

Editorial

Flexibility at Work – Implications for Individuals, Organizations, and Society

Severin Hornung & Pierre Sachse

University of Innsbruck, Institute of Psychology

Confronted with the erratic dynamics and compounding pressures of hypercompetitive markets, organizations efforts to increase their structural flexibility continue to reshape basic categories of work and employment. The interdisciplinary research on workplace flexibility fills bookshelves, yet, overall, is hardly conclusive. In the field of applied psychology, a growing stream of studies are dedicated to investigating cognitive, motivational, behavioral, affective, and health-related effects of increased flexibility at work – feeding into a rising tide of journal articles, books, and special issues on „new“ forms of work organization and human resource practices. Testimony to the recognized importance of the underlying trends, critical discussions of the principles of flexible organizing and their implications for the psychological regulation of work activities have long found their way into the standard textbooks of work psychology. For instance, Hacker and Sachse (2014) explicitly call attention to potential downsides of high-involvement work practices, offering high autonomy and challenging tasks within the framework of a functional flexibility strategy – in terms of negative health implications of self-endangering or „self-exploitative“ work behavior. This is particularly notable, as it stands in stark contrast to the initial paradigm of action regulation theory, aimed at integrating and enriching partialized and incomplete work tasks resulting from excessive division of labor (Ulich, 2008). What is foreshadowed by these earlier experiences with programs aimed at improving the quality of working life, however, is the Janus-face of structural changes in contemporary organizations. Indeed, the deceitful double-faced ancient Roman god of dualities, time, and transitions provides a suitable „patron deity“ for flexibility – ruling over the tension-field between a „new wave“ in the humanization of work through employee-oriented (individual) flexibility versus new form of economic (self-)rationalization for the

sake of capacity-oriented (organizational) flexibility. Although work intensification and extensification are a hallmark of the latter, paradoxically, highly stimulating tasks and involving work environments may be even more efficient in prompting employees to work harder and longer towards attaining group or individual goals – thus possibly engaging in self-enacted or self-exploitative forms of „subjectified“ work intensification and extensification. Thus, it has been argued that workplace flexibility is most suitably analyzed as a contradictory paradox or even an inherent dialect, characterized by antagonistic tendencies that contain the seed of their own negation, transformation, and re-emergence in a qualitatively different configuration.

One example for the „blind spots“ and unresolved challenges faced by psychological research into work and organizations is the often implicitly made assumption that employees comply with certain organizational flexibility requirements voluntarily, out of their genuine own free will, or predominantly based on intrinsic motivation – this view, however, collides with the a basic psychological insight, telling us that this interpretation almost inevitably falls prey to the fundamental attribution error. Behavior in contemporary work contexts cannot be understood without taking into account the „atmospheric“ background pressure of external and internal labor market competitiveness. Market forces „spill“ into workplaces as turnover and selection effects, resulting in escalating performance demands, job insecurity, and social tensions – as symptoms of increasingly volatile conditional and competitive employment. The tendency of workers to comply with aggravated flexibility requirements is partly rooted in the more or less existential threat of losing their main source of living. Historically the driving force of employment, this underlying power-dependence relationship provides the psychological basis and leverage for more sophisticated labor utilization

strategies through job insecurity, such as temporary employment, internal competition, artificial tournament situations, and threat of systematic exclusion – phenomena inexorably linked to the „darksides“ of the often vague and ambiguously used term of workplace flexibility. Mainstream research in work and organizational frequently tends to downplay these tensions and antagonisms in favor of more convenient unitarist assumptions of converging employee and employer in interests. The topic of flexibility demonstrates the necessity to question, challenge, and qualify such widely-held counterfactual assumptions, the roots of which can often be traced back to system-justifying ideological belief systems, serving particular interests, rather than the scientific quest for truth or social responsibility for the common good.

