

Flexible workers and their willingness to show extra-role behaviour

Relation of paper to Ph.D. project: The paper gives a description of the theoretical model that I developed on the basis of interviews for my Ph.D. project. I just finished to collect questionnaire data (n≈500) intended to test the model empirically using quantitative data. At the time of the workshop I will be able to report on results from data analysis.

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Abstract

Today's labour market faces a gradual but accelerating growth of non-traditional, flexible employment arrangements (e.g. temporary workers, freelancers). However, little is known about work-related attitudes and behaviours of flexible workers. In my paper I will thus develop a model predicting willingness to show extra-role behaviour for highly skilled flexible workers. The model is based on existing literature as well as in-depth interviews conducted with flexible workers (n=28).

The model consists of two main assumptions: First, it is assumed that commitment in the workplace (conceptualized as commitment towards supervisor, co-workers, work tasks, and the organization) is positively related to extra-role behaviour of flexible workers. This relationship is expected to be moderated by preference for flexible work such that the relationship is stronger if preference is high. Second, if flexible workers believe that extra-role behaviour is instrumentally useful for gaining a permanent position they will be more willing to show extra-role behaviour. This relationship is expected to be stronger if preference for flexible work is low (moderating effect).

Currently this model is tested empirically using questionnaire data from about 500 respondents, mainly IT-freelancer, interim-managers, journalists and temporary workers with varying professions.

The world of work and the interaction between organizations and their members is changing. Today's labour market faces a gradual but accelerating growth of non-traditional, flexible employment arrangements. The traditional standard employment arrangement – working full-time on a permanent contract, performing work at the employer's place of business and under the employer's direction (Kalleberg, 2000) – is losing its significance especially in the Western hemisphere but also in other parts of the world (Connelly & Gallagher, 2004).

Flexible employment is characterized by both a limited time frame and weak mutual contractual obligations (Polivka & Nardone, 1989; Quinlan & Bohle, 2004). Typical examples for flexible employment are temporary workers, leased workers, independent contractors, and freelancers as well as employees working on fixed term contracts.

Although there has been some research on flexible employment (for an overview see Connelly & Gallagher, 2004; Guest, 2004), the following statement of Pfeffer and Baron (1988, p. 258) still holds true: "Much of contemporary organization theory takes for granted the existence of a workforce subjected to hierarchical or bureaucratic control [...] and relatively "attached" to the organization, with a clear boundary between those who are inside the organization and those who are not."

As this is no longer valid for a rising number of workers the need to further investigate the implications of flexible employment arrangements on work-related behaviour and work-related attitudes is evident. From an organizational point of view, it is especially important to learn more about the factors that influence the performance of flexible workers. Work performance is usually divided into in-role-behaviour and extra-role-behaviour (Organ, Podsakoff, & MacKenzie, 2006; Williams & Anderson, 1991). In the context of flexible work-arrangements extra-role behaviour is even more important to look at. There is a growing tendency to staff positions with flexible workers that require a high level of qualification (Guest, 2004). For this kind of positions it is difficult to control workers' performance on quantitative terms,

sometimes it is even difficult to closely monitor it or to strictly define expectations beforehand. Therefore, organizations strongly depend on workers' willingness to perform well – and beyond formal requirements.

This paper focuses on highly-qualified workers taking up a flexible employment arrangement. It is the aim of this paper to develop a model predicting the willingness to engage in extra-role-behaviour for this kind of flexible workers. As extra-role behaviour is discretionary by definition it is supposedly related to work-related attitudes. Therefore this paper also refers to the theory of affective commitment. A review of the existing research suggests that it is also important to take into account flexible workers' evaluation of the flexible work arrangement ("preference for flexible work"). As was stated before research on flexible workers is limited. The process of developing a model is therefore enriched by an explorative qualitative study that was conducted for this purpose.

The paper is organized in the following way: First of all, extra-role behaviour and affective commitment are defined. This is followed by a short review of the research on flexible workers. Afterwards, information is given about the interviews conducted and the process of analysis. Then the findings from the interview study are presented. That is followed by the development of several assumptions based on the findings from the literature review and the interview study.

Extra-Role Behaviour

Extra-role behaviour – also called Organizational Citizenship Behaviour (OCB) – is defined as „individual behaviour that is discretionary, not directly or explicitly recognized by the formal reward system, and that in the aggregate promotes the effective functioning of the organization” (Organ, 1988, p. 4). It is generally assumed that employees' extra-role behaviour improves organizations' ability to transform, to adapt and to innovate (Organ, 1988) –

capabilities that are crucial to organizations' success within a market that is shaped by globalization, competitiveness and technological advancement.

If extra-role behaviour is operationalized in questionnaires it usually is divided into subdimensions. Number and names of the subdimensions vary; the dimensions most often used are altruism, courtesy, sportsmanship, civic virtue, and conscientiousness (Organ et al., 2006).

