideals of work and worker, the role of middle management in translating organisational norms and expectations, and performance appraisal systems that reinforce what type of work is valued (EA 2011, 2013). Whether FWAs are implemented depends on middle management support. Managerial views on flexiwork are contextualised by the prevailing ideologies governing work, commitment to work, and expectations of the ideal worker. Finally, the reward system reinforces significance of the interpretation of work commitment from the perspective of middle management. This framework is used to guide the interview structure for this research.

Method

A purposive sample of 30 respondents who had recently successfully negotiated for part-time work status was selected (see Table 1). Sampling was driven by the focus to include information-rich cases who had first-hand experience with negotiating flexiwork arrangements (MacFarlane and O'Reilly-de Brun 2012; Patton 1990). The sample comprised a diverse group of professionals who were chosen because they were in positions of influence in their workplace and yet still faced difficulties in their transition from full-time to part-time work status. A variety of industries were represented, including healthcare ($n = 9$), sales and customer service ($n = 6$), banking and finance ($n = 5$), research and education ($n = 5$), and other services ranging from security to food and beverage ($n = 5$). A subset of our sample held middle ($n = 3$) and upper management ($n = 2$) positions. Most in this group stepped back from full-time work because of family care responsibilities. We also included older adults who wished to reduce work pressures and

Table 1 Summary profile of respondents

Respondent	Job title	Sex	Age	Marital status, children, no. and age
R1	Deputy director	F	36–40	Married, 1 child aged 7
R2	Manager	F	46–50	Married, 3 children aged 18, 15, 14
R3	Founding partner of medical clinic	M	66–70	Married, 2 children aged 39 and 43
R4	Senior clinical psychologist	F	36–40	Married, 3 children aged 7, 4, 2
R5	Administrative manager	M	61–65	Married, 1 child aged 37
R6	Investment director	M	46–50	Married, 2 children aged 18 and 16
R7	Environment service associate	M	61–65	Married, 1 child aged 34
R8	Senior security supervisor	M	66–70	Married, 4 children
R9	Chef	M	61–65	Married, 1 child aged 25
R10	Senior assistant nurse	F	56–60	Married, 1 child aged 26
R11	Deputy director	F	51–55	Married, 2 children aged 19 and 15
R12	Banker	M	41–45	Married, 3 children aged 10, 8, 4
R13	HR manager	M	31–35	Married, 2 children aged 5 and 2
R14	Accountant	F	66–70	Single, no children
R15	Sales consultant	F	46–50	Married, 2 children aged 17 and 14
R16	Patient information associate	F	51–55	Married, 1 child aged 24
R17	Senior clinical psychologist	F	36–40	Married, 1 child aged 6
R18	Senior staff nurse	F	46–50	Married, 2 children aged 11 and 7
R19	Staff nurse	F	31–35	Married, twins aged 7
R20	Customer service assistant	F	66–70	Widowed, 3 children
R21	Customer service assistant	M	61–65	Married, 2 children aged 37 and 33
R22	Administrator	F	56–60	Married, 3 children aged 27, 23, 19
R23	Administrator	F	21–25	Single, no children
R24	Partner at business consultancy firm	F	41–45	Married, 1 child aged 5
R25	Senior research officer	F	31–35	Single, no children
R26	Social worker	F	41–45	Married, 2 children aged 12 and 10
R27	Sales consultant	F	51–55	Married, 2 children aged 27 and 23
R28	Executive interviewer	F	56–60	Married, 1 child aged 31
R29	Freelance piano teacher	M	31–35	Married, 2 children aged 5 and 1
R30	Clinic assistant	F	21–25	Single, no children

responsibilities, as well as those who had re-entered the workforce through various rehiring schemes directed at older workers. Recruitment was through the snowball method, and with assistance from organisations that facilitate and promote work–life balance. Care was taken to ensure an equal number of respondents from two age groups – 21 to 54 years old, and 55 years and older. Both men and women were represented in the sample.