Faced with the task of writing an editorial for this special issue, it appears both tempting and worthwhile to take a look back at previous contributions made towards a better understanding of workplace flexibility in the *Journal Psychologie des Alltagshandelns / Psychology of Everyday Activity*. In fact, a considerable number of studies published in this journal over the years has dealt with topics related to workplace flexibility, reflecting both the multi-faceted character of flexibility as well as the range of approaches to studying it. Notably, in the inaugural issue of this journal, Hornung, Herbig and Glaser (2008) initially introduced the concept of employee-oriented flexibility, based on a project evaluating the implementation of telecommuting in the public administration. Roughly a decade later, this research cycle had come to a closure with the publication of a summary of programmatic research on workplace flexibility – based on individual negotiation of idiosyncratic deals – in the anniversary issue of the journal (Hornung, Glaser & Rousseau, 2018). In addition to this positive interpretation of workplace flexibility, significant contributions towards the development of the more critical stream, focusing on new forms of indirect organizational control, coping with flexibility demands, and self-endangering work behavior, were made by Bredehöft, Dettmers, Hoppe and Janneck (2015), Deci, Dettmers, Krause and Berset (2016), and, most recently, Schulthess (2017). A particularly important and influential early article was authored by Höge (2011), who developed theory and psychometrically sophisticated measures on organizational flexibility requirements and the employee-orientation – the former representing new forms of job demands and the latter reflecting psychological implications of changing occupational identities. A noteworthy feature of this contribution is that it builds interdisciplinary bridges, conceptually and methodologically transferring and thus making accessible the sociological employee-proposition and the broader paradigm of the „subjectivation of work“ for

research in the field of applied psychology. A number of other high-quality studies have dealt directly with implications of numerical and temporal organizational flexibility, manifesting in temporary work arrangements (Rigotti, de Cuyper, de Witte, Korek & Mohr, 2009), increased job insecurity (Otto & Beck, 2012), as well as associated consequences, such as conflicts and negative spillover from work into private and family life (Amstad & Semmer, 2011), impaired personal well-being and health (Sora & Höge, 2014), and the related phenomenon of presenteeism, that is, continuing to work while actually being sick (Strasser & Varesco Kager, 2018; Ulich & Strasser, 2010). Further, relevant to workplace flexibility in a broader sense, are studies on employee readiness to change occupations (Otto, Dette-Hagenmeyer & Dalbert, 2014), work intensification in human services (Schulz-Dadaczynski & Jungmanns, 2014) and the working customer (Rieder & Voss, 2010), that is, the new ways in which companies take advantage of people not only of their roles as employees, but also as consumers. Taken together, these important previous contributions complement each other to provide a strong background framework and foundation for the research compiled in this special issue. Thus, calling attention to the history of flexibility research in this journal not only is a matter of good reflexive practice, but, indeed, strengthens our case for the present project.

The insights gained from these and other studies notwithstanding, formulating a comprehensive, coherent, and integrated theory of the heterogeneous – negative and positive – manifestations, interdependencies, implications, and trajectories of organizational flexibility is a Herculean and, so far, outstanding challenge. Given its amorphous, perpetually transforming nature, it seems debatable whether it is even possible to provide such a „grand theory“ of workplace flexibility. Humbled by the vastness, pervasiveness, and multidimensionality of the topic, we set our aim on the more realistic goal of contributing to a more complete, differentiated, and „complexified“ view on workplace flexibility. Our aspirations focus on examining the meaning of flexibility from the employee and employer perspective as well as across multiple levels of analysis, specifically, individuals, organizations, and society. That is, we are considering implications of flexibility on a micro-, meso-, and macro-level. The manifestations and consequences of flexibility on these three levels share characteristic features – parallels that we are tempted to interpret as properties of „self-similarity“ across scales, reminding us of the repeating kaleidoscopic patterns found in ecological systems and mathematical fractals. For instance, socioeconomic developments on the societal level parallel organizational HR strategies of workforce segmentation and differentiation, demanding that flexibility

requirements and potentials are allocated increasingly unevenly, resulting in privileged functional core workforces versus more or less precarious numerically and temporally decoupled or „flexibilized“ peripheral employee groups. Aggravating competition along the fault lines of differently attractive labor market segments, numerical organizational flexibility to reduce under- and overcapacities manifests on the individual level as discontinuities in occupational biographies, phases of under- or unemployment, undesired work arrangements, economic uncertainty, and marginalization. At this point, at the latest, flexibility transcends conventional confines of research into work and organizations, raising implications for socio-economic stratification, social inequality and societal structure. These dialectic, bi-directional, and cross-level influences between individual, organizational, and societal implications render research on workplace flexibility, albeit from a psychological perspective, a political, ideologically charged, and contested undertaking.

