

Flexibility at work: Employee perceptions

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FLEXIBILITY AT WORK:

Employee Perceptions

by Rucha Bhate

Findings from:
The
Generations of Talent
Study



INTRODUCTION

Workplace flexibility is no longer just an innovative policy option for managing employees. It is also a critical requirement for companies to thrive in today's competitive and dynamic global business environment. The multinational nature of work calls for an ever-increasing use of flexibility in schedules, hours, and locations. Despite barriers related to monitoring, manager skepticism, and the potential for adverse effects on productivity, the gains from expanding workplace flexibility are far too compelling to disregard.

➤ This brief explores two main questions:

- How do employees view the impact of flexible workplace options on job performance and work/life balance?
- Are employees' perceptions of workplace flexibility significantly different across countries?

Why flexibility matters

An efficiently operated and carefully enforced comprehensive workplace flexibility program can be a winning situation both for employees and employers. Among the benefits to employers are improved employee morale and work engagement, better recruitment outcomes and workforce retention, and the enhanced productivity offered by a stable talent pool. Such gains can provide a competitive edge for any company. Among the benefits to employees are reduced stress on the job, better work/family and work/life balance, and improved physical and mental health.¹ As organizations evolve, workplace flexibility is likely to become the norm—an integral part of any organization's operating design.

➤ In this brief, workplace flexibility refers to the opportunity for employees and their supervisors to have some choice and control over when, where, and how work is done.

According to the theory of perceived organizational support, employees interpret certain aspects of an organization's environment, including workplace flexibility, as signals of the degree to which the organization understands and supports their needs.² Even if employees do not use the flexible work options available to them, simply knowing that they have these options helps them judge the extent to which the organization cares about their desires and well-being. In addition, research has shown that perceptions of organizational efforts to support work/life balance positively influence employees' commitment to their jobs, satisfaction with their work, and ability to handle their responsibilities at work and at home.³

¹ A study by the Boston College Center for Work & Family titled *Measuring the Impact of Workplace Flexibility* (2000) underscored the benefits that ensue when employers can trust their employees to make decisions about how to spend their time so that they are as productive as possible at work and as close to home as they can be. See also "Work-life Balance and the Economics of Workplace Flexibility" (March, 2010), a report of the Executive Office of the United States President and the Council of Economic Advisors, available at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/files/documents/100331-cea-economics-workplace-flexibility.pdf>.

² Eisenberger, R., Huntington, R., Hutchison, S., & Sowa, D. (1986). Perceived organizational support. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 71, 500-507.

³ Valcour, M., Ollier-Malaterre, A., Matz-Costa, C., Pitt-Catsouphes, M., & Brown, M. (2011). Influences on Employee Perceptions of Organizational Work-Life Support: Signals and Resources. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 79(2), 588-595.

The multinational study described in this brief explores the cultural underpinnings of the link between workplace flexibility and successful management of the demands of work and personal life. We sought to understand how employees in seven countries in various geographic regions⁴ view the impact of workplace flexibility on positive work outcomes (job success, work/life balance, and job commitment), after controlling for variations in demographic, socioeconomic, and job-related characteristics.

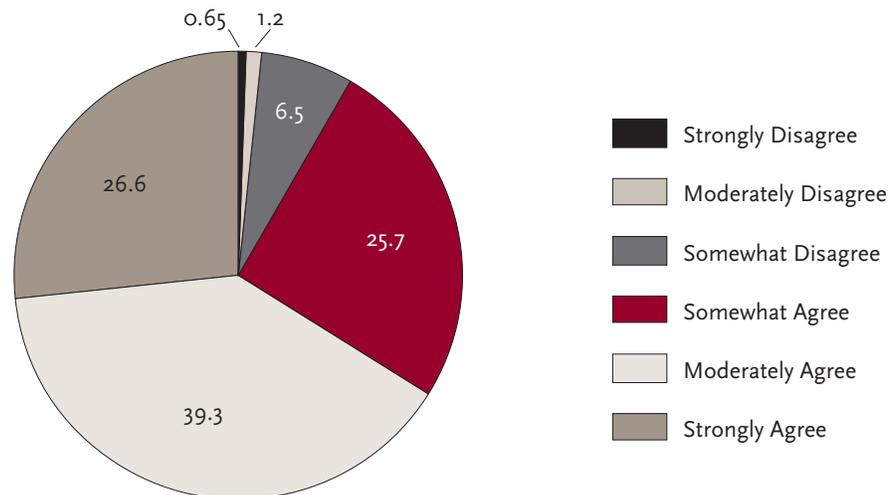
Perceptions of the impact of flexibility on job success, work/life balance, and job commitment