To best serve the preliminary, exploratory aims of this study, in-depth one-on-one interviews (which lasted between 1 and 2 hours) were conducted following a semi-

structured interview guide which was designed based on four broad narrative themes derived from an extensive literature review. With the respondents' consent, interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim. Theoretical coding was used as a guiding principle when deciphering the raw data. The interviews were transcribed and the raw data was analysed by a group of four researchers to achieve cross-validation and inter-coder reliability (Elo et al. 2014). Data reduction was accomplished following steps to construct theoretical narratives from the raw text. First, an initial coding scheme was derived following the themes that guided the design of the interview guide (Hsieh and Shannon 2005). Six categories were created and a set of qualitative codes then guided the thematic analysis (see Table 2; Saldana 2013). Relevant text was then highlighted and repeating ideas were recorded by grouping together related passages of relevant text. Content that detracted from the key themes in the interview data as well as verbatim recordings that were non-essential to understanding the central ideas articulated by our respondents were removed.

The two authors proceeded with coding and content analysis through independent readings of interview transcripts and written summaries, engaging in an iterative process of revising and refining the initial coding scheme to include new themes and sub-themes of existing codes, a methodology adopted by other researchers working on emerging social themes (Carolan and Nelson 2007; Johnston and Swanson 2003). Using different colored highlighters representing predetermined codes, themes and sub-themes were identified and grouped together within individual narratives. For example, the sub-theme of 'employee initiative' appeared time and time again in respondents' accounts. Each time this sub-theme was encountered in the transcripts, it was highlighted in red. Later, all text

Table 2 Codes and categories guiding qualitative data analysis

Categories	Examples of codes
Work patterns	Clocking face time; motivation to work; time spent at the office; use of technology; overtime work
Organisational culture	Hiring policies; flexiwork options; promotion of flexiwork; management's view of flexiwork; employee's view of flexiwork; stigmatisation of part-time work; employee initiative; work intensification
Ideals/expectations of work	Responsibilities and deliverables; work–life balance; overtime work; employee commitment; strain on working relationships; flexiwork at personal cost
Role of management	Supervisor trained (to evaluate part-time work); supervisor experienced (with flexiwork); supervisor's awareness of flexiwork options
Performance appraisal systems	Expectations of part-timers; commitment to work; importance of face time; absence of clear performance markers
Respondent's need for flexiwork	Childcare demands; non-work commitments; leisure activities

highlighted in red was moved together onto a separate document for further analysis of thematic relationships. Any text that was not highlighted (i.e. categorised according to the initial coding scheme) was later analysed to determine if it represented a new theme or sub-theme of an existing code (Hsieh and Shannon 2005). For example, the personal costs associated with working part-time were a major finding in this study. In grouping inter-related ideas across interview transcripts and reducing data to its core content, the analysis progressed to increasingly higher levels of abstraction.

Key findings

Why flexiwork?

Our respondents fell into three broad categories. Most wanted more time to take care of young children. Parents, particularly mothers, expressed a desire to be there for the special occasions in their children's lives.

> Flexiwork arrangements definitely help . . . just to be able to attend my daughter's theatre per-formance, or [school-based] festive celebrations. I get to meet my personal needs, and what-ever my daughter needs. If my daughter is sick, I can take her to the doctor. I don't go home feeling tired, overworked, and I get to spend time with my daughter before it's dinnertime, bath time and sleep. (R1, female, age 36–40, deputy director, one child)

> [I went on part-time status] because of my 3 children . . . a mother has to be there for them. And I'm glad that I made the decision, though sometimes there's always a tinge of regret. 10 years ago, I took a step back. I could have been somebody [at work]. But again, because my children are well brought up [I have no regrets]. If I was not there with them these 10 years, it may not have been the case. So I'm just thankful for the decision that I made. (R2, female, age 46–50, manager, three children)

In addition to childcare demands, there were also those who wanted time for them-selves, to meet their aspirations outside of paid work, or just to nurture a hobby or interest.

> You can benefit yourself and the people around you because you have more time. For exam-ple, when your friends have problems [you can help them]. If you're working full-time, every-body is like, 'Don't call me, I'm at work now, I'll get in trouble with my boss'. (R30, female, age 21–25, clinic assistant)

The third group comprised of retired older adults who wanted to remain economically active and engaged. Rather than relax in their retirement, they felt lost without a regular work schedule.