The articles compiled for this special issue illustrate the broad spectrum of intellectual traditions, theoretical perspectives, concepts, constructs, empirical results, and methods, that humanistic and critical research on workplace flexibility in applied psychology can draw on, including sociology, organizational behavior, management, and related fields. The five main contributions are authored by researchers at the University of Innsbruck's Institute of Psychology. Discussed topics range from work intensification and extensification to erosion of the private sphere, psychosocial strains of uncertainty, role conflicts and precariousness, but also potentials for a „new quality“ of work supporting self-determination, time autonomy, learning and growth-promising opportunities for self-actualization at work and through work activity. Underlying rifts, ambivalences, and tensions, as well as potentials and opportunities, are illuminated from multiple angles with reference to different manifestations, conceptualizations, and operationalizations of flexibility. In the opening article, Höge develops a Marxist perspective to integrate psychological and sociological theory in laying out a domain-integrating life-conduct perspective for studying subjectified flexible work in post-Tayloristic societies, populating the proposed framework with exemplary results of his own research. The following contribution by Glaser and associates conceptually analyzes tensions, conflicts, and contradictory demands confronting employees and supervisors in flexible work systems, suggesting, negotiation of idiosyncratic deals (i-deals) as one way to align diverging employee and employer interests. In the third article, Seubert and colleagues report the theory-guided development and validation of a survey instrument assessing subjective experiences of work-related precariousness. Subsequently, Palm and

coauthors offers a review of her research on issues of boundaryless work, including individual and organizational antecedents and dynamics as well as implications for employee health and wellbeing. Lastly, elaborating on the degrees of freedom that contemporary transitions open up for self-determination, personality development, and individuation at work, Hornung and coauthors adopt an employee-oriented perspective on functional flexibility to develop and test a tripartite interaction model of proactive work self-redesign and individual quality of working life. With task autonomy, job crafting, and task-related i-deals, this contribution integrates constructs widely associated with positive implications for both individuals and organizations, yet which also have a controversial connotation in the context of flexibility. The closing article by Hornung and Höge offers some preliminary reflections and an outlook for critical future research on flexibility, presently caught between the antagonistic poles of humanistic ideals and organizational realities shaped by the omnipresence of neoliberal ideology. For all six articles of the special issue, expert scholars will be invited to provide short commentaries, which will be published in the next regular issue of the journal.

Overall, we believe that the articles assembled here complement each other towards a fresh perspective on the paradox, complex, and multifaceted phenomenon and implications of workplace flexibility. Moreover, our aim was to transcend ideological rhetoric in stimulating academic and practice-oriented discourses on the broader implications of workplace flexibility by synthesizing different streams of literature, integrating disciplinary approaches, and developing and testing theories, models, and instruments for subsequent research. Likely attributable to the complex, dynamic, and systemic nature of flexibility as well as its „self-obscuring“ ideological properties, this objective turned out to be an extremely ambitious, and, at times, disorienting – bewitching, bothering, and bewildering, so to speak – but also educational and personally transformative project. Thanks, appreciation, and gratitude are due to many who have directly and indirectly contributed – as authors, reviewers, and editors, administrators and technicians, research participants, supportive colleagues and friends. It will be left up to the reader to decide on the extent to which our collective efforts to transmit our sparks of insight here have been successful.

