Doing more with less? Flexible working practices and the intensification of work

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Abstract

This article examines an unanticipated consequence of adopting flexible working practices – that of work intensification. Based on a study of professional workers and in line with other studies, we present evidence showing that flexible workers record higher levels of job satisfaction and organizational commitment than their non-flexible counterparts. However, we also report evidence of work intensification being experienced by both those who work reduced hours and those who work remotely. We identify three means by which this intensification occurs – imposed intensification, enabled intensification and intensification as an act of reciprocation or exchange. We argue that the apparent paradox of high job satisfaction and organizational commitment, alongside work intensification can be explained by employees trading flexibility for effort. Using social exchange theory we propose that employees respond to the ability to work flexibly by exerting additional effort, in order to return benefit to their employer.

Keywords

Introduction

Recent years have seen an increasing number of organizations in the UK offering a range of flexible working options to their employees (Kersley et al., 2006). For many employers this has been a response to increasing interest in work–life balance (Bailyn et al., 2001), the need to be competitive in the labour market (Rau and Hyland, 2002) and the introduction of legislation giving parents of young or disabled children and, more recently, carers, the right to request flexible working arrangements. At the same time there has been a widespread impression that tension and strain have increased in UK workplaces (Green, 2004) and this is supported by evidence of the intensification of work (Burchell, 2002; Green, 2006). Patterson (2001) observes that the working week has now been eroded and replaced by the 'waking week'. These two trends, however, have generally not been seen to be associated, other than in observations that work intensification may generate the need for flexibility to re-balance work and non-work activities (Lewis, 2003; Lewis et al., 2007). Flexible working policies are normally designed to give employees a degree of choice over how much, when and

where they work and to help them achieve a more satisfactory work–life balance; as such one would not expect the implementation of flexible working to result in the intensification of work. However, in this article we present findings from a study examining employee experiences of working from home for part of the week and working reduced hours, which show that work intensification can be an outcome for employees. We examine how this intensification has come about and seek to explain the responses of flexible workers.

Background

The article starts by exploring the potential for a link between flexible working practices and work intensification by examining the literatures concerned with the outcomes of flexible working and with work intensification and its causes. The term flexible working has been used in a broad sense to cover a range of working patterns,[1] including reduced hours, non-standard hours, various forms of remote working, and compressed working time. The central feature of these work arrangements is that it is the employee, not the employer, who chooses the working arrangement, so-called flexibility *for* employees (Alis et al., 2006). Growing interest in the use of flexible working practices has spawned a number of studies that have examined the various forms of flexible working practices and that have contributed to our understanding of the outcomes for both individuals and organizations (see for example, Hammer and Barbera, 1997; Igbaria and Guimeraes, 1999; Kossek et al., 1999; Lee et al., 2002; Tietze and Musson, 2003). In this article we will focus on two forms of flexible working: remote working, where employees work from home for part of the working week and reduced hours working. It is recognized that not all flexible working is voluntary (Tomlinson, 2007); however, the results reported here are based on those who have opted to take up a flexible working arrangement.

Extant studies have identified a range of outcomes of flexible working for employees. First, where employees are able to exercise choice over their working patterns, there is evidence to show a positive impact on job satisfaction (Hill et al., 1998; Hyman and Summers, 2004; Igbaria and Guimaraes, 1999). Looking specifically at remote working, however, the results are more diverse. Some studies have found higher levels of job satisfaction (Baruch, 2000) and increased autonomy (Kelliher and Anderson, 2008), while others have found feelings of isolation impacting negatively on job satisfaction (Cooper and Kurland, 2002). Second, generally flexible workers report lower levels of strain and stress (Almer and Kaplan, 2002; Thomas and Ganster, 1995). For remote workers again the evidence is more mixed. Raghuram and Wiesenfeld (2004) report lower levels of stress for those who spend time working remotely, whereas others have identified new sources of stress (Tietze and Musson, 2005) and greater evidence of mental ill health than for those based at the workplace (Mann and Holdsworth, 2003). Third, studies that examine the relationship between work roles and non-work roles have found evidence of both conflict (Greenhaus and Parasuraman, 1999; Hammer et al., 2005; Rothausen et al., 1998) and more positive effects, such as positive

spillover (Kirchmeyer, 1993) and work-family enrichment (Greenhaus and Powell, 2006). From an organizational perspective, there is also evidence of benefits brought about by the introduction of flexible working. These include increased productivity (Belanger, 1999; Eaton, 2003; Konrad and Mangel, 2000); above average financial performance and improvements in quality (Dex et al., 2001); the ability to attract and retain valued employees (Branine, 2003; Rau and Hyland, 2002; Rothausen, 1994); reduced absenteeism (Dalton and Mesch, 1990) and greater employee loyalty and commitment (Grover and Crooker, 1995; Roehling et al., 2001).

Intensification of work is concerned with 'the effort employees put into their jobs during the time that they are working' (Burchell, 2002: 72). Green (2001) distinguishes between 'extensive' and 'intensive' effort. Extensive effort refers to the time spent at work, whereas intensive effort relates to physical and mental input. The intensification of work is generally seen to have negative outcomes for employees (for an overview, see Fairris and Brenner, 2001). Burchell (2002: 72), while noting the relative lack of work in this area, suggests that 'the intensification of work may be a greater problem – in terms of stress, psychological health and family tension', than other factors such as the prevalence of job insecurity. Work by Warr (1987) links work intensification to a reduction in job satisfaction and worker well-being. In particular, where work intensification is imposed on workers, such as in the case of downsizing, those who are forced to work harder may become demoralized (Kets de Vries and Balazs, 1997).