Sometimes discussions arise around the topic of extra-role behaviour not being subject to formal reward system. This could be interpreted in such a way that only those kinds of behaviours may be called extra-role that can not be used by employees to generate organizational reward (Hui, Lam, & Law, 2000). However, the fact that extra-role behaviour is *not explicitly recognized by the formal reward system* does not necessarily mean that extra-role behaviour may not be connected to favorable organizational outcomes for the employee especially on the long run (Organ et al., 2006). It is more important to realize that the nature of extra-role behaviour makes it difficult if not impossible for the organization to interfere if workers withhold extra-role behaviour. In contrast, if workers withhold in-role behaviour organizations have a formally defined repertoire of possibilities to intervene.

To sum up, although extra-role behaviour may lead to favourable outcomes for the worker it is discretionary. That means that it is left to the employee's willingness to decide if he/she wants to engage in extra-role behaviour (Coyle-Shapiro, 2002; Organ, 1988). This paper thus aims at identifying variables that influence flexible workers' willingness for extra-role behaviour¹.

Commitment

Commitment is usually defined according to the three-component-conceptualization by Meyer and Allen (1991). They propose that commitment may be divided into affective, normative, and continuance commitment. Affective commitment is the component that is analysed most often in the literature (cp. Wright & Bonett, 2002). It has been found to be more strongly

related to indicators of employee performance than normative and continuance commitment (cp. Felfe, Schmook, Six, & Wieland, 2005; McElroy, 2001). Affective commitment denotes an emotional attachment to, identification with, and involvement in the organisation (Guest, 2004). This paper will also focus on affective commitment².

Originally, commitment was mainly discussed as organizational commitment. However, it soon became obvious that commitment towards the organization is not the sole focus of commitment within the work context. Today several foci of commitment in the workplace are discussed in the literature, e.g. commitment towards supervisor, work group, and work task (Cohen, 2003).

Emergence of commitment can be explained drawing on the theory of social identity (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Tyler, 1999). Individuals are thought to use social groups to obtain favourable identity-relevant information shaping their sense of self and creating feelings of self-worth and self-esteem (Tyler, 1999). Memberships of groups in the workplace are valuable sources for such kind of information.

Research on flexible work arrangements

Studies comparing the level of extra-role behaviour of flexible and permanent workers have lead to inconsistent results. Ang and Slaughter (2001), Van Dyne and Ang (1998) as well as Coyle-Shapiro and Kessler (2002) found lower levels of extra-role behaviour for flexible workers than for permanent workers. However, Coyle-Shapiro and Kessler (2002) found a stronger the relationship between perceived organizational support and extra-role behaviour for flexible workers than for permanent workers. In the study by Van Dyne and Ang (1998) the level of extra-role behaviour was contingent on the level of organizational commitment for flexible workers. Flexible workers surveyed by Pearce (1993) and Feather and Rauter (2004) showed higher levels of extra-role behaviour than their permanent counterparts.

Although study results are incoherent and were obtained under a broad variety of working conditions, some conclusions can be drawn. What can be seen is that flexible workers do engage in extra-role behaviour and that the level of extra-role behaviour may even equal or exceed that of permanent employees. At the same time, it is obvious that it is necessary to extend and revise the theories developed for permanent workers if they are to be applied for flexible workers as well. Although workers' attitudes about their workplace like commitment and satisfaction have already been identified as important predictors of performance they seem to be even more important if flexible workers are concerned.

Some studies also investigated predictors of extra-role behaviour for flexible workers. Felfe et al. (2005) interviewed temporary workers in Germany analysing several commitment foci and their relationship with extra-role behaviour. Organizational commitment as well as commitment towards temporary work turned out to be significant predictors for extra-role behaviour. Support for a significantly positive relationship between organizational commitment and extra-role behaviour was also found by Liden, Wayne, Kraimer, and Sparrowe (2003) investigating temporary workers and by Coyle-Shapiro, Morrow, and Kessler (2006), who surveyed long-term contracted workers.

Marler, Barringer, and Milkovich (2002) found that work satisfaction and organizational commitment were significantly correlated to extra-role behaviour. Additionally they divided the temporary workers under study into two categories, traditional temporary workers and boundaryless temporary workers. The two groups differed in their motives for taking up temporary work (voluntary decision vs. involuntary), in age and education.

Feldman and Turnley (2004) analyzed the importance of relative deprivation in the context of flexible work arrangements and extra-role behaviour. In the work-context, relative deprivation means that individuals think that they want and should have a better job situation than they have now and feel angry about the current job situation (Feldman & Turnley, 2004, p 296).

Investigating adjunct faculty in the US they found relative deprivation and work satisfaction to be positively correlated to extra-role behaviour.

Again, as stated above, work satisfaction and commitment prove to be of relevance if extra-role behaviour of flexible workers is concerned. However, another variable comes into play: Although differently defined and operationalized three of the studies cited above included a concept that is based on some kind of evaluation of the flexible employment arrangement by the worker. Feldman and Turnley (2004) refer to it by the construct of relative deprivation, Marler et al. (2002) include voluntariness and Felfe et al. (2005) commitment towards temporary work.

Flexible workers' evaluation of their employment arrangement, i.e. their preference for either a flexible or a permanent work arrangement, has been subject to research in the past. Most authors who analyze this topic categorize flexible workers as "voluntary" or "unvoluntary" (e.g. Feldman, Doeringhaus, & Turnley, 1995; Krausz, 2000). Surveys on voluntariness usually come to the conclusion that 20 % to 45 % of flexible workers voluntarily chose a flexible work arrangement (Ellingson, Gruys, & Sackett, 1998; Feldman et al., 1995; Guest, 2004; Marler et al., 2002). Voluntary flexible workers are generally found to show higher levels of work satisfaction than involuntary flexible workers (Ellingson et al., 1998; Feldman et al., 1995; Krausz, 2000; Krausz, Brandwein, & Fox, 1995; Silla, Gracia, & Peiro, 2005).

The relationship between preference for flexible work and extra-role behaviour as well as preference and commitment is less clear as research on this topic is scarce. Generally, the construct of preference for flexible work is yet not clear defined. Work by Ellingson et al. (1998) and Feldman (1995) points to the direction that dichotomous measurement most authors are using does not cover all facets of preference³.

Up to now there has been scant research on commitment in the workplace regarding flexible workers. Research including several foci of commitment is even more scarce and mainly

concentrates on shedding light on the problem of dual organizational commitments⁴ (e.g. Connelly, Gallagher, & Gilley, 2007; Coyle-Shapiro et al., 2006; Felfe et al., 2005; Liden et al., 2003). In his review, Guest (2004) comes to the conclusion that flexible workers either show the same or slightly lower levels of commitment to the organization where they work, so there is no reason to assume that flexible workers are not or only to a minor degree committed towards the workplace.

To sum up, attitudes towards the workplace, especially commitment and work satisfaction, seem to be of relevance if analyzing flexible workers' extra-role behaviour. Additionally, preference for flexible work is of importance, although this concept needs further clarification.

Interviews: Methodology and Procedure

As was shown above, literature on flexible workers and their willingness to perform extra-role behaviour is scarce. Therefore and prior to the development of the theoretical model, 28 interviews with flexible workers were conducted. The aim of the interviews was to learn more about the relationship between flexible workers and the organization they are currently working at. The main topics of the interviews were preference for flexible work, commitment in the workplace as well as extra-role behaviour.

Sample: 28 flexible workers from Germany and Switzerland were interviewed (12 women and 16 men). Interview partners varied regarding age (20 to 60 years) and career stage, had different professional backgrounds (e.g. school-teachers, journalists, IT-freelancer) and included several types of flexible work arrangements (e.g. freelancers, employees on a fixed term contract, project-based employment and temporary workers). This broad variety was chosen by purpose because it was the aim of this study to see if it is possible to find variables that are generally important for extra-role behaviour of flexible workers.

As the focus of this research is on highly qualified flexible workers all interview partners had some kind of higher education. A majority of the interviewees had graduated from university and/or had completed some kind of vocational training. However, some of them did not hold a formal degree; instead their high qualification was due to long years of on the job-experience.

Procedure: An interview guide was prepared in advance to secure that all topics were covered within in each interview and to provide terming on the topics of interest that is understandable to the interviewees. However, the sequence of questions was not fixed but depended on the way the conversation took. Interviews took place face-to-face or via telephone. They lasted between 45 to 90 min. Most of them were recorded and fully transcribed afterwards. In four cases recording was not possible, so extensive notes were taken by the interviewer during and after the interview. 17 of the interviews were conducted by the author of this paper; the remaining 11 were conducted by a graduate student after extensive instruction by the author. Naturally all interviews and analysis were conducted in German; translation into English is only done for the purpose of this paper.

Analysis: On the basis of the transcripts interviews were re-written as cases using the main topics of the interviews as guiding principles. Main topics are – as stated above – preference for flexible work, commitment in the workplace (including various foci), and extra-role behaviour as well as the relationship between those constructs. These topics were identified by the literature review and served as a framework for further analysis providing theoretical understanding. Cases were than analyzed and compared to each other looking for emergent patterns.

Methodological Issues: It is the aim of qualitative research to make sense of the social world of the individuals studied by trying to reconstruct their view of their world (Wiseman, 1979). In this paper, the findings from the interviews will be used in the process of developing a model, as the literature to draw on for this purpose is scