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Using flexitime – for better work or a better life? Issues in R&D work efficiency

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Abstract

Providing flexible working time has become increasingly popular among employers with the purpose of improving efficiency or making jobs more attractive for employees. It is still quite unclear, however, what the motivating factors are in different types of employees in terms of using flexitime. Based on our survey among 153 Estonian creative R&D employees, we find two distinct groups of reasons for the use of flexible work – some aim to improve the work results while some wish to achieve a better work-life balance. Younger and better educated employees, as well as those who sleep less hours at night appeared to be more aimed at better work outcomes through the use of flexitime. Those with larger families, however, appear to value options for improving the work-life balance more when using flexitime. It is important that employers understand that flexible working time is attractive for different types of employees, and for different purposes. This, in turn, may have an impact on what kinds of employees the employer is able to recruit or maintain.

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Paindliku tööaja kasutus – paremaks tööks või paremaks eluks? T&A tööajakorralduse tõhususest

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Kokkuvõte

Üha enam ettevõtteid üle maailma katsetavad paindliku tööaja programmidega, mille eesmärgiks on enamasti kas parandada ettevõtte majandustulemusi või olla atraktiivsemaks tööandjaks valdkonna parimatele spetsialistidele. Siiski on tihti ebaselge, millist mõju paindlik tööaeg millist tüüpi töötajatele omab. Varasemad teadusuuringud on jõudnud seisukohale, et need mõjud on keerukad ja tihtipeale seotud konkreetse inimese isikuomadustega. Meie uuringus osales 153 Eesti teadus- ja arendustöötajat, kelle vastuseid analüüsidest joonistus välja, et paindliku tööaja kasutamisel on kaht tüüpi põhjuseid – positiivsed mõjud töötulemustele ja positiivsed mõjud elu sotsiaalsetele (eeskätt perekondlikele) aspektidele. Eri tüüpi inimesed tunnetasid seejuures tööaja paindikkuse mõju erinevalt. Nooremad ja kõrgemalt haritumad töötajad tajusid suuremat mõju töötulemustele. Samuti tunnetasid paindlikust tööajast tulenevat positiivset mõju töötulemustele need, kes magavad öösel vähem ning kellel on probleeme tervisega. Mida suurema osa tööajast pühendab töötaja loovatele tegevustele, seda suuremaks paindliku tööaja tunnetatav positiivne mõju osutus. Nooremad töötajad tunnevad lisaks paranenud töötulemustele ka seda, et paindlik tööaeg parandab nende töö- ja eraelu kvaliteeti. Suuremate peredega töötajad tajuvad aga pigem, et paindlikul tööajal on negatiivne mõju töö kvaliteedile, kuid samal ajal positiivne mõju nende elu sotsiaalsetele aspektidele. Tööandjad peaksid teadvustama, et eri tüüpi inimestel on erinevad põhjused paindliku tööaja kasutamiseks ning paindliku tööaja võimaldamine või mittevõimaldamine ei oma kõigile samasugust mõju. Seega peaksid tööandjad põhjalikult läbi mõtlema paindliku tööaja võimaldamise võimalikud tulemused ja mõjud sellele, kuidas see võib nende töötajaskonda ja töötajate motiveeritust kujundada.

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Using flexitime for better work or a better life?

Issues in R&D work efficiency

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An era of flexible working

As the career paradigms and the traditional standards of work are changing, companies and other undertakings around the world are experimenting with flexible working programmes. Some companies implement flexible working options simply to stay competitive in a dynamic labour market, while others believe those programmes could enhance the productivity of their employees and thereby lead to better economic performance and sustainability. However, the effects of flexible working programmes on individual employees are not straightforward and companies often struggle to understand what exactly is going on after those options have been made available. Some employees decide to use flexible options, while others do not – often due to perceived opposition from supervisors and declining career prospects. Some clearly feel positive benefits, while others perceive at best no benefit from those options. While previous studies note the complexity of those relationships (De Menezes & Kelliher, 2011; Hazak et al., 2017), the effects of flexible work remain difficult to understand.