There has been much debate about the causes of work intensification and calls for research to improve our understanding of its sources (Green, 2004). Existing studies have identified a number of factors, which focus mainly on macro level influences such as increased competitive pressure and technological change (see for example, Burchell et al., 1999; Green and McIntosh, 2001; Green, 2004; Lapido and Wilkinson, 2002). Less attention has been given to how changes at workplace level may contribute to intensification. There is some limited evidence to show that certain approaches to the organization of work, such as functional flexibility and multi-skilling, can result in an intensification of work by matching the supply and demand for labour more closely (Green, 2004; Kelliher and Gore, 2006). The use of certain human resource management practices may also result in work intensification by stimulating effort either directly (e.g. performance related pay), or indirectly as a by-product of other human resource (HR) outcomes, such as organizational commitment (Green, 2004; Osterman, 1995). This literature, however, has not cited the introduction of flexible working practices as a significant contributor to work intensification. In many ways this is not surprising, since one would not expect practices designed to help employees achieve a more satisfactory work–life balance to result in work intensification. Those who work reduced hours are spending less time at work and as such would be expected to exert less extensive effort. Similarly, reduced hours should not have implications for intensive effort per se. Those who work remotely

change the location of work which, in theory, should not result in changes to the intensity of work.

It is important to recognize, however, that while flexible working policies may ostensibly be about allowing employees some choice, in order to achieve a better work–life balance, in practice this is not always the outcome (Higgins et al., 2000). Critics of the work–life discourse argue that the emphasis on choice and achieving balance implies control over life decisions (Caproni, 2004) and that these need to be seen in the context of the constraints of gender, workplace culture and norms (Lewis, 2003; Lewis et al., 2007). Similarly, little attempt has been made to challenge the changes that have resulted in increased workplace pressures and generated the need to create balance. There has also been criticism of the largely two-dimensional approach – that of work and home – in this debate (Ransome, 2007) and it is argued that when other domains are taken into account, rather than having the 'best of both worlds', flexible workers may struggle to achieve a balance (Warren, 2004).

It may be that this predominant work–life discourse has obscured some of the wider implications of flexible working. If we examine the potential for flexible working to result in the intensification of work at a deeper level of analysis and draw on a wider literature, there are a number of features of flexible working that could potentially have consequences for the intensification of work. We have identified three means by which intensification may take place. Increased effort may be *imposed*, *enabled*, or it may be a reciprocal act on the part of employees in *exchange* for discretion over working arrangements. We examine each of these in turn. First, the way in which flexible working is implemented may result in imposed intensification, in a similar way in which workloads may increase following downsizing (Kets de Vries and Balazs, 1997). For example, this might occur if, when a full-time member of staff opts to reduce their hours, their workload is not reduced accordingly. Such circumstances could result in increased extensive effort – working at times when they are not scheduled to work (Sigala, 2005; Skinner, 1999), and/or increased intensive effort while working (Higgins et al., 2000).

Second, work intensification may be enabled because flexible working patterns facilitate the exercise of increased effort. Green (2004) has argued that work intensification may occur where changes to work organization allow people to work hard more easily. In the case of remote working, it could be that work intensity increases if being away from the workplace makes it easier for people to work harder, or longer. This could be as a result of the removal of workplace distractions (demands of co-workers, social interactions, etc.), although this is not to say that other locations, such as the home, will not also generate distractions for employees (Harris, 2003; Tietze and Musson, 2005). In spite of evidence of managers having concerns about the performance of those who work from home (Felstead et al., 2003), some studies have indicated that home-based teleworkers work increased hours (Baruch and Nicholson,

1997). Along similar lines, it may be that traditional patterns of the working day or the working week do not necessarily result in optimal employee effort. Working a different number of hours may result in different levels of effort being expended. If employees work fewer hours they may be able to exercise greater effort while working, because they experience less fatigue and feel less need to take breaks from the work process. In support of this, a number of studies have reported that part-time workers bring increased enthusiasm and energy to work (Edwards and Robinson, 2004; Skinner, 1999), which may result in increased intensive effort. Similarly, the avoidance of a stressful commute by a homeworker may mean that the employee has more energy for work.

Third, work intensification may be an act of reciprocation or exchange. The ability to take advantage of flexible working options may engender a reaction in employees, which results in them expending greater effort. This may occur either directly or indirectly. Indirectly, there is evidence to show that policies designed to gain employee commitment engender higher levels of employee effort (de Menezes and Wood, 2006; Green, 2004) and a number of studies have shown that offering flexible working options has a positive effect on employee commitment (Grover and Crooker, 1995; Roehling et al., 2001). Therefore, enhanced employee commitment, brought about by the provision of flexible working, could result in flexible workers exercising higher degrees of effort. Similarly, Dex and Scheibl (1999) in a review of the evidence present the case that family friendly policies (including flexible working) can increase staff motivation, which may lead to the exercise of increased effort. However, there is also some contrary evidence showing that those who work reduced hours record lower levels of organizational commitment and hence might be expected to be less willing to put in additional effort (Steffy and Jones, 1990).

From a direct perspective Golden (2001) observes that, in return for the opportunity to adopt flexible time schedules, workers are sometimes prepared to make sacrifices, such as changes to the timing or number of hours worked, even though they may entail costs to their leisure, compensation or predictability in the work week. It may be that other flexible workers would also be prepared to make sacrifices in return for their flexible working arrangements, for example, in the form of increased effort. Social exchange theory (Blau, 1964; Homans, 1958) may be useful here. Social exchange theory is concerned with the obligations that are generated through a series of transactions between parties (Emerson, 1976). Put simply, an individual who receives some form of benefit is under obligation to the supplier of that benefit. To discharge this obligation they in turn must furnish some form of benefit to the supplier of the original benefit. It could be argued that for an employee, taking advantage of a flexible work option, a feeling of obligation towards the employer is generated. This might be in the form of a negotiated or reciprocal exchange (Molm et al., 1999). Reciprocal exchange occurs when actors provide benefits for others without any agreement, but an expectation of future benefits being available to them. Reciprocal exchange

tends to be established over time in longer term relationships (Molm et al., 1999).

