

Implementation of Flexible Work Arrangements for Sustainable Development

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ABSTRACT

Rapid globalization, the Internet-enabled on-demand economy, changing demographics, dynamism and flexibility in the workforce are redefining the landscape of work and inevitably lead to the changes in work arrangements. Flexible work arrangement (FWA) can be defined as a set of benefits provided by employer that lets employees to control over when and where they work outside of the standard arrangement. Although the concept of flexible work arrangements (FWAs) is quite widely analysed by scientific community during past decades, there is a lack of knowledge exploring the impact of flexible work practices on sustainable development. The purpose of this paper is to examine how flexible work arrangements can contribute to sustainable development at different levels of abstraction. Research methodology includes comparative analysis and synthesis of scientific literature, modelling, and empirical research in the form of survey and semi-structured interview. Research revealed that FWAs, when implemented with care and preparation, have a positive influence on sustainability at different levels of abstraction: individual level, company level, and society level. Benefits of flexible work practices turn up through three interconnected domains: economic, environmental, and social.

Keywords: flexible work arrangements, sustainability, sustainable development, employees, organization

1. Introduction

Sustainable development is a key challenge organizations are facing today. During the past years, there has been a growing pressure on business to pay more concern to the environmental and resource consequences of the products, services and processes, and the relationship of profit, people, and the planet (Kleindorfer, Singhal, Van Wassenhove, 2005). According to Kleindorfer, Singhal, Van Wassenhove (2005), Gimenez et al. (2012), Vveinhardt and Andriukaitiene (2014), Martens and Carvalho (2016), Stonkutė et al. (2018) sustainability integrates social, environmental, and economic responsibility in order to create a rational use of present resources and to offer normal life for future generations.

The challenge is in integrating issues of sustainability with products, services, processes and work practices companies deploy (Kleindorfer, Singhal, Van Wassenhove, 2005; Blake-Beard et al., 2010; Gimenez, Sierra, Rodon, 2012). There is a pressure to be agile, adaptive, and aligned in balancing concerning the relationship of profit, people, and the planet, integrating environmental, health, and safety concerns on product design, operations, and supply chains (Kleindorfer, Singhal, Van Wassenhove, 2005; Vveinhardt and Andriukaitiene, 2016; Martens and Carvalho, 2017). Companies implement different

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technological solutions, environmental programmes and work practices aimed to improve environmental, social and economic performance dimensions.

Information revolution and digital technologies have forced companies to unbind time and task from place enabled common, even synchronous activities to be distributed across employees at remote locations (Gajendran and Harrison, 2007). Decentralized and flexible work arrangements have been proclaimed by different researchers as a way for companies to reduce expenses, cope with variations in demand, and be more attractive for employees.

Employees prefer flexibility in working time and location in order to suit their preferred, more individualized life-styles and to be able to better combine paid work with other life activities (Possenriede, 2014). Work-family balance has important implications for individuals, organizations, and society, and attracts attention from researchers analysing different intersection of work and family domains (McNall, Nicklin, Masuda, 2010), benefits and risks implementing flexible work practices.

The policy on work-life balance is mainly based on the assumption that changes in the profile of the workforce and in shifting expectations, both of the employer and the employee, are demanding reorganization of work practices to ensure that the company keeps up with the competition and that employees achieve work and life balance (Eldridge and Nisar, 2011).

Growing interest in the use of flexible working policies is expressed in a number of research works that have examined the various forms of flexible working practices and contributed to understanding of the outcomes for individuals, organizations and society (Kelliher and Anderson, 2010).

Although topics of flexible work arrangements and sustainability are widely analysed by scientific community during past years, the intersection between these two fields is still scarce with just a few studies focused on both of these topics.

The study aims to fulfil this gap by identifying how flexible work arrangements can contribute to sustainable development at different levels of abstraction. The research design applies multi-method approach, combining systematic and comparative analysis of scientific research works, modelling, survey and semi-structured interview.

2. The Importance of Flexible Work Arrangements in the Context of Sustainability

Sustainability integrates economic, social, and environmental dimensions concerning the relationship of profit, people, and the planet. Economic dimension refers to the sustainability of businesses and its human resources in sustainable wealth creation processes; environmental sustainability can be defined as impact of products and operations on environmental degradation including the company's related emissions and waste; social sustainability means impact of products or operations on human rights, labour, health, safety, regional development, and other community concerns (Katsoulakos and Katsoulacos, 2007; Blake- Beard et al., 2010).

Social, economic, and environmental challenges have become increasingly complex, forcing organizations to innovate, manage change, adopt new activities (Martens and Carvalho, 2017) and work arrangements.