Why use flexible working options?

Considerable attention in research has been dedicated to understanding which types of employees participate in flexible working programmes. For example, some studies have found that gender, age and family situation determine whether an individual joins or not (Almer, Cohen & Single, 2003; Giannikis & Mikhail, 2011). They claim that women are more likely to take advantage of flexible working options as the work-family conflict is commonly more persistent for females. In addition, younger and more highly educated employees seem to be more eager to take advantage of those opportunities (Kossek, Barber & Winters, 1999;

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Sharpe et al., 2002); the likelihood increases further when professionals have young children. It is safe to say that the research focus has been increasingly dedicated to the kinds of personal characteristics that have an effect on how flexibility affects employees. However, the decision to use flexible work options also depends on the expected benefits from using these options.

In our study, we investigated the reasons for using flexible working options and also examine what types of employees perceive which benefits from flexible working. We focused on R&D employees in Estonia and surveyed 153 employees from 11 entities.

When asked about the reasons for using flexible working options, we find distinct groups of reasons prevail for the use of flexible work. Seventy-eight (78%) per cent of employees with flexitime possibilities in our sample answered that flexible working time contributes to their productivity, and 68% claimed that they perceive a positive effect on their working ability. On the other hand, 68% of the respondents feel that time flexibility allows them to achieve a better work-life balance, and 63% perceive that flexibility allows them to better serve the needs of their close ones. Overall, there seems to be two distinct streams of motivations for using flexible options – some aim to improve their work results while some wish to achieve a better work-life balance.

Individual characteristics matter

As individuals have different reasons for using flexitime, designing flexible work programmes becomes even more complex. In order to account for personal differences and maximize benefits from those programmes, companies and other employers of creative R&D employees need to understand which types of employees perceive which kind of benefits.

As in previous studies, our work indicates that younger and more educated R&D professionals perceive more of the benefits from flexible working. These groups of employees feel that flexibility allows them to improve the results of their work. Younger people are in general more open to trying new things and experimenting with other forms of working besides the standard 9 to 5 workday at the office. Higher education in turn seems to indicate that individuals are more “in control” of their work tasks and time management, and therefore do not need the discipline of rigid working regulations. Interestingly, household size also affects the perceived effects from flexibility on work quality, as those with large

families feel they benefit less from flexibility. We think those with children sense that flexitime could disrupt the boundaries between work and family life, and therefore in the end have a negative effect on work results as well. We find that there are other significant factors influencing how flexibility affects work outcomes; for example, employees with limited sleep hours and weaker health feel more of the benefits on work quality. In this case flexibility could help those employees to use their productive work time more efficiently.

In addition to the positive impact on work results, younger employees also feel that flexibility has a positive effect on their social and family-related affairs. We believe younger generations are better able to switch from work to family time, and therefore benefit more from being able to mix work and life according to their preferences. As one might expect, those with large families also perceive benefits in their social life due to flexibility.

Why offer flexible working options and how?

Employers need to acknowledge that employees have different reasons for using flexitime and that the effects of flexible working programmes are not uniform for all the employees. In turn, the reasons employers use flexitime can also be based on different underlying motivations. Some employers offer those options to improve the results of their employees, and therefore impact the financial results of their institutions, while others offer those possibilities only to attract top talent to their company.

Flexibility programmes cannot be identical for all employees, especially in the case of a specialist workforce such as R&D employees. In order to achieve their objectives, companies need to understand the characteristics of their employees and carefully consider which groups of employees should be offered flexibility options.

We would like to highlight the broader context of this research brief as part of a series on the links between working time arrangements and work results and health among Estonian creative R&D employees (see www.ttu.ee/ta2). Furthermore, the larger goal of our research group is to investigate the individual, institutional, financial and market driven aspects of development in R&D and knowledge intensive societies. We believe that these interrelated studies are able to facilitate discussion and the implementation of related managerial and governance decisions.

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