> I've been working for 17 years with the same organisation. Because I don't have young ones or elderly people to look after, I want to keep the work momentum going. I just want to stay relevant to society. . . Yes, [part-time work] it's a huge pay cut. But we are thankful as it keeps us active. Having something to do is very important to keep us active. Or else we will go downhill. (R20, female, age 66–70, customer service assistant, three children)

For female respondents with family responsibilities (be it childcare or eldercare needs) and older retirees, part-time work is considered a more attractive alternative to full-time work or unemployment. The following discussion will show that, regardless of the motivation to seek part-time work, the general sentiments expressed by the respondents suggest that part-time work comes with relatively high personal cost to the individual. There is no framework that guides the negotiation process, and much is dependent on the attitude of the direct supervisor. While there are existing policies that facilitate part-time engagement, there is a lag in terms of normative appreciation of the contribution of part-timers. The findings are elaborated below.

The organisational response to FWAs: the case of part-time work
Even with official policies on flexiwork in place, few organisations have taken a proactive approach towards FWAs. Closing the implementation gap requires organisations to reconceptualise entrenched work processes and view part-time work and other FWAs as key to retaining and attracting workers. As R3 shared, many organisations are still in the early stages of rethinking traditional work arrangements:

> To be honest, we have not really gone into [flexiwork] in great detail. We know that this is one of the things that the government is trying to promote, but I think most employers are not very keen on flexiwork. Because allowing flexiwork means that a lot of arrangements have to be made. You may need somebody, like a manager, who can manage all these things. And you've got to co-ordinate everything. So there has to be a rethink of work altogether. (R3, male, age 66–70, founding partner of medical clinic, two children)

Based on respondents' accounts, FWAs were not openly encouraged or widely endorsed. Across organisations, the push and preference for full-timers is partly linked to staffing shortages in certain industries (e.g., nursing and security). As R4 pointed out, developing new approaches to integrating and managing part-timers created additional time and resource burdens for human resource departments and senior management:

> If a department comprises of 10 full-timers versus 20 half-timers, in terms of hospital management, it's so much more complicated. The HR management of things are doubled although in my mind, when I obviously only think in terms of workload, like clinical work, in terms of the actual work that I carry out … to me, it's equitable. 10 full-timers is equals to 20 part-timers right? But when it was explained to me, well the reality is, it's so much more complicated for finance, for HR management. You now have to manage 20 people. (R4, female, age 36–40, senior clinical psychologist, three children)

The majority of respondents were unaware of their organisation's official work–life integration policies and formal flexiwork options. A key finding from this study reveals that most organisations did not approach current employees to review their flexiwork options nor actively recruit part-timers. R25 remarked that no one in her organisation had 'come in straightaway as a part-timer', indicating full-time status as the normative

standard. Thus, it is up to individual employees to initiate a conversation with their superiors about flexiwork options. In the case of R19,

> You have to initiate. I am not sure about others, but for me, I did inform my supervisor about my constraint of hours and all that. So they give me the option to try out (a part-time schedule). (R19, female, age 31–35, staff nurse, two children)

Many employees continue to perceive flexiwork as a privilege to be negotiated on a case-by-case basis, as one respondent described:

> Actually, I'm not very sure because it's one of those secret things that I don't know about. To the best of my knowledge, part-time status is a privilege. It's probably true for a lot of organisations. It's really case-by-case; there are policies stipulating minimum hours required to work, and maximum. [Hours worked] would determine the range of benefits I'm entitled to. (R4, female, age 36–40, senior clinical psychologist, three children)

For those who have successfully negotiated for part-time work, an additional hurdle was work intensification. A number of respondents highlighted that they have not experienced a decline in their workloads commensurate with their reduced hours and pay. One respondent lamented,

> I don't think I'm doing 60% although I am paid 60%. So I don't imagine there's a lot more than what I'm doing now, which is what I would be doing if I were just 100% full-timer. ... I'm a part-timer but you know, I'm still doing a lot of work that a full-timer would do. But it's not quite so simple in terms of HR and finance where it is very easily pro-rated. In terms of the work that I do, it's very difficult to pro-rate work. I mean you can't write two-thirds of a report. It's complicated. I can't do two-thirds of the supervision and leave one-third to somebody else to do. It doesn't quite work out. (R4, female, age 36–40, senior clinical psychologist, three children)