We based our study on responses to questions posed as part of a much broader survey conducted by researchers at the Sloan Center on Aging & Work.⁵ Workers were asked to rate on a scale of 1 to 6 the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with the following three statements, with 6 indicating strong agreement:

- The use of flexible work options contributes to employees' success at work.
- The use of flexible work options helps employees manage personal and family lives.
- The use of flexible work options increases employees' job commitment.

These questions probed workers' sense of a connection between access to flexible work options and job success, work/life balance, and job commitment. We used the combined responses to those three questions to create a measure of workers' confidence in the benefits of flexible work options for their job performance and in their personal lives. We call this measure the Flexwork Scale.

Figure 1. Employee confidence in the benefits of flexible work options⁶

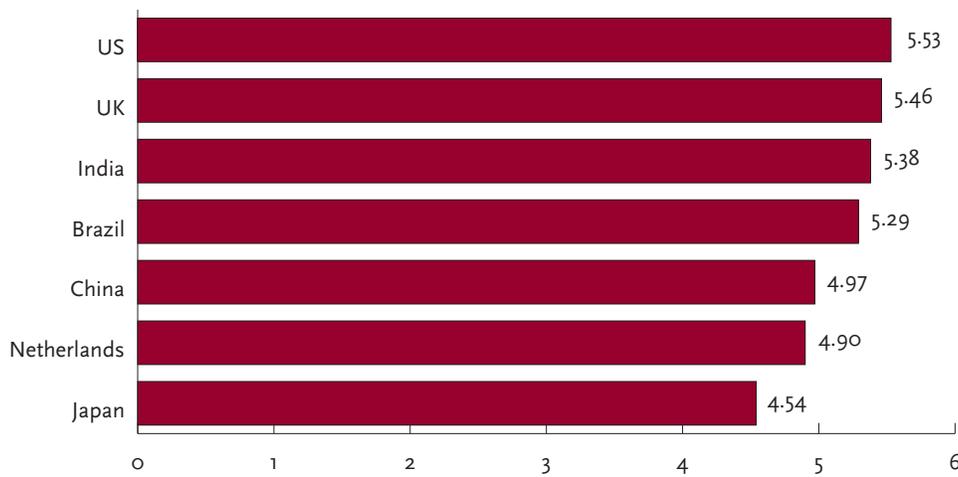


⁴ Our sample consisted of four developed countries (Japan, The Netherlands, the United States, and the United Kingdom) and three developing countries (Brazil, China, and India).
⁵ Reports from the "Generations of Talent" (GOT) study, funded by the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation, are available at <http://www.bc.edu/research/agingandwork/projects/genTalent.html>.
⁶ This figure shows the aggregate percentages of workers expressing the range of possible responses to the three survey questions designed to gauge employees' perceptions of the impact of flexible work options on their job performance and personal lives.

As illustrated in Figure 1 (page 3), we found that about two-thirds of all of the respondents (65.9 percent) in our seven-country sample moderately to strongly agree that workplace flexibility has a positive impact on job success, work/life balance, and job commitment. This finding reinforces the idea that employees across the globe recognize the virtues of workplace flexibility.

We then looked at the average of the scores workers gave in response to the three survey questions, broken out by country. These are shown in Figure 2, below.

