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Sources for Statistical Data on Flexible Work Arrangements

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Prepared for Workplace Flexibility 2010 by Shelley Waters Boots and Anna Danziger on behalf of the Urban Institute.

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SOURCES FOR STATISTICAL DATA ON FLEXIBLE WORK ARRANGEMENTS

From the Department of Labor, the best survey for flexibility data comes from the Current Population Survey (CPS). The CPS is a monthly survey of 60,000 households that provides data on the labor force, employment, unemployment, and persons not in the labor force. Basic labor force data are gathered monthly; data on special topics are gathered in periodic supplements. The May supplement includes questions about flexible and shift schedules, the reasons for working particular shifts, the beginning and ending hours of work, formal flextime programs, home-based work, and other related topics. Respondents are also asked a direct question about their ability to vary either the starting or ending time of their typical workday. Otherwise, data on “flexibility” has to be inferred from detailed work schedule data available through this survey.

The benefit of the CPS is that it is large, reliable, and the sample is carefully weighted to provide nationally representative estimates. It also has a significant amount of other data, including a large amount of information on employee characteristics, occupation and industry classifications, and work schedules. The drawbacks however, are that the questions on flexibility are limited in number and scope -- providing data that answers only a few of the questions on workers’ access to and use of flexible work arrangements. The use of work schedule data is particularly problematic because it is often unclear whether the schedule is directed by the worker, the employer, or a combination of both.

Several studies from nongovernmental sources also provide useful information about flexible work arrangements.

- The National Study of Employers and The National Study of the Changing Workforce conducted by the Families and Work Institute. These two studies ask much more in-depth questions of employees and employers on flexible work arrangements.
 - The National Study of Employers (NSE) examines the practices, policies, programs and benefits provided by a nationally representative study of U.S. employers with over 50 employees. The 2005 sample includes 1,092 employers—66 percent are for-profit companies and 34 percent are non-profit organizations; 44 percent operate at only one location, while 56 percent have operations at more than one location. The NSE is a rich data source for flexibility information; among other topics, it includes extensive questions on employer provision of flexible work arrangements and other work/family policies.
 - The National Study of the Changing Workforce (NSCW) is a large representative survey of U.S. workers (about 3,500 respondents in 2002). The study aims to gather information about work lives as well as personal lives. It is modeled on the government’s Quality of Employment Survey (QES), which was last conducted in 1977, and provides insights into three decades of work-life changes. The study has an extensive list of questions on workplace flexibility, including workers’ use of daily flextime, traditional flex time, compressed workweeks, and part-time work, to name a

few. It also explores worker perceptions of the consequences of using workplace benefits and their preferences for policies to address work/family demand.

- The General Social Survey (GSS), conducted by the National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago, was started in 1972 to gather data on social change and the growing complexity of American society. It is funded by the Sociology Program of the National Science Foundation. It is a biennial survey, which has a “core” set of questions on various demographic and attitudinal variables. For each survey there are also topical modules. In the past, several GSS surveys’ topical modules have included worker opinions on work, job characteristics and work-life balance.

This survey is useful in that it is large (approximately 50,000 respondents) and representative of English speaking adults. (Spanish interviews were added in 2006). However, the questions are limited, and because many of the flexibility questions are on the topical modules, they are not asked each year that the survey is conducted.

- The National Organizations Survey (NOS) is a representative survey of about 500 U.S. business organizations. Conducted for the National Science Foundation (NSF), the National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH), and the Commonwealth Fund, the study examines various aspects of the workplace, including investigating the employment policies, benefits, and structures of organizations and the resulting effects on workers.

This fact sheet was produced through a non-exhaustive survey of selected websites and conversations with researchers in available data sources. We welcome feedback on additional data sources and information that could be included here.

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