For some flexiworkers, the notion of having a 'privileged status' contributed to feelings of gratitude and, in some cases, guilt towards their organisations, which resulted in a heightened sense of obligation to work harder. R22 expressed that, 'We are very grateful. Since we can't commit full-time, if they can give us part-time, we are very happy. So we don't mind serving, doing a bit more extra for them' (R22, female, age 56–60, administrator, three children). Another respondent explained that, even as a part-timer, she feels obliged to give 100%:

> Because of the perception that you are in a privileged position. Because everybody here expects that everyone works full-time. You are expected to be face-to-face when you do meetings, and not telecomm. I would think that because the part-timer has all these privileges [of flexiwork], you tend to think that you need to give more, and you may need to help out more. (R2, female, age 46–50, manager, three children)

Ideals and expectations of work: managing face time

This study asked how 'ideal work' was defined in order to gain a sense of how part-time work could be contextualised in an evaluation of value contribution to

the organisation. For many respondents, ideal work was associated with work–life balance. When achieving greater work–life balance means transitioning to part-time work, however, employers worry about compromises to employee commitment and productivity. For these reasons, R11 (female, age 51–55, deputy director, two children) described her superiors as highly unreceptive towards flexiwork:

Interviewer: What do you mean by the directors don't really condone [flexiwork]?

R11: They don't like it.

Interviewer: Do they express it out rightly or verbally?

R11: Yeah. They said if one goes, the rest will ask for it. I'm talking about mainly the flexibility I want to work from home, rather than come to the office. 'Well then, how do we know you're really working? I can't keep checking on you, how do I know? At least when you're in the office we know you're in the office and working.' That sort of thing, so no, they don't like it.

Compared to full-time employees, part-timers face a unique set of challenges that stem from reduced working hours and face time. The most commonly cited is the misperception that face time is a reflection of one's commitment to the organisation. Part-timers have a harder time than full-timers demonstrating commitment to their organisations because of their decreased presence in the workplace. As a consequence, some expressed the need to compensate for their absence to avoid negative reactions from supervisors and co-workers. When asked to comment on the perception that full-timers were considered more committed than part-timers, R2 replied,

I think we are all equally committed. But I think part-time employees do get the shorter end of the stick. You are not expected to know only 80% of your e-mails; you are expected to know 100% of your e-mails. It's just that you work less hours. I have fewer hours to read e-mails than my full-time colleagues. So I have to be quick. In some ways, I do feel a little disadvantaged because I come in slightly later, I have to catch up with whatever that came in during the two hours. Sometimes I do miss e-mails. That's the frustration on my part. Because I don't have enough time to catch up [with my e-mails]. So there are some things which I do miss out. (R2, female, age 46–50, manager, three children)

Despite some respondents' best efforts to demonstrate commitment and not burden their superiors and co-workers with extra work, their part-time status put a strain on working relationships. Decreased face time, for example, meant fewer opportunities to integrate oneself socially into the working environment, resulting in greater distrust and lower social support from colleagues. A number of respondents affirmed the view that flexiwork can be burdensome for their colleagues, particularly in the beginning:

Of course my colleagues will say that it's better if I work on a five-day week so that they will not be taxed so much. (R18, female, age 46–50, senior staff nurse, two children)

I think because we are not here all the time, so there are certain duties that the full-timers will have to take up ... I don't think they are always okay with it, but I think it's something that they have comes to terms with. (R17, female, age 36–40, senior clinical psychologist, one child)

It is clear from the interview data that employee commitment is not simply measured by the quantity and quality of their deliverables, but also by the level of assimilation into their organisation's culture, namely its work performance ideals and expectations of employees. One respondent (R24) suggested that the absence of clear performance markers has led employers to overstate the value of face time. When asked if time spent at work reflects commitment in an employee, she replied,

No, I think in this day and age, the time factor doesn't matter so much. But organisations need to determine clear performance markers before the time factor will go away. So I think the timefactor is almost used as a proxy of hard work, maybe because performance criteria isn't so clear or isn't so easy to set. (R24, female, age 41–45, business partner, one child)

The role of management in facilitating flexiwork
To understand why flexiwork policies in Singapore are underimplemented and underutilised, it is important to explore the roles and perceptions of managers. Managers are usually appointed as 'gate-keepers' who appraise employees' requests for FWAs.