Figure 2. Employee confidence in the benefits of flexible work options, by country*



* The numbers on the horizontal axis reflect the range of possible responses to the three survey questions, from 1 (“Strongly Disagree”) to 6 (“Strongly Agree”). The chart shows the average of all scores given in response to the three selected survey questions by workers in a given country.

From this country-level view of the data we reached the following conclusions:

- The four developed countries are divided in terms of prevailing perceptions of the value of flexible work options, with workers in the United States and the United Kingdom in moderate to strong agreement and workers in The Netherlands and Japan agreeing only somewhat or moderately.
- The three developing countries fall in the middle of the pack. In particular, India and Brazil exhibited average scores regarding perceptions of flexible work options that closely resembled those of the United States and the United Kingdom. This finding reflects the fact that employee confidence in the benefits of flexible work options is not confined to the high-income developed countries.
- Japan had the lowest average score on perceptions of the value of flexible workplace options, indicating that the respondents at Japanese worksites are less convinced than respondents elsewhere that workplace flexibility has a positive impact on work/family balance and job success.

Flexibility and sociodemographic characteristics

When we evaluated perceptions of flexible work options through the lens of sociodemographic characteristics such as gender, education, and caregiving status, several observations emerged:

- Female employees have more confidence in the positive impact of flexible work options than their male counterparts do.
- Employees with eldercare or childcare responsibilities, as well as those living with a partner, are more likely to perceive the positive impact of flexible work options than are employees without any caregiving responsibilities and employees who do not live with a partner.
- Employees with a graduate degrees are more likely to perceive the benefits of flexible work options than those without a college education. However, this is not to say that appreciation of flexible work options increases in step with education, because employees with an undergraduate degree had a mild but more negative perception of the benefits of workplace flexibility than those without a college education. This asymmetry is somewhat counterintuitive and could be an interesting topic for further exploration.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

About the Generations of Talent Study

To gather business-relevant information about the work experiences of employees of diverse ages who work in different countries, the Sloan Center on Aging & Work at Boston College conducted the Generations of Talent (GOT) Study.

From May 2009 through November 2010, the Sloan Center on Aging & Work collaborated with seven multinational companies. In total, 24 worksites in 11 countries participated in the study, and 11,298 employees responded to the survey. Employees were invited to complete one 30-minute online survey during work time, which they were able to access on a secure website. The survey was translated into Japanese, Mandarin Chinese, Brazilian Portuguese, and Spanish. It should, however, be noted that our sample is not representative of the entire population or the workforce in the participating countries.

The survey consists of core questions (questions that were included in the surveys made available to each respondent) and module questions (additional, complementary questions, a subset of which was randomly assigned to the respondents). The survey focused on employees' perceptions of their work experiences, workplace-based resources, demographic information, and employees' assessments of their health and well-being at work and in their lives in general.

Dr. Marcie Pitt-Catsouphes and Dr. Natalia Sarkisian were the co-principal investigators of the GOT study and worked with an international group of 17 colleagues.

About the Author

Rucha Bhate is a doctoral candidate in the Economics Department at Boston College and a graduate research assistant at the Sloan Center on Aging & Work. Her primary research interests include macroeconomics, international economics, and applied econometrics. At the Center, she has been a part of the Country Context studies and most recently the Generations of Talent project.

About the Sloan Center on Aging & Work

Established in 2005, the Sloan Center on Aging & Work at Boston College promotes quality of employment as an imperative for the 21st century multi-generational workforce. We integrate evidence from research with insights from workplace experiences to inform innovative organizational decision-making. Collaborating with business leaders and scholars in a multi-disciplinary dialogue, the center develops the next generation of knowledge and talent management.

Since our founding, we have conducted more than 20 studies in collaboration with employers: for example, studies on “Age & Generations,” “Talent Management,” and “Generations of Talent.” Studies under way are “Assessing the Impact of Time and Place Management” and “Engaged as We Age.”

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For more information about the Center, please visit: <http://www.bc.edu/agingandwork>

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