Human Relations virtual special issue: Flexible Work Practices and Work-Family Domain

Human Relations virtual special issues bring together and highlight related research on a particular topic. Each collection is compiled and introduced by two of the journal's editors; here we have Yasin Rofcanin and Smriti Anand, Associate Editors at *Human Relations.*

Readers can access our virtual special issue on Flexible Work Practices and Work-Family Domain here:

https://journals.sagepub.com/topic/collections-hum/hum-1-flexible_work_practices_and_work/hum

Introduction

With the outbreak of COVID-19, flexible work arrangements have become the "new normal". The vast majority of employers[1] have asked their employees to work from home. But this new change to established work patterns comes with a toll: work-family boundaries. Employees are encountering a number of challenges in fulfilling their "work" and "home" domain roles simultaneously, leading to undesirable outcomes of blurred work-family boundaries, role conflict, stress, and reduced work motivation. Therefore, this virtual special issue sheds light on flexible work practices to tackle the problems of work-family boundary management. The findings of each paper included in this issue explain how non-traditional work arrangements can be managed effectively to create a win-win for both employees and organizations.

The virtual special issue has eight papers. We start with the work by Almudena Cañibano, who investigates the paradox innate to workplace flexibility. This study addresses the question "how do employees deal with the increasing pressure of being constantly available to work"? The findings from a case study point out that the implementation of flexible work practices exceed the officially approved limits of such practices, raising questions about the legitimacy and pressure of these HR tools. As in most of our relationships with an organization, flexible work practices are likely to be defined around the terms of psychological contracts, in which employees determine the extent to which they will reciprocate the inducements of their organisation. If flexible work practices are used in a manner to exploit employees, employees may adjust their perceptions of psychological contract fulfilment by reducing their input to the organization.

Focusing on role boundary management theory, the second paper in our virtual special issue seeks to unravel the collapsing work-family role boundaries in the context of volunteering work. Focusing on non-family work lives, the authors set out to explore how one's fulfilment in other roles beyond family enrich one's life. Utilising in-depth interviews, the study reveals how "volunteer role" ameliorates demanding situations at home and at work. Developing a term called "collapsing boundaries", the authors show that multiple roles in different domains of life are enacted and transition between these roles is fluid. We expect the fluidity of roles between domains to manifest itself in various forms and ways in COVID-19 and post-pandemic periods.

A key segment who will be left widely impacted by the virus is the young generation, sometimes referred to as Generation Z: Universities worldwide have shifted to online education shaping the campus experiences of students in their last years. For new graduates, it

is challenging to find a job as many companies have gone into workforce reduction mode or are waiting for the crisis to pass before starting recruitment. Thus, the young generation is at special risk of missing a startling career start and enjoying university experience to the fullest. The third paper in our virtual issue by Paula K McDonald aims to understand how and why young people expect careers to be flexible. Based on interviews conducted with a wide range of employees in various occupations, the author concludes that gender and social networks help shape the picture of flexible careers for young employees. Findings of the study suggest that there are three factors that determine the extent to which careers are flexible: temporal ties, structural elements in one's social network, and relationships. With the challenges posed by COVID-19, it is imperative to trace and explore how career trajectories of young employees change over their course of work lives and what matters in this post-COVID-19 era to define new success criteria for flexible work practices.

Another vulnerable segment that bears the costs of flexible work arrangements is women: Due to caring responsibilities and the gendered norms of expectations in the society, extant research has revealed that women tend to fall behind on career ladders if and when they have children and start using flexible work practices. The fourth article of this virtual special issue by Heejung Chung and Mariska van der Horst underscores how flexitime and teleworking can help women sustain their careers after childbirth. Based on a large and representative dataset in the UK, the findings of this study show that flexitime helps women stay in the workforce following the birth of their children. These findings suggest that new ways of working can be constructed as HR tools to help boost minority and underrepresented groups of individuals at work. As recent conversations in the media and reports underline the possibility of working from home a new reality, this article is likely to be of greatest value for organizations and HR departments to develop flexitime and telecommute practices to help address and satisfy the needs of underrepresented groups, one of which is women with childcare responsibilities.

When it comes to implementing flexible work practices, various problems and issues emerge. With this question in mind, the fifth article of this virtual special issue by Alex J Wood investigates how flexible scheduling works in practice through a case study of a large retail firm in the UK. Interview data and document analyses by the author reveal that flexible work practices are used in lieu of standardized work arrangements to bestow employers with power and discretion of using them instead of hiring contractual workers. A striking conclusion which highlights that even union presence and collective bargaining are not sufficient to prevent the precariousness of flexible work arrangements, leaving employees in limbo while empowering employers. These findings challenge management scholars to ponder several questions, such as: What is the role of unions in the post-COVID-19 period? How can we ensure equality and fairness of flexible work practices in a context when many of these decisions are made remotely and without any visibility?

Our sixth article explores a key issue in relation to our everyday working lives: How does segmentation preference and work-family boundary blurring (constant exposure to work-related mobile phones) shape family performance on a daily basis? Adopting border theory, this article underlines that understanding your style is key to managing work-family conflict: Segmentors are those who prefer clear-cut boundaries between work and home, while integrators are characterized by an attribute of blurring work and home such that work can be conducted anytime and anywhere. In times when we are faced with the negative consequences of COVID-19 at an everyday level, what is important is to bear

in mind our preferred style of boundary management, and implement it in all our daily encounters when it comes to juggling work and home roles. An important future research will be to explore the question of gender in how these relations unfold, especially during the COVID-19 period where all family members are sheltering at home, working and dealing with various roles and responsibilities at the same time.

While most studies of our virtual special issue have focused on support mechanisms and the transition of positive experiences between domains, an important issue prevails: the presence of stressors and how we deal with them at work and home. Wood and Michaelides differentiate between the effects of challenge and hindrance stressors in managing work-family boundaries. The challenge stressors push employees to achieve better work performance while hindrance stressors prevent goal achievement because they deplete from personal resources and energies. The authors tested this idea in a sample of portfolio employees, and found that emotions are key mechanisms that are overlooked in most work-family research. Feelings of calmness and enthusiasm are the discrete emotions that explain how and why stressors impact work-family interference. A key take-away of this article is that dealing with COVID-19 necessitates dealing with and managing employee emotions in a professional manner, possibly via implementing emotion regulation interventions.

The last article of our virtual issue deals with the question of flexible work practices and how they lead to perceptions of intensified work. Results from a study of professional workers demonstrate that job satisfaction and organizational commitment increase for employees who have flexible work arrangements. However, the findings paint an unexpected pattern in that work intensification also increases with more exposure to flexible work arrangements. A similar pattern is reported in media and reports about the implications of COVID-19, revealing that employees tend to feel more pressured and thus work harder in the COVID-19 and post-pandemic period. This study identifies three types of work intensification – imposed intensification, enabled intensification, and intensification as an act of reciprocation. Future studies are recommended to explore and question which type of intensification holds for the post-COVID-19 period and why.

A common and most important shared aspect of these articles is that they build on border and boundary management theories in addressing their research questions. We hope that the wide and different array of articles we collated for you will help you and us all to understand and tackle the limitations of COVID-19 better in the context of work-family lives and flexible work arrangements.

Yasin Rofcanin
Associate Editor, *Human Relations*
Professor of Organizational Psychology and Human Resource Management
University of Bath, School of Management, UK

Smriti Anand
Associate Editor, *Human Relations*
Associate Professor of Management
Illinois Institute of Technology, Stuart School of Business, USA

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Note

1 The vast majority of blue-collar jobs are exempt from this claim.