Furthermore, a sense of obligation requiring the exercise of additional effort may extend to co-workers. Reduced hours or remote workers may find themselves working more intently in order to meet the expectations of their co-workers. There is evidence of co-worker satisfaction being negatively associated with the prevalence of teleworkers (Golden, 2007). Flexible workers, aware of a negative effect on co-workers, may feel the need to increase their effort in an attempt to ameliorate such reactions. Other evidence suggests that when workers who have reduced face time are proactively available to their work colleagues, this assists group performance (Corwin et al., 2001) and the success of reduced hours working (Lee and Kossek, 2004). If flexible workers recognize this and take steps to be proactively available, this essentially requires the exercise of additional effort on their part.

To summarize then, while there is an accumulating body of knowledge about the implementation of flexible working practices and the outcomes for both individuals and organizations, relatively little attention has been given to the implications for work intensity. Much attention has focused on the relationship with work–life balance, emphasizing employee choice and it may be that this discourse has drawn attention away from potential consequences for areas such as employee effort. In this article we attempt to shed further light on the relationship between flexible working practices and work intensification. In particular, we are concerned with the ways in which work intensification is brought about and seek to explain the responses of flexible workers. We present data on employee experiences of flexible working, focusing specifically on two types of flexible working where employees have less face time in the workplace, reduced hours and remote working. Employees with these working arrangements may be more susceptible to work intensification since, as Munck (2001) notes, in many organizations the time employees are seen at work is often equated with productivity; as such employees with less face time may feel under pressure to exert more effort in order to compensate for this.

Methods

The results reported here are drawn from a wider study designed to examine the implementation of flexible working practices and in particular the impact on employee behaviour, in a number of organizations in the UK private sector. In this article we present findings from three of the organizations involved in the study. Data collection involved the use of focus groups, interviews and a questionnaire distributed to both flexible and non-flexible workers. Here we present largely qualitative data drawn from the semi-structured interviews with flexible workers. In addition, we present a small number of results from the questionnaire. These findings provide some supplementary, background data on employee outcomes and allow the responses of flexible and non-flexible workers to be compared.

Our concern was to investigate the lived experiences of flexible workers. In particular we were concerned to examine how they felt flexible working impacted on their working lives. The three organizations included in this study were all large, multinational companies drawn from the information technology, pharmaceutical and consulting sectors. Each of the organizations had offered a range of flexible working options to employees for several years. This allowed data to be gathered from respondents who had developed perceptions about flexible working based on their experiences over time. The participants in this study had all requested to change their working arrangements. The study did not include participants who were required to change their working arrangements, or those who were originally employed on reduced hours contracts, or as remote workers.

The interviews were semi-structured in order to allow factors identified as important by the respondents to emerge (Rapley, 2004). Questions covered the interviewee's role, the nature of their flexible working arrangement, their motivation for altering their working pattern and their experiences of flexible working, including the impact on their work and on them personally. A range of demographic details were also gathered from each interviewee. We did not ask specific questions about the intensification of work, yet it emerged as a theme as we examined how flexible working impacted on their experience of work. In total 37 interviews were conducted with flexible workers who worked remotely and/or reduced hours. Fifteen were employed by the technology company, nine by the pharmaceuticals company and 13 by the consulting firm. Details of the interviewees are included in Table 1.

Table 1 - Interviewee profile

		Reduced hours	Remote	Remote and reduced hours
Men	No children		4	
	Pre-school children	2	1	
	School aged children		2	
	Data on children unavailable		2	
Women	No children		4	
	Pre-school children	9	1	7
	School aged children	2		3

All remote workers in the study spent part of their working week (typically one day) working from home. For those working reduced hours this ranged from 50–90 percent of full-time. All those working reduced hours had a formal arrangement to do so. However, of the 14 full-time remote workers, only five had a formal arrangement. We felt it was important to include those without a formal arrangement, since as Healy (2004) observes, in practice much flexible working is informal. All interviewees were in professional roles and the majority were engaged in some form of knowledge work. Professional workers were chosen since they are more likely to be able to exercise discretion over their working hours, location and effort (Felstead et al., 2002; Ibarra, 1999). Interviews lasted in the region of 45–60 minutes and were conducted in the workplace, during working time. With the permission of interviewees,

the interviews were audio recorded and subsequently transcribed. The data were analysed using template analysis (King, 2004), supported by the use of NVivo software. A key feature of template analysis is the use of hierarchical coding and based on part of the data set an initial template was produced as a result of discussion between the two researchers. The initial template was based on the preliminary coding and clustering of the codes. The template was modified and extended as further transcripts were examined by both researchers, allowing for a summary of emergent thinking and interpretation of the findings. Such an approach addresses reliability in line with Miles and Huberman's (1994) recommendations for ensuring high standards of qualitative research.

The questionnaire was distributed by email as a hypertext link and was sent to all employees in the division(s) being researched in each company. The questionnaire included sections asking about the respondent; the nature of their working arrangements; a range of attitudes and responses to their organization using existing scales. Job satisfaction was measured using Schneider et al.'s (2003) measure of Overall Job Satisfaction. Organizational commitment was measured using Cook and Wall's (1980) British Organizational Commitment Scale and stress was measured using Rose's (2005) measure of Work Related Stress. For each question participants were provided with a set of responses on a Likert scale (see Appendix 1 for details of questions and scales). A response rate of 24 percent was achieved, yielding 2066 responses across the three organizations. This included 729 remote workers and 228 on reduced hours contracts. The majority of those on reduced hours contracts worked a significant proportion of the working week, with 60.4 percent contracted to work 80 percent or more of full-time hours. Remote workers typically only worked remotely for a small proportion of the working week, with just over 70 percent (71.1%) spending one day or less away from the workplace. While we did not ask respondents to specify their remote location, discussions with the organizations' HR departments and in the focus groups confirmed that that overwhelming majority of this took place at home. Most remote working was an informal arrangement (76.3%), at the employee's own discretion (81.8%), and on an irregular basis (79.7%).

The questionnaire did not include questions specifically relating to work intensificaion, so with these data we were not able to analyse the relationship between work intensification and various employee outcomes. However, the findings on employee outcomes (job satisfaction, organizational commitment) provide a second source of data on these outcomes from a larger group of respondents in each organization. These, taken together with the qualitative findings, help to build a picture of how flexible workers responded to their jobs and their organizations. Furthermore, *T*-tests were used to compare the mean scores on employee outcomes of the flexible workers with those who had a non-flexible working pattern. There may be many factors that influence scores on measures of employee outcomes; however, if work intensification caused significant reactions among flexible workers, it would be likely to be manifest in comparisons of the scores of flexible and non-flexible workers.

In line with much existing research on the intensification of work, in this study our evidence is mainly based on self-report. While this approach may be limited by the employee's ability to recall circumstances at an earlier point in time, or prior to the introduction of an initiative, self-report is seen as a reliable indicator of work intensification (Burchell, 2002; Green and McIntosh, 2001). Moreover, in this study we were interested in understanding how flexible workers responded to their experiences of flexible working and therefore it was important to elicit their own accounts.

Findings

In this section we present evidence of employee experiences of flexible working. One of the themes to emerge from the initial analysis of the data set was work intensification. In the interview data we found widespread evidence of both reduced hours and remote workers experiencing work intensification through greater extensive and intensive effort. However, somewhat paradoxically, from the questionnaire responses we also found that flexible workers had more positive scores on measures of overall job satisfaction and organizational commitment than those who did not have flexible working patterns. We start by presenting data on these employee outcomes for flexible workers and non-flexible workers and from the qualitative data we provide some explanation for these findings. We then focus on our main theme of the intensification of work, which emerged from employee accounts of adopting a flexible work pattern. We examine the sources of intensification and the reactions of employees.

Both the interview and questionnaire data show that the flexible workers in this study were generally satisfied with both their jobs and their work–life balance and were committed to the organizations they worked for. On a number of employee outcomes measured in the questionnaire flexible workers recorded more favourable scores than those who did not work flexibly (see Tables 2A and 2B). Although the differences were small, *T*-tests showed that there were significant differences between the mean scores of both reduced hours and remote workers and non-flexible workers on overall job satisfaction and on organizational commitment.

In the interviews respondents explained their higher levels of job satisfaction by reference to the element of control that being able to work flexibly gave them. Remote workers reported that being able to exercise discretion over where they worked contributed to their satisfaction. Similarly, reduced hours workers reported that the opportunity to continue with professional, meaningful work was a source of satisfaction. Interviewees explained that being able to work flexibly was important to them and this meant that they felt loyalty to the organization for accommodating their particular working pattern. For those with a highly individualized working arrangement there was a common belief that it would be hard to replicate this arrangement elsewhere.

Table 2a - Comparing mean scores of reduced hours and non-flexible workers on overall job satisfaction, organizational commitment and stress

	Reduced hours		Non-flexible		t value	d.f.	p
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD			
Overall job satisfaction[a]	2.167	0.759	2.336	0.853	2.675	932	0.008
Organizational commitment[b]	2.732	0.901	2.958	0.952	3.159	931	0.002
Stress	2.66	0.797	2.845	0.938	2.697	932	0.007

[a]This scale is reverse coded, i.e. 1 = Very Good, therefore a lower mean score represents a higher degree of job satisfaction.

[b]This scale is reverse coded, i.e. 1= Strongly Agree, therefore a lower mean score represents a higher degree of organizational commitment.

Table 2b - Comparing mean scores of remote and non-flexible workers on overall job satisfaction, organizational commitment and stress

	Reduced hours		Non-flexible		t value	d.f.	p
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD			
Overall job satisfaction[a]	2.153	0.808	2.336	0.853	4.190	1446	0.000
Organizational commitment[b]	2.859	0.955	2.958	0.952	1.975	1445	0.048
Stress	2.727	0.819	2.845	0.938	1.546	1446	0.074

[a]This scale is reverse coded, i.e. 1 = Very Good, therefore a lower mean score represents a higher degree of job satisfaction.

[b]This scale is reverse coded, i.e. 1= Strongly Agree, therefore a lower mean score represents a higher degree of organizational commitment.

Contributing to this positive picture of flexible workers, those who worked reduced hours reported lower (albeit small) levels of stress than those who did not work flexibly. Reduced hours interviewees explained that having time away from work acted as a pressure valve for them. It should be noted though that for some interviewees working reduced hours was also a source of stress, such as the pressure to complete their workload in the time they had available. One interviewee described it as hard to 'escape the psychological commitment of having a five day-a-week job'.