The traditional work arrangement is characterized by a well-defined work domain with strict temporal and spatial boundaries, and employees are expected to tend to personal matters on their own time (Rau and Hyland, 2002). Until now quite many today's work arrangements still carry the imprint of the Industrial Revolution (Gajendran and Harrison, 2007), do not provide enough flexibility for today's workforce, and do not match changing environments, circumstances, and needs.

The Internet-enabled on-demand economy, the rise of IT-based work platforms that support new distributions of work tasks, the convergences of mega-trends including digital disruption, artificial intelligence, smart industry, and global connectivity are redefining the landscape of work (Madden, 2016; Mar, 2016, National Academies of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine, 2017). The world of work is changing, and it implies the necessity to move away from older, more traditional, less flexible ways of working (Lake, 2013). Changes in markets, technologies, composition of the workforce and life styles create new contexts in which companies have to organize their work processes. Lake (2013) denotes the following nine trends that provide context for change in moving towards more flexible work practices:

1. Lean organizations, re-engineering and outsourcing;
2. Growing percentage women in the workforce;
3. Demographic and workforce changes;
4. Individualism and personal autonomy;
5. Blurred boundaries between work and home;
6. Globalization;
7. Decline of manufacturing, growth of service economy and knowledge economy;
8. Spread of ICT in work practices and personal life;
9. Environmental awareness.

Work practices and arrangements appear to be particularly crucial among the policies that prevent work-family conflict that occurs when employees try to balance work and family responsibilities. According to Choo, Desa, and Asaari (2016), employees experience this type of inter-role conflict when time spent on work activities and requirements puts the employee in a difficult position to the ability fulfil family needs. Unsatisfactory employee work-life balance is measured by three indicators: coming home from work too tired to do some of the necessary household jobs; difficulty in fulfilling family responsibilities; and difficulty in concentrating at work (Eurofound, 2013).

Demand for individualized, employee-oriented arrangements and practices those permit temporal and spatial flexibility in work processes and help to fit changing environments and needs is constantly increasing. A growing number of organizations offer a range of flexible working options to their employees. The share of establishments offering one or another type of work flexibility is constantly rising.

According to Lambert, Marler, and Gueutal (2008), flexible work arrangement (FWA) is defined as a set of employer provided benefits that permit employees some level of control over when and where they work outside of the standard workday. It includes flexible and restructured full-time options, reduced work-time options and off-site options (Blake- Beard et al., 2010). Morgan (2014) emphasizes that flexible work typically consists of three things; allowing employees to work anytime, anywhere, and

focusing on outputs instead of inputs. Flexible working policies give employees more freedom and higher degree of choice manage competing work and family domains and attain a balance between work and personal life in today's 24/7 global economy (Possenriede, 2014). This helps them to achieve a more satisfactory work–life balance (Kelliher and Anderson, 2010).

The most of researchers agree on two broad groups in terms of flexibilities: temporal flexibility and place flexibility (Ciarniene and Vienazindiene, 2018). Temporal flexibility refers to flexibility in the scheduling of hours worked and flexibility in the amount of hours worked. Place flexibility involves flexibility in the choice of geographical location of the workplace, referring to work conducted at home, satellite location or on move to meet the changing needs of employers and employees.

Flexible work structures can have different combinations of temporal and place flexibility. According to Thompson, Payne and Taylor (2015) three different combinations of temporal and place flexibility could be emphasized: flex-time without flex place; flex place without flex-time; and flex place with flex-time.

Various types of work flexibility give benefits for both employees and employers. Analysis of theoretical research works and empirical studies of Rau and Hyland (2002), Osnowitz (2005), Gajendran and Harrison (2007), Shockley and Allen (2007), Casper and Harris (2008), Joyce et al. (2010), Kelliher and Anderson (2010), McNall, Nicklin, and Masuda (2010), Eldridge and Nisar (2011), Carlson et al. (2011), Dutcher (2012), Lee and DeVoe (2012), Booth and van Ours (2013), Chapman (2012), Lake (2013), Cotti, Haley, and Miller (2014), Possenriede (2014), Gordon (2014), Choo, Desa, and Asaari (2016), Heathfield (2016), Taylor (2016), Ciarniene and Vienazindiene (2018) let to reveal the main benefits of flexible work arrangements on sustainability dimensions (see table 1).

Table 1. The main benefits of flexible work arrangements

Sustainability dimensions	Benefits of flexible work arrangements	
	For employees	For the employer
Economic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Less rush-hour commutes • Reduced consumption of time and fuel • Ability for people to work when they accomplish most • Increased job performance and productivity • Money saved on going out for lunch • Decreased external childcare hours and costs • Less consumer-driven lifestyle 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Activities matched according to customer demand, better customer coverage • Increased job performance • More efficient use of equipment and facilities • Saving on office space, furniture, equipment, and electricity • Saving on water, coffee, paper towels, and etc. • Fewer parking spots required • Increased productivity and profitability
Social	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Better work-life balance • Increased personal control over work schedule • Ability for people to work when they accomplish most • Less disruptions of the office environment • Reduced employee burnout • Increased morale, engagement, and commitment • Higher levels of job satisfaction 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased ability to attract, retain and motivate employees • Betterwork possibilities for elder and disabled people • Increased employee morale, engagement, and commitment • Reduced absenteeism, tardiness and turnover intent • Higher job satisfaction and organizational attachment • Family-friendly employer image

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lower levels of strain • Positive effect on health outcomes • Better possibilities for education and training 	
Environmental	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Less rush-hour commutes • Reduced consumption of time and fuel • Reduced air pollution • Higher recycling and waste reduction • Less consumer-driven lifestyle 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Saving on water, coffee, paper towels, and similar • Higher recycling and waste reduction • Environment -friendly employer image

The main benefits of FWAs are related with reduction of different type of resources both for employee and company, increased productivity, better work-life balance, less strain, higher employee satisfaction, and better health outcomes. These benefits can be considered through main sustainability dimensions: economic, environmental, and social.

3. Modelling the Implementation of Flexible Work Arrangements

While the benefits of FWAs are commonly recognized, in every case introduction of flexible working practice implies a change. As with any change process, some resistance, risks and disadvantages can occur.

Based on the literature analysis conducted, figure 1 presents theoretical conceptual model of flexible work arrangement implementation in the context of sustainability.

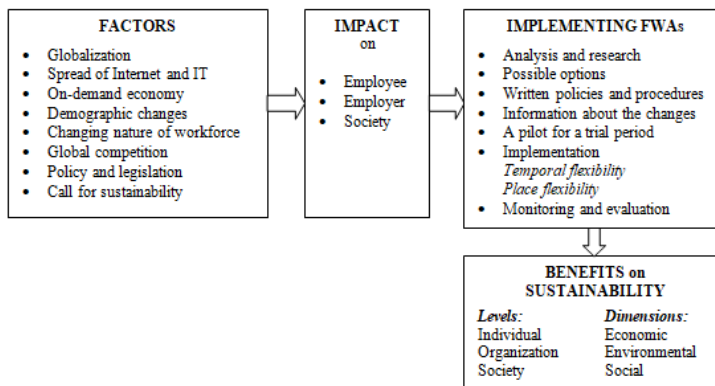


Figure 1. Theoretical conceptual model of flexible work arrangement implementation

Global changes in technologies, economy, demography, composition of workforce and life styles call for higher flexibility in work arrangements. Although creation and implementation of flexible work practices is not always an easy solution, the need for redesigning the workplaces into those with higher level of flexibility is employee, employer and society driven. It is essential for today's employees to ensure work-life balance and for employers to attract and retain top talent, improve performance, increase productivity and profitability, and be pro-environmentally oriented.

In order to take advantage of FWAs, organizations should prepare to move towards more flexible work environment and practice. The following main steps are important when implementing flexible work arrangements in the company:

1. Analysis of flexible work options, all the pros and cons of instituting a flexible work program in the company, e.g., impact on clients; benefits for employees and the organization.
2. Identification of possible options and areas within organization as potential candidates of the new program. According to Morgan (2014), typical candidates for flexible work usually start in marketing, sales, and PR departments.
3. Development of basic guidelines or principles of flexible program, written policies and procedures for implementation and monitoring of FWAs.
4. Presentation of all the necessary information about changes in work practices to all stakeholders.
5. Running a pilot for a trial period to get a feedback and place for improvement.
6. Revision and modification of the program after a pilot, if necessary.
7. Monitoring and evaluation of a flexible work practice, making sure customers' needs, employees' expectations and company's goals will be met in the best way.
8. Implementation of FWAs to a larger scale.

FWAs, when implemented after analysis and preparation effectively serve a triple purpose contributing to the needs on micro and macro levels, when meeting the needs of individuals, goals of the company, and providing benefits to society as a whole. Benefits of FWAs can be considered through economic, environmental and social issues.

Economic benefit for employees is gained when they decrease expenses for commuting to work, going for lunch, and for childcare. Employers that adopt flexible workplace benefit from better customer coverage and improved performance; reduced expenses for office space, furniture, equipment, electricity, and other recourses; and increased productivity. FWAs also contribute to organizations' global competitiveness as their workforce is able to interact with customers and clients all around the world flexibly in terms of hours and locations. Family-friendly and pro-environmental employer image are also important factors to consider. According to Gray (2014), organizations that value corporate social responsibility and the environment need to recognise flexibility as part of this.

Employees clearly gain from workplace flexibility not only because of economic matters. Working fewer hours, having flexible start and finish times make it easier for people to take public transport, ride or walk travelling between home and the workplace. Flexible working arrangements contribute to more environmentally friendly workplaces with less traffic congestion, less fuel consumption, and lower emissions. Research of Chapman (2012) revealed that satisfaction with flexible working arrangements, regularly working from home, and having access to leave and flexible hours are associated with better pro-environmental outcomes at work and at home. Better work-life balance tends to lead to lower levels of stress and higher levels of satisfaction, makes a positive effect on mental and physical health.

Flexible work practices are recognized to be attractive supporting continuing education and training. FWAs can contribute to the problems society faces with regard to ageing and shrinking of working population, as workplace flexibility offers good options for various groups of population, e.g., students, mothers with small children, retirement-age people, and disabled to be in the workforce and to continue as productive participants in society. Higher people engagement to labour market increases the number of taxpayers meanwhile decreasing the number of people utilizing social security. All this makes a

positive contribution to the welfare of the whole society.

According to Gray (2014), the key to living more sustainably is mainly about the choices that individuals and society make, but having the option to adapt our work practices to support a more eco-friendly lifestyle can play a big part in enabling these choices.

4. Empirical Research

Research goal was to disclose employee satisfaction about existing flexible work practises and their benefits in the context of sustainability.

Research methods. The quantitative and qualitative research methods were used for the study. On the basis of scientific literature analysis the empirical research instruments in the form of a survey and semi-structured interview were created.

The quantitative research data were collected from a sample of 316 employees. Informants of semi-structured interview were six top level managers, representing Lithuanian manufacturing and service companies applying flexible work practices. The quantitative research has been carried out in March – June 2017, the qualitative in January 2018.

The idea of quantitative research was to find out employee's satisfaction about existing flexible work practises and their benefits. Table 2 presents respondents satisfaction in applied forms of flexible work arrangements.

Table 2. Satisfaction in applied forms of flexible work arrangements

Forms of flexible work arrangements	Assessment, %		
	Unsatisfying	Neither satisfying, nor unsatisfying	Satisfying
Total time accounting	14,8	21,7	63,5
Overtime	32,7	13,8	53,5
Flexible beginning and end of working time	7,4	6,9	85,7
Shift work	20,2	33,5	46,3
On-call work	23,3	46,6	30,2
Flexible lunchtime schedule	0,0	5,1	94,9
Compressed workweek	8,6	25,3	66,1
Part-time work	0,0	6,1	93,9
Work on weekends	46,6	22,8	30,7
Flexible working time during a week	0,0	27,5	72,5
Annual working hours	0,0	56,1	43,9
Standby duty at home	19,9	50,7	29,5
Coordination of work at home and in the office	10,3	0,0	89,7
Work at home	8,6	33,3	58,0
Telework in another remote place	9,3	18,0	72,7
Long-term part-time work load	31,1	23,2	45,8
Job sharing	28,2	28,7	43,1
Work on demand	28,1	26,3	45,6
Flexible vacation time	0,0	5,7	94,3

The research results indicate that employees are most satisfied in flexible lunch schedule, flexible vacation time, part-time work, flexible beginning and end of working time,

coordination of work at home and in the office, flexible working time during a week, and telework in another remote place. Highest discontent was determined for such forms of flexible work organization as work on weekends and overtime.

Table 3 presents employees’ responses on benefits of flexible work arrangements. Research results show that FWAs are really attractive for employees in economic, social and environmental dimensions as they help to decrease costs for childcare, travelling to work, food, and outfit; coordinate work and family interests; work with reference to state of health; increase work efficiency; decrease unemployment, and are ecologically attractive.

Table 3. Benefits of flexible work arrangements

Benefits of flexible work arrangements	Assessment, %		
	Disagree	Neither agree, nor disagree	Agree
Increases working efficiency	0,0	40,8	59,2
Helps to coordinate work and family interests	0,0	2,7	97,3
Decreases stress, positively affects health	0,0	41,2	58,8
Less rush-hour commutes	0,0	36,4	63,6
Less costs for travelling to work, food, outfit	0,0	10,0	90,0
Decreased external childcare hours and costs	0,0	3,5	96,5
Favourable for persons tendering disabled, elder people	0,0	17,6	82,4
Possibility to work with reference to state of health	0,0	17,6	82,4
Improves environment -friendly employer image	0,0	45,2	54,8
One of the ways to decrease unemployment	4,4	36,4	59,2
Ecologically attractive	4,4	40,0	55,5

The purpose of qualitative research was to find out employers’ attitude on the benefits of FWAs in the context of sustainability. Table 4 presents employers’ responses on economic benefits of FWAs including three subcategories: 1) more efficient use of resources; 2) increased productivity; 3) increased profitability.

