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More flexibility, better results? Issues in R&D work efficiency

Marko Virkebau, Aaro Hazak, Kadri Männasoo

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MARKO VIRKEBAU*, AARO HAZAK*, KADRI MÄNNASOO*

Abstract

Flexible working time and teleworking have provided grounds for debate among employers, employees, researchers and HR experts. With our study among 153 Estonian creative R&D employees we seek to better understand what the links are between flexible work arrangements and creative work results. We find that flexibility in choosing to work fully or at least partially from home or elsewhere outside the office has a positive effect on the employee's satisfaction with his/her work results. In regard to working time arrangements, we find that men as well as those with a better education have much better chances of getting jobs that offer flexitime. This in turn has implications for the work outcome, as positions that include flexible working time options are filled by a certain type of employee. Another result from our research is that clearly evening and clearly morning types of people – “owls” and “larks” – are in general more satisfied with their creative work results. This may be due to part of their creative work being done outside normal office hours, providing a potentially less stressful work environment. Overall, employers should consider providing employees more flexibility in the timing and place of work in order to facilitate improved work results – at least in creative R&D jobs.

* Department of Economics and Finance, Tallinn University of Technology
Corresponding author: Marko Virkebau, marko.virkebau@ttu.ee

Mida paindlikum töökorraldus, seda paremad töötulemused? T&A valdkonna töökorralduse tõhususest

MARKO VIRKEBAU*, AARO HAZAK*, KADRI MÄNNASOO*

Kokkuvõte

Paindlik tööaeg ja kaugtöö on nii ettevõtjate, töötajate, teadlaste, personalivaldkonna ekspertide kui ka poliitikakujundajate hulgas palju väitlusainest andnud teemad. Meie uuringu eesmärk on paremini mõista, kuidas mõjutavad paindliku tööaja ning kaugtöö võimalused teadus- ja arendustöötajate töö tulemusi. Varasemad uuringud ei ole nendes küsimustes andnud üheseid vastuseid ning T&A valdkonna töö spetsiifikat pole varasemalt põhjalikult käsitletud. Meie uuringus osales 153 töötajat üheteistkümnest T&A-ga tegelevast ettevõttest ja teadusasutusest. Uuringu tulemused näitavad, et kaugtöö tegemise võimalus mõjutab positiivselt töötaja rahulolu oma töö tulemustega, st võimalus kas alaliselt või kasvõi aeg-ajalt kodust töötada tõstab töö tunnetatavat tulemuslikkust. Tööajakorralduse osas aga ilmnes, et paindliku tööaja pakkumine saab suurema tõenäosusega osaks meessoost ning parema haridustasemega töötajatele. Rohkem haritud töötajad on seejuures oma töötulemustega rohkem rahul, samuti on mehed rahulolevamad kui naised. Paindliku tööaja võimaldamine avaldab seega töö tulemustele mõju seeläbi, et paindliku tööajaga ametikohad täidetakse teatud kindlat tüüpi töötajatega. Seetõttu on nii kaugtööl kui töö ajalisel paindlikkusel selge mõju töö tunnetatavatele resultaatile ning T&A valdkonna tööandjate huvides peaks olema suurem paindlikkus töökorralduses. Olles tuvastanud uuringus osalenute seas nõ õhtu- ja hommikuinimesed ning "tüübitud" selgus, et kindlalt õhtust või hommikust tüüpi töötajad on töö tulemustega rohkem rahul kui need, kellel selge õhtu-hommiku-profiil puudub. Selle ilmingu põhjused võivad omakorda olla seotud tööajakorraldusega – tavalisest "üheksast viieni" tööajast varem või hiljem tehtud loominguine T&A töö võib potentsiaalselt vähemate segavate faktorite tõttu olla tulemuslikum.

* Majandusanalüüsi ja rahanduse instituut, Tallinna Tehnikaülikool
Autorite kontaktisik: Marko Virkebau, marko.virkebau@ttu.ee

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MARKO VIRKEBAU*, AARO HAZAK*, KADRI MÄNNASOO*

Why does the efficiency of research and development work matter?

The arrangement of working time for employees is a controversial topic often debated by entrepreneurs, corporate HR professionals as well as policy makers. Due to a high demands placed on their top talents, companies are increasingly considering flexible working options such as possibilities to work remotely or during non-standard working hours. However, it is far from clear whether those flexible options improve the work outcomes of employees in practice.

One of the areas where the effects of flexible work are especially important is research and development (R&D). Creative R&D employees are a distinct group of employees who often require more freedom (of mind) for their intellectual work and they are therefore interested in taking advantage of flexible working options. Improving the effectiveness of R&D employees can contribute to the results of R&D activities in an economy, and therefore lead to improved growth possibilities in the long run.

What has previously been found on the nexus of work results and flexibility?

The effects of flexible working have been extensively studied since the 1970s (Golembiewski & Prohl, 1978). Previous studies have investigated various types of employees in a number of countries, but the conclusions remain mixed. While recent theoretical frameworks (e.g. Tan, 2016) suggest that more freedom at work improves work results, the empirical evidence to date has produced inconclusive results. More support has been found for a positive relationship between flexible working and work results, but many studies have also uncovered no association between those aspects (De Menezes & Kelliher, 2011). In more recent studies (Sarbu, 2014; Golden, 2009), the research focus has shifted to investigating the personal

* Department of Economics and Finance, Tallinn University of Technology
Corresponding author: Marko Virkebau, marko.virkebau@ttu.ee

characteristics that could potentially mediate the relationship between flexible work and its effects. This would mean that flexible work has different effects on the work results of distinct types of employees. Interestingly, none of the previous research projects has studied R&D employees in particular.

How does work arrangement relate to creative R&D work results?

We studied 153 creative R&D employees in Estonia with the goal of understanding the relationship between flexible work options and work outcomes. However, when analysing the data, we uncovered that these relationships are not always straightforward. We discovered that the availability of flexible working time has an effect on the results of work through a job selection mechanism. This means that employees who choose or get positions with flexible working time, are in many ways different from other employees. It is noteworthy that males as well as those with better education are more likely to choose jobs that offer flexible working options.

We find that those who have the option of working remotely, for example from home, are in general more satisfied with their work results. This could mean that the home environment is more suitable for R&D employees to achieve quality in their work.

Another interesting result from our study is that those who are of an evening or morning type are considerably more satisfied with their work results compared to the people who do not have a particular morningness-eveningness profile. This may be due to part of their creative work being done outside normal office hours in a potentially less stressful work environment. This finding suggests that as employees have different natural sleep regimes, employers should not try to fit them all into the same standard nine-to-five workday regime.

Interestingly, higher work hours also lead to improved satisfaction with work results. This could mean that professionals need more than the standard 8 work hours per day in order to achieve acceptable quality.

Overall, our study on creative R&D employees has identified several new aspects of flexible working and work results, which are dependent on the personal characteristics of the employees. Providing flexible working options could have important consequences on job selection and also on achieving better R&D work results. These results can be used by HR

professionals for designing flexible work programs that take into consideration personal differences.

We examine the above topics in more detail in our forthcoming academic paper (Hazak et al., 2017). This study is part of a broader research project on the effects of working time arrangements on work results, the perceived health effects and individual well-being of Estonian creative R&D employees (see www.ttu.ee/ta2). Moreover, it is part of a larger effort by the research group to investigate the individual, institutional, financial and market driven aspects of development in R&D and knowledge intensive societies. We hope that these papers and research briefs help to stimulate discussion on these important topics in society.

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