However, in addition to this picture of enhanced satisfaction, greater commitment, and reduced stress, in the interviews we also found considerable evidence of flexible workers experiencing work intensification. In describing their experiences of flexible working, all but one of our interviewees indicated that they had experienced some form of work intensification. Greater extensive and intensive effort was exercised by both reduced hours and remote workers. Working over contractual hours and/or the normal pattern in the workplace was a dominant common discourse among interviewees. Many remote workers indicated that when they

worked from home the working day tended to increase, typically extending to the time they would be away from home if they were going to their workplace and although less frequently, in some cases beyond this time. Those who worked reduced hours also commonly reported working additional time when they were not scheduled to work. Discourse on working more intensively during working time was also widespread. Remote workers universally reported that they did more when they worked at home. Reduced hours workers similarly reported that they worked more intently when they were at work. These findings are in line with a number of other studies of flexible workers, which although not explicitly situated in the work intensification debate, have found flexible workers working when they are not scheduled to work and reporting greater effort when they are working (see for example, Baruch and Nicholson, 1997; Higgins et al., 2000; Major et al., 2002; Sigala, 2005; Skinner, 1999; van Echtelt et al., 2006).

In contrast, there were also a small number of cases where those who had reduced their hours felt that their work had become less, rather than more, intense. For instance, an interviewee who had reduced her hours when she returned to work after maternity leave reported that she was proportionately less occupied since her return to work. She attributed this to a view among those allocating work that not all types of work (in particular client facing work) were seen as suitable for reduced hours workers.

Overall, interviewees offered a variety of explanations of why their flexible working pattern had resulted in work intensification. We will examine these according to the three categories discussed earlier, imposed intensification, enabled intensification and intensification as a form of exchange, distinguishing between extensive and intensive effort.

Imposed intensification
More than half of our interviewees indicated that they felt intensification had been imposed upon them. Imposed intensification was, however, only reported by those on reduced hours contracts. A dominant discourse among these respondents was that their workloads had not decreased in line with their hours when they moved to a reduced hours contract and consequently they were doing something akin to a full-time job, but in fewer paid hours. This could result in both increased extensive and intensive effort. One interviewee commented:

> There is enough workload to keep me busy for five days, but I only have three days to do it in, so I either work late, which I do sometimes, or I try and delegate some of it.
>
> (Interviewee number 5, female, reduced hours, 60%)

Many reduced hours workers also expressed concern about the constraint on their time and reported that this forced them to be very focused while at work, exercising greater intensive

effort. One interviewee described their way of coping with the pressure of time constraint as:

> Just really being very structured in terms of 'This is what I've got to do', focus on the main
> priorities and not spend/waste time in many respects doing sort of low level tasks.
>
> (Interviewee number 27, female, reduced hours, 80%)

Although, a perhaps less overt form of imposition, it was also very common for reduced hours workers to report that they felt the need to be available at times when they were not scheduled to be working, but when the business was operating. This took the form of being prepared to take phone calls and checking emails at times they were not working. For example one interviewee reported:

> On a Monday, when I'm not at work, I'll typically put in forty minutes to an hour just checking my
> emails to make sure that I'm on top of any issues that come up, or that came up over the weekend
> . . . so I check the email at least once if not twice during the Monday.
>
> (Interviewee number 17, male, reduced hours, 80%)

The need to 'catch up' and 'get ahead' was frequently cited by reduced hours workers. This in itself may not be indicative of intensification, but may be more of a reflection of the extended hours norms in these organizations (82% of questionnaire respondents, flexible and non-flexible workers, indicated that they regularly worked over their contractual hours, with 49% reporting working more than five additional hours per week).

Enabled intensification

More than two-thirds of respondents reported that working flexibly enabled them to work more intently, exercising both greater intensive and extensive effort. However, in contrast to imposed intensification, the vast majority of those reporting enabled intensification were remote workers. All interviewees who worked from home for part of their working week indicated that they exercised greater intensive effort when they worked at home. Generally, this was explained by being able to focus on the task in hand more effectively when they were away from the distractions of the office, such as telephone calls, or conversations with colleagues. This was deemed to be particularly important in the two organizations where the office accommodation was organized on an open-plan basis. Respondents identified particular types of work, such as writing documents and analysing large volumes of data, which they were able to work on more intently in an environment with fewer distractions. Contrary to commonly held views about people being more likely to be distracted from work when working from home (Felstead et al., 2003) and documented evidence of these distractions (Harris, 2003; Tietze and Musson, 2005), the majority of respondents described their homes as having fewer distractions than their workplace.

Although a less common discourse, we found that some respondents working reduced hours

reported increased energy levels for work as a result of not being full-time. One explained:

> It's much easier to maintain your energy levels and enthusiasm if you're working for three days or four days, than if you're working for five days . . . and keep your efficiency up if you're just maintaining it over three or three and a half days, rather than five.
>
> (Interviewee number 19, female, reduced hours, 80%)

In addition to the potential for work intensification, this point raises an interesting wider question of whether traditional working patterns are the best means of optimizing work effort.

From a different angle, the provision of laptop computers and broadband connections by employers, to facilitate employees working from home, meant for some remote workers that it was difficult to switch off from work, both literally and metaphorically. One observed:

> Drawbacks are that you never really leave it behind . . . because I'm working from home and then I've got my PC on and it's in my study, I probably have to walk past my study probably thirty times in the evening and so you're always glancing at the screen because it, I don't know, somehow it's there isn't it? . . . Because I think oh if I just do that now it saves me a job tomorrow and you end up spending another thirty minutes and those thirty minutes add up.
>
> (Interviewee number 28, female, remote, two days)

While not confined to remote workers, the so-called 'electronic leash' resulted in greater extensive effort on the part of some remote workers.