For many respondents, flexiwork requests were evaluated on a case-by-case basis by supervisors and then routed to HR departments for processing. In this respect, supervisors and co-workers with past flexiwork experience serve as both role models for employees and champions of flexiwork within the organisation. Supervisors who have not benefited from FWAs before may not be as empathetic or approachable, and may be more inclined to view flexiwork requests with apprehension. When asked how her organisation views employees who work flexible hours, one respondent lamented:

Probably guardedly. Sort of like ... we're not the most desirable people, I suppose. It's hard because I cannot attend [certain] meetings ... when I try to arrange meetings ... it's kind of hard I suppose. At the same time, I suppose we are a necessary evil, because we do fulfill our clinical work function. So we're a necessary evil [laughs]. (R4, female, age 36–40, senior clinical psychologist, three children)

In sum, managerial support is critical to the implementation and utilisation of flexiwork policies. Even organisations that do have flexiwork policies in place are not necessarily proactive in communicating them to their employees. The predominance of negative views on flexiwork at the managerial level calls for a greater understanding of the benefits of flexiwork and strategies for implementation that will maximise long-term gains and diminish short-term costs.

Flexiwork at personal cost

A theme that surfaced in almost all the interviews was the acute awareness that going part-time came at a personal cost to the employee. While all were grateful that the flexibility allowed them to better manage work–life balance or to stay economically engaged for the older respondents, all were also cognisant that part-time work comes at significant personal costs, particularly in terms of remuneration and career advancement.

> I think anyone on flexiwork arrangement needs to understand that you're on a different work arrangement from a full-timer. So in terms of a simple proportion, if you're on a half time, your output is half of what a full-timer gives, right? So you might be an equally high performer but output wise, the full-timer because of the nature of his role, produces twice as much. So you cannot expect then both of you to progress at the same level, because your output is halved. And I think people on flexiwork arrangement need to understand that you can't have the cake and eat it as well. (R24, female, age 41–45, business partner, one child)

This means that it may only be a feasible option for those who are in economically stable family situations and who can afford to go part-time. As one respondent lamented on her staff benefits as a part-timer,

> For me currently, as a 60-precenter, by and large, I get most of my benefits pro-rated. It's a simple formula. Basically it's just two-thirds of anything I would get if I'm a full-timer. With the exception that I lose some health and dental benefits for my family. (R4, female, age 36–40, senior clinical psychologist, three children)

Some female respondents described flexiwork as putting their careers in 'slow motion', while for others it has meant 'taking a step back' or stepping off the 'corporate ladder' entirely. R17 and R24 shared similar sentiments:

> It has hurt. I mean, everything slows down. Your training, your career progression . . . it slows down. There are a lot of things you can't take on; you can't do, because you know that you can't afford the time. (R17, female, age 36–40, senior clinical psychologist, one child)

> I think the 'hindered part' is again that acceptance that your progression . . . you are intentionally slowing down your progression compared to a peer who is charging ahead and doing that much, double of what you're doing. And I think that's something that we have to accept when we go on a flexible work arrangement. (R24, female, age 41–45, business partner, one child)

In addition, one respondent (R12, male, age 41–45, banker, three children) commented that taking time off for family is socially acceptable for women but not for men. This made it more difficult for him to initiate negotiations for part-time work. He described part-time work as a 'sacrifice' in terms of his career.

Discussion

The implementation gap appears to be at two levels. First, in terms of organisational culture, there is little attempt to normalise and formalise flexiwork and, in particular, part-

time work so that there are clear channels for application, approval, and assessment. Employers continue to be wary of the change in the level of employee visibility under FWAs, which can potentially complicate employee assessment and surveillance (Felstead, Jewson, and Walters 2003). This study confirmed that, in the absence of clear guidelines on how to measure effective performance in the new economy, there persists an over-reliance on face time to reflect commitment. This is particularly acute for part-timers who log reduced hours and face time (Felstead, Jewson, and Walters 2003). Without overt guidelines on managing flexiwork options, it was left to individual supervisors to interpret employees' requests. Supervisors who have benefited from FWAs were more likely to render support, and they play significant roles in shifting normative expectations towards flexiwork (Lambert, Marler, and Gueutal 2008). However, as take-up for FWA is so low, relying on converts to drive the charge would not be sufficient to transform the workplace culture.