Table 4. Economic benefits of FWAs

Subcategories	Statements
More efficient use of resources	<FWAs help to save on office space, equipment, and electricity.> (I1 and I2) <...We disclosed more efficient use of equipment and facilities...> (I3 and I6) <...work conducted at home, satellite location or on move helped us to save on water, coffee, paper towels, and similar...> (I4 and I5) <...when employees work at home, fewer parking spots are required...> (I3 and I6).
Increased productivity	<...possibility to balance work and family interests leads to increased job satisfaction...> (I1) <We noticed positive an impact of flexible work schedules on employees engagement and productivity... > (I2, I4 and I6) <...increased personal control over work schedule leads to better work results...>(I5)
Increased profitability	<...saving on resources increased profitability of the company... > (I4 and I3) <...increased productivity made a positive impact on profitability...> (I2 and I6)

Research results revealed the main economic benefits of FWAs: more efficient use of equipment, facilities, and office space; saving on electricity, water, paper and etc.; fewer parking spots are required. Informants noticed that application of FWAs also made a

positive impact on productivity and profitability.

Environmental benefits of flexible work practices are presented in table 5. This category was divided into two subcategories: 1) conservation of natural resources; 2) emissions and waste minimization.

Table 5. Environmental benefits of FWAs

Subcategories	Statements
Conservation of natural resources	<p><...there is no necessity to spend time in traffic jams...> (I3)</p> <p><...consumption of time and fuel is minimized when you can select work schedule ...> (I2 and I6)</p> <p><...using public transport during non-rush-hour helps to reduce fuel and emissions ...> (I4 and I5)</p>
Emissions and waste minimization	<p><Working at home you don't have to go by car, thus air pollution is reduced. > (I1)</p> <p><...Less emission leads to less air pollution...> (I2 and I6)</p> <p><Application of flexible work arrangements helps to reduce waste and create pro-environmentally oriented employer image.> (I4 and I5)</p>

Responses of informants showed that application of FWAs makes positive impact on environmental issues saving natural resources, minimizing waste and pollution, creating pro-environmentally oriented employer image.

Social benefits of flexible work practices are presented in table 6. This category was divided into three subcategories: 1) employment of various groups of population; 2) positive effect on health outcomes; 3) employer image.

Table 6. Social benefits of FWAs

Subcategories	Statements
Employment of various groups of population	<p><Because of workplace flexibility good options for mothers with small children and retirement-age people are in our company.> (I1)</p> <p><...disabled people have better options to be in the workforce...> (I2)</p> <p><...we practice to employ elder people and parents with small children according to the goals of the company and needs of employees...> (I3 and I6)</p>
Positive effect on health outcomes	<p><When employees combine paid work with other life activities better, they feel better and are more engaged.> (I1)</p> <p><...possibility to select start and finish time has positive impact on health outcomes...> (I2 and I3)</p> <p><...better work-life balance reduces strain...> (I5)</p> <p><...work flexibility reduces burnout...> (I4)</p>
Employer image	<p><...organizations that apply flexible work practices are more family-friendly...> (I2)</p> <p><Conservation of natural resources create environment -friendly employer image. > (I3 and I6)</p>

Analysis of social benefits revealed that FWAs are important as means for better employment options for various groups of population, have positive effect on employees health outcomes, help to create family-friendly and environment-friendly employer image.

Conclusions

Globalization, the fourth Industrial revolution, spread of digital technologies, on-demand economy, necessity of better customer coverage, changes in work force

composition, social, environmental, and economic responsibility call for higher workplace flexibility, force companies to unbind time and task from place, and raise the opportunity to adjust working practices to changing circumstances.

As a theoretical contribution our study shows that flexible work arrangements when implemented with preparation and care, effectively serve meeting the needs of individuals, demands of the company, and providing benefits to society as a whole through the main sustainability dimensions.

Results of quantitative and qualitative research have proved the findings of scientific literature analysis towards flexible work arrangements in the context of sustainable development. Empirical research revealed that respondents are satisfied with existing options of flexible work practices. FWAs are attractive from both employee and employer perspectives, balancing the relationship of profit, people, and the planet, providing the benefits in economic, environmental and social domains.

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