Intensification as reciprocation and exchange

Rather more complex is the notion that flexible workers voluntarily exercise additional effort. Earlier, we reported the organizational commitment levels of remote and reduced hours workers and found them to be significantly higher than those who did not work flexibly. In line with influence of organizational commitment on employee effort (de Menezes and Wood, 2006; Green, 2004), we might expect some effect on the level of effort exercised by these flexible workers. The impact of commitment on effort was reinforced by a number of interviewees. For example, interviewee number 28 who reported greater extensive effort when she worked from home (see earlier quote) also commented on the 'loyalty' brought about by being able to work flexibly:

> So you have this kind of loyalty I guess, which is very deep seated to be honest, if people are prepared to treat you as a human being more and that's what it's about really. I'm not some kind of machine that has to be at the office at nine and five thirty, I actually do see myself in a more human way, which is around the commitment . . . when companies support you, you are naturally more loyal and more committed.
>
> (Interviewee number 28, female, remote, two days)

Another interviewee who, although he talked about the need to contain excessive additional effort, described his commitment as a result of having access to flexible working arrangements:

> You generally feel happier, making you a better worker and more committed, so that's a big effect on performance and the quality of work and you're a bit more passionate about the company that you work for.
>
> (Interviewee number 29, male, remote, one day)

We did not encounter much evidence of remote or reduced hours workers responding negatively to the intensification they experienced. There was little sense of interviewees feeling exploited. Instead, some intensification seemed to result from flexible workers voluntarily increasing their levels of effort in some form of trade or exchange. Almost 60 percent of our interviewees indicated an expectation of being required to give something in return for the changes to their working arrangements. For example, there was an expectation on the part of reduced time workers that they would exercise greater extensive effort and work beyond their agreed hours. One reflected:

> Did I expect that I'd be able to put my pen down on a Thursday night and not pick it up again until Monday morning? Probably not!
>
> (Interviewee Number 6, female, reduced hours, 80%)

Willingness to increase their effort stemmed for some from a general feeling of gratitude to their employer and for others it was more of an explicit trade of effort for flexibility. Gratitude to their employers for accommodating different working arrangements was a dominant discourse among both remote and reduced hours workers. The opportunity to tailor the way in which they worked to suit their own circumstances and preferences was highly valued by these professional employees, even if this was gained by the exercise of greater effort. As one commented:

> I love the fact that I can just get up and start work at eight in my pyjamas as opposed to driving here, drag myself in for nine to start work – so pure ease of doing my job.
>
> (Interviewee number 23, female, remote, one day)

Interviewee number 5 who reported imposed intensification (see quote above), also described her employer as 'allowing' her to work flexibly and described her reduced hours as a benefit, even though she had taken a pay cut in line with her reduced contractual commitment. For some it assisted them in combining family responsibilities with work; for others it allowed them to avoid long or stressful commutes, or simply to schedule work and non-work activities in the ways they preferred. For example:

> Working part-time, even if I work beyond my contracted hours, it still leaves a significant amount of time for me to spend with the kids and so for me it's a definite way to balance my home life and my work life.
>
> (Interviewee number 30, female, reduced hours, 60%)

There was much discourse around the notion of 'give and take' in the employment relationship and for some there was an explicit notion of trading. One employee described a situation where, by working additional hours at home in the evening, she felt at liberty to take her children to school and start work later than normal, because she was 'in credit' with the organization:

> I can stop working at six and then have four hours just doing what I need to do with the children at home, and then maybe do a couple of hours again. And then if I need, if I want to do the school run the following morning then I can do it because I'm kind of two hours in credit if you like.
>
> (Interviewee number 28, female, remote, two days)

For this member of staff working additional hours in the evening (to accommodate working with people in different time zones) was not seen as a problem; rather it was a process of trading, building up hours 'given' to the organization, in order to 'take' some back for personal activities. However, it is noteworthy that in this instance the give and take is unlikely to be equal; unless the school run took two hours the employee would be likely to remain in credit. While, the notion of 'give and take' was often referred to, in practice the trading of effort for flexibility was hard to equalize, since as a number of respondents indicated, the opportunities to recoup what was given by the employee were often limited.

These findings suggest that where employees voluntarily exercised additional effort this represents some form of social exchange (Blau, 1964; Homans, 1958). In return for a degree of flexibility or control, these flexible workers were prepared to exert additional effort. For many interviewees though this was not seen as a negotiated exchange, where the benefit was agreed in advance, but rather a reciprocal exchange that had evolved over time (Molm et al., 1999).

Interviewee number 6 who indicated that she expected to have to work over and above her reduced hours (see earlier quote) reflected:

> It's both helped me have a positive work life balance, because I can have these times on a Friday with my children, with my youngest. It also can have a negative affect on your work life balance, because I do far more work in the evenings than I ever used to do.
>
> (Interviewee number 6, female, reduced hours, 80%)

Unlike imposed and enabled intensification, where we did not observe notable differences

between the organizations in the study, the notion of exchange was less prevalent in the consulting organization (mentioned by only five of the 13 respondents). A possible explanation for this is that when asked about why the company offered flexible working options, most respondents from this organization indicated that it was to attract and retain high quality staff. Thus, these employees may have seen it as something the employer needed to offer to them in order to be competitive in the labour market, rather than as a privilege that generated an obligation.