Second, in terms of workflow and processes, middle management has not been adequately trained and equipped to facilitate flexiwork. This has made each application for part-time work a unique case in which employees had to rely on their own negotiation skills to advance their appeal. Indeed, one of the major themes to emerge from the interview data was employee initiative. We found that the vast majority of respondents initiated conversations about flexiwork with their superiors, and not the other way around. This was largely due to rampant skepticism of flexiwork at the managerial level, due to its potentially detrimental and disruptive effects on employee productivity and organisational performance (Abbott and De Cieri 2008; Den Dulk and De Ruijter 2008; Rousseau, Ho, and Greenberg 2006). In sum, this study reinforced findings elsewhere about the critical role management plays in facilitating FWAs.

Part-time employees do not expect a full-time remuneration, but they do expect a fair compensation package and reasonable access to a competitive career trajectory in the organisation. For many of the younger part-timers who took time off for childcare and self-enhancement, they expect to return to full-time work in the near future and do not want to see part-time work leading them to a dead-end in their career aspirations. Across gender lines, slower career progression is perceived as one of the major drawbacks of part-time work, particularly for women (Durbin and Tomlinson 2010). This study supports the observation that women's careers are primarily affected. Most of the men interviewed for this study took up FWAs towards the end of their careers or in retirement. As reported in other studies, men opted for part-time status only if they felt it would not harm their further career prospects (Smithson et al. 2004). These reflections correspond to existing findings that part-time work is not conducive for career advancement for men or women (Crompton 2002).

Until organisations are able to conceptualise and operationalise what part-time work entails, a fair remuneration package will not be delivered to these employees. In a remuneration system that relies on performance indicators, if organisations are not able to derive clear measurements of output, employees and supervisors will continue to depend on face time to determine commitment. As a result, part-time workers will always remain

marginalised and supervisors will remain underrewarded for their efforts. To bridge the implementation gap, two criteria are essential: a conducive culture of trust in human capital, and an empowering reward system that recognises the translational efforts of supervisors in the negotiation of FWAs. The current performance-based evaluation system takes a relatively short-term view of output and tends to value a more individualised competitive approach to work. To encourage supervisors to adopt longer term goals that support stability of the organisation, performance of supervisors needs to be tied to staff retention of a diverse profile of employees.

Conclusion

This study confirmed the presence of an implementation gap for FWAs. While the benefits of FWAs are appreciated on a conceptual level by upper management, in terms of middle management support and effective performance appraisal systems, translation is lagging. While this study does not seek to provide an exhaustive account of flexiwork in Singapore, it aims to provide a vignette of the barriers and facilitators. Just as a single organisational policy on flexiwork is unable to cater to the full range of the needs of Singapore workers, there is no one-size-fits-all approach to implementing FWAs in all organisations. However, so long as companies desire to unlock the potential of FWAs in hopes of ameliorating labour shortages and work–life balance struggles, there is an ongoing need for companies to focus on the various organisational factors that influence flexiwork uptake rates.

As seen from the various accounts, the problems facing organisations are multifaceted and multidimensional. Under these circumstances, it is essential that companies take on an eclectic approach to resolving these issues. Both the government and employers must continue to engage in a partnership to provide an integrated approach in solving the barriers against flexiwork. Nonetheless, it is certain that as Singapore continues to experience a diminishing workforce, companies will increasingly look towards flexiwork as a solution to attract new employees. Early embarkation on flexiwork would provide an advantageous edge for the company to remain competitive in the shrinking labour market.

As we continue to face challenges in manpower constraints and implications that the lack of a healthy work–life balance has on marriage and procreation trends, the facilitation of flexiwork arrangements will be essential and no longer merely an option. As many of our professional respondents pointed out, if they were not able to secure part-time work arrangements with their current employers, they would leave the organisation and seek alternative employment rather than sacrifice their personal and family needs.

Study limitations and directions for future research

Although this study captured the voices of part-time workers across a wide range of ages and occupations, we were mainly interested in examining the experiences of professionals and managers who, despite being in a position to negotiate for FWAs, still faced barriers and suffered personal costs. The purposive sample also did not focus on obtaining

representative voices from across organisational types. A broader sample would have included part-time workers from the mid- or low-level employment strata, where barriers to flexiwork may be comparatively greater. Understanding differences across the labour force, and their implications for organisational flexiwork policies and practices should be a priority for future research.

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