

Organizational tensions, paradoxes, and contradictory demands in flexible work systems

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ABSTRACT

The spread of flexible work systems, epitomized by continuously changing structures and work anytime / anywhere, intensifies goal conflicts in organizations. In particular, increasing work performance and maintaining employee health are incompatible, if delegated to supervisors and employees without required resources and empowerment to determine situationally adequate ways to define, balance, and pursue associated objectives. Drawing on different theoretical approaches – paradox theory, role theory, action regulation theory, leadership theory – we try to integrate concepts of organizational tensions, role conflicts, contradictory work demands, and ambivalences in leadership and employee behavior with a focus on performance and health. We argue that top-down work design or ambidextrous leadership are insufficient to reconcile contradictory objectives, whereas idiosyncratic deals (i-deals) offer a promising approach to align diverging interest. Traditional divisions of authority, responsibilities, and resources between top-management and supervisors/employees are bound to catalyze role conflicts and contradictory demands. These manifest in tensions and paradoxes at different organizational levels, contribute to widespread detrimental phenomena like self-exploitative work behavior and psycho-mental disease. I-deals between supervisors and employees offer secondary elasticities in HR systems to buffer or alleviate tensions. Integrating theoretical approaches from a multilevel perspective on organizations, work design, leadership, and work behavior, we shed light on tensions, role conflicts, and contradictory demands imposed on supervisors and employees in contemporary flexible work systems. Ways to align and balance individual health and organizational performance through idiosyncratic deals are proposed.

Keywords

Organizational tensions – paradoxes – role conflicts – contradictory demands – idiosyncratic deals – work design