Although critics of the work–life discourse question the degree of control available to employees (Caproni, 2004; Lewis, 2003; Lewis et al., 2007), the idea that these professional workers were exercising some degree of control over the amount of effort they were expending was supported by the strategies that some indicated they had adopted to attempt to limit the amount of additional effort they exercised. A remote worker aware of the need to consciously stop work explained:

> The last few weeks I've worked at home till seven, it's not been beyond that. I've kind of drawn the line at seven.
>
> (Interviewee number 29, male, remote, one day)

There were also instances of reduced hours workers attempting to make it clear that while they could be contacted in an emergency at times when they were not working, they were generally not available. For example, one respondent indicated that she encouraged colleagues to email her rather than to telephone, so that she could choose to check emails at times convenient to herself, rather than being interrupted in non-work time by a telephone call.

Discussion and conclusions

This study was designed to examine the lived experiences of flexible workers who have less face time in their workplaces, either as a result of working from home for some of the working week, or by working reduced hours. In line with a number of existing studies our questionnaire data showed that flexible workers had higher levels of overall job satisfaction (Hill et al., 1998; Hyman and Summers, 2004; Igbaria and Guimaraes, 1999) and organizational commitment (Grover and Crooker, 1995; Roehling et al., 2001) than their counterparts who did not work flexibly and in the case of those working reduced hours, lower levels of stress also (Almer and Kaplan, 2002; Thomas and Ganster, 1995). However, exploring flexible workers experiences in the interviews, we also found an unanticipated, somewhat paradoxical outcome of flexible working, that of work intensification.

In this article we have explored the theoretical case for flexible working as a cause of work intensification and have identified three broad means by which this might happen. A flexible

work arrangement may impose, or enable work intensification, or it may engender a sense of obligation from employees where they reciprocate with additional effort. The literature on the intensification of work provides some support for intensification being imposed (Kets de Vries and Balazs, 1997) and enabled (Green, 2004), but there has been little discussion of individual employees exercising additional effort as an act of reciprocation or exchange. We have drawn on social exchange theory (Blau, 1964; Homans, 1958; Molm et al., 1999) as a basis for this source of work intensification.

We have documented evidence of greater extensive and intensive effort being exercised by flexible workers with less face time in the workplace. We found support for each of the above as causes of work intensification among flexible workers, although this varied according to the form of flexible working. Imposed intensification was experienced by those working reduced hours, in circumstances where their workload had not been suitably adjusted in line with their hours. More subtly, reduced hours workers and also some remote workers reported that they felt the need to be available to the business, perhaps reflecting a recognition of the importance for those with less face time to be proactively available as contended by Van Dyne et al. (2007). Enabled intensification was mainly experienced by remote workers. They reported that they were able to exert higher levels of intensive effort, when they were away from the distractions of the workplace, in spite of the potential distractions in the home (Harris, 2003; Tietze and Musson, 2005). We also found that, facilitated by technology, some employees worked the time saved by not commuting to work, rather than using it for non-work activities. Intensification was also enabled for some reduced hours workers, who reported that they brought more energy to work as a result of not being full-time (Edwards and Robinson, 2004; Skinner, 1999). In addition, we found notable evidence of flexible working engendering responses that resulted in individuals exerting additional effort. This included both enhanced levels of organizational commitment and feeling the need to reciprocate the benefit of flexible working afforded to them by their employer.

We explain the apparent paradox of satisfied and committed workers alongside abundant evidence of work intensification, by contending that in addition to imposed and enabled intensification, flexible workers were extending some additional effort on a discretionary basis. The willingness to increase effort, we argue, was out of a sense of obligation. Using the principles of social exchange theory, we propose that employees, grateful to their employers for accommodating changes to their working arrangements, reciprocate by extending greater effort, a benefit to the employer. Both the need to reciprocate feelings of gratitude and more overt notions of exchange emerged as strong themes from our study. While no respondents reported explicit negotiations, where effort was seen to be traded for flexible working arrangements, this was more akin to negotiated exchange. Where additional effort was a response to gratitude, this was characteristic of reciprocated exchange that had developed over time (Molm et al., 1999). In addition, enhanced levels of organizational commitment among

flexible workers may also explain their willingness to increase their effort (de Menezes and Wood, 2006; Green, 2004). Other studies have shown that those working reduced hours are sometimes prepared to accept negative outcomes, such as marginalization, from reduced hours working with little resistance and this has often been explained as individuals seeing this as the 'price to be paid' for this type of working arrangement (Dick and Hyde, 2006). Our results suggest more than just an acceptance of work intensification as a consequence of circumstances. In line with Golden's (2001) findings, we argue that the opportunity to exercise some control over working arrangements was highly valued by respondents and that in return they were prepared to exercise additional effort. The high value attached to these working arrangements could account for employees being prepared to give seemingly more than they take in this exchange.

With a few exceptions, we did not find much evidence of the negative outcomes normally associated with the intensification of work (Burchell, 2002; Fairris and Brenner, 2001; Warr, 1987). Similarly, we did not encounter much voiced opposition to this intensification. Job insecurity has been cited as a reason why employees may accept intensification without resistance (Campbell, 2002). Although, we did not encounter concerns about job security, this still may be of relevance here. Since our respondents placed high value on their working arrangements, it could be argued that it was the security of their working arrangements that they sought to protect, rather than their jobs per se. Brannen et al. (2001) argue that in contemporary workplaces, with a prevailing rhetoric of greater personal autonomy, employees often see themselves as responsible for their own work intensification. To some extent these professional workers may have seen themselves as partly responsible and hence not voiced opposition. However, other studies have also found that employees do not always respond negatively to intensification, especially where they believe they will gain some benefit as a consequence (Kelliher and Gore, 2006).