References

- Amstad, F. T. & Semmer, N. K. (2011). Spillover and crossover of work-and family-related negative emotions in couples. *Journal Psychologie des Alltagshandelns / Psychology of Everyday Activity*, 4 (1), 43-55.
- Bredelhöft, F., Dettmers, J., Hoppe, A. & Janneck, M. (2015). Individual work design as a job demand: The double-edged sword of autonomy. *Journal Psychologie des Alltagshandelns / Psychology of Everyday Activity*, 8 (2), 15-26.
- Deci, N., Dettmers, J., Krause, A. & Berset, M. (2016). Coping in flexible working conditions—engagement, disengagement and self-endangering strategies. *Journal Psychologie des Alltagshandelns / Psychology of Everyday Activity*, 9 (2), 49-65.
- Hacker, W. & Sachse, P. (2014). *Allgemeine Arbeitspsychologie. Psychische Regulation von Tätigkeiten* (3. Aufl.). Göttingen: Hogrefe.
- Hornung, S., Glaser, J. & Rousseau, D. M. (2018). Idiosyncratic deals at work: A research summary. *Journal Psychologie des Alltagshandelns / Psychology of Everyday Activity*, 11 (1), 36-46.
- Hornung, S., Herbig, B. & Glaser, J. (2008). Mitarbeiterorientierte Flexibilisierung: Konzeptgeleitete Evaluation eines Fallbeispiels aus der öffentlichen Verwaltung. *Journal Psychologie des Alltagshandelns / Psychology of Everyday Activity*, 1 (1), 33-45.
- Höge, T. (2011). Perceived flexibility requirements at work and the employee-work-orientation: Concept and measurement. *Journal Psychologie des Alltagshandelns / Psychology of Everyday Activity*, 4 (1), 5-21.
- Otto, K. & Beck, J. (2012). Beanspruchung als Mediator zwischen Selbstwirksamkeitserwartung und Arbeitseinstellungen bei geringer vs. hoher Arbeitsplatzunsicherheit. *Journal Psychologie des Alltagshandelns / Psychology of Everyday Activity*, 5 (2), 40-51.
- Otto, K., Dette-Hagenmeyer, D. E. & Dalbert, C. (2014). Occupational change readiness at career transition points in those at the beginning of their working life. *Journal Psychologie des Alltagshandelns / Psychology of Everyday Activity*, 7 (1), 19-29.
- Rieder, K. & Voss, G. (2010). The working customer – an emerging new type of consumer. *Journal Psychologie des Alltagshandelns / Psychology of Everyday Activity*, 3 (2), 2-10.
- Rigotti, T., de Cuyper, N., de Witte, H., Korek, S. & Mohr, G. (2009). Employment prospects of temporary and permanent workers: Associations with well-being and work related attitudes. *Journal Psychologie des Alltagshandelns / Psychology of Everyday Activity*, 2 (1), 22-35.
- Schulthess, S. (2017). Indirekte Unternehmenssteuerung, interessierte Selbstgefährdung und die Folgen für die Gesundheit – eine Analyse von Kadermitarbeitenden. *Journal Psychologie des Alltagshandelns / Psychology of Everyday Activity*, 10 (2), 22-35.
- Schulz-Dadaczynski, A. & Junghanns, G. (2014). Gefordert unter Druck? – Anforderungen und Zeitdruck bei qualifizierter Dienstleistungsarbeit. *Journal Psychologie des Alltagshandelns / Psychology of Everyday Activity*, 7 (2), 20-36.
- Sora, B. & Höge, T. (2014). Job insecurity and its cross-domain effect on family satisfaction. The role of employee's impaired affective well-being and detachment. *Journal Psychologie des Alltagshandelns / Psychology of Everyday Activity*, 7 (1), 10-18.
- Strasser, P. & Varesco Kager, N. (2018). Präsentismus – Mobile office im Fokus. *Journal Psychologie des Alltagshandelns / Psychology of Everyday Activity*, 11 (2), 5-14.
- Ulich, E. (2008). Von der Relevanz historischer Erfahrungen für die Lösung aktueller Probleme. *Journal Psychologie des Alltagshandelns / Psychology of Everyday Activity*, 1 (1), 2-16.
- Ulich, E. & Strasser, P. (2010). Präsentismus. *Journal Psychologie des Alltagshandelns / Psychology of Everyday Activity*, 3 (1), 51-55.