At one level these findings are likely to be appealing to employers. Greater effort is being gained from employees, seemingly without the negative outcomes in terms of employee well-being normally associated with work intensification. In this vein these findings also add weight to the 'business case' arguments put forward to support the adoption of flexible working. However, this interpretation needs to be treated with caution, since if the cumulative, longer-term effects of work intensification brought about by flexible working are negative; this raises questions over the viability of these ways of working. Longitudinal research would be beneficial in tracking the on-going effects of flexible working. Furthermore, as legislative support increases and where flexible working becomes more commonplace, employees may be less inclined to feel grateful to their employers for accommodating their working pattern and consequently may see less of a need to offer something, such as increased effort, in exchange.

At a more general level the findings highlight the need for organizations to be aware of the potential for unanticipated outcomes of change initiatives. While organizational change programmes may be designed to achieve a particular goal and may be implemented in a planned manner, organizations are dynamic and the process of change may bring about additional and/or alternative outcomes. In this case a policy ostensibly about assisting employees to gain a more satisfactory work–life balance, also produced outcomes that could have negative implications for work–life balance and employee well-being in the longer term. With increasing legislative provisions to support flexible working in the UK and elsewhere, it seems likely that the number organizations offering flexible working options will continue to grow and hence there is a need for further research to develop our understanding of the full range of consequences of introducing these policies. The extant research examining the business case for flexible working, discussed earlier in the article, has tended to focus on specific outcomes representative of individual and organizational performance. Examining a broader range of outcomes and uncovering those that may not have been anticipated, would allow a more informed assessment of the business case to be made.

This research also illustrates the need for practitioners and future researchers to recognize that the implementation of different forms of flexible working may yield different results. Here two forms, both involving less face time in the workplace, have resulted in different forms of work intensification. While there may be combined effects of family friendly policies (Wood and de Menezes, 2007), research is also needed to understand how the introduction of different practices impact on organizations and the individuals involved. Furthermore, our findings identified a small number of cases where flexible working had resulted in work becoming less rather than more intense. It would be helpful for future research to examine the conditions under which flexible working need not be associated with work intensification.

The results presented here need to be seen in the context of the study undertaken and may not apply to other circumstances. First, this study confined itself to examining professional employees who had a degree of control over their jobs and therefore may have been able to organize their work more easily to accommodate flexibility. Recognizing that notions such as control need to be seen in the context of workplace culture and norms (Lewis, 2003; Lewis et al., 2007), it may be for workers carrying out different types of work in different workplaces that the outcomes would differ. Second, in this study we have only examined flexible workers who work reduced hours or who work at home for part of the working week. It may be that other forms of flexible working will yield different results. Consequently, research on different types of employee and different types of flexible worker would help ascertain the generalizabilty of these findings. Furthermore, we included both those with a formal flexible working arrangement and those who worked flexibly on an informal basis. It may be that the degree of formality has an influence on the behaviour of employees, therefore it would be useful to analyse differences between these groups more fully. The reduced hours and remote workers

in this study opted for these working arrangements. Where employees are required to change the location or amount of work they undertake, their experiences and responses may be very different. Finally, these findings emerged from a study designed to examine employee experiences of flexible working. It is recommended that further research is conducted designed specifically to investigate the implications for work intensification more fully.

In conclusion, in this article we have presented evidence of flexible working arrangements leading to work intensification. We have considered the theoretical case for flexible working as a cause of work intensification and have analysed our evidence on reduced hours and remote working in the light of this. Based on our findings, we posit that flexible workers perceive some form of obligation to arise from having the opportunity to change their working arrangements and that they respond to this obligation by providing benefit for their employer in the form of additional effort. Drawing on social exchange theory we have identified a form of work intensification, reciprocation, not widely discussed in the work intensification literature. We have contributed to this literature by furthering understanding of the factors at workplace level that contribute to work intensification. This research has contributed to developing our understanding of how flexible workers respond to their working arrangements. At least in part due to the predominant focus in the flexible working literature on the relationship with work–life balance, this is an area that has received limited research attention. Importantly, our findings show that employee responses to flexibility and intensification are not uniform. By using an in-depth qualitative approach to examine the experiences of flexible workers, we have highlighted the importance of understanding how workers interpret and assign meaning to their experiences.

Appendix 1: Items for overall job satisfaction, organizational commitment and stress scales

Overall Job Satisfaction (Schneider et al., 2003)

Considering everything how satisfied are you with your job? (VS–VD) Considering everything, how would you rate your overall satisfaction with your company at the present time? (VS–VD)

How would you rate this company as a company to work for compared to other companies? (VG–VP)

The endpoints for this five-point Likert scale were VS–VD = very satisfied – very dissatisfied; VG–VP = very good – very poor

British Organizational Commitment Scale (Cook and Wall, 1980)

I am quite proud to be able to tell people who it is I work for.

I sometimes feel like leaving this employment for good.

I'm not willing to put myself out just to help the organization.

Even if the firm were not doing too well financially, I would be reluctant to change to another employer.

I feel myself to be part of the organization.

In my work I like to feel I am making some effort, not just for myself, but for the organization as well.

The offer of a bit more money with another employer would not seriously make me think of changing my job.

I would not recommend a close friend to join our staff.

To know my own work had made a contribution to the good of the organization would please me.

The endpoints for this seven-point Likert scale were Strongly Agree – Strongly Disagree.

Work Related Stress (Rose, 2005)

I worry about problems after work.

I find it difficult to unwind after work. I feel used up

after work.

I feel exhausted after work.

The endpoints for this six-point scale were Never – All of the time.

Note

[1] In this article we have used the terms flexible and non-flexible workers to mean those who do or do not have a flexible work arrangement. While the use of the term 'flexible worker' is widespread, it is recognized that not all so-called flexible arrangements afford the employee significant flexibility. An employee with an arrangement to work reduced hours may in practice have no more flexibility than those who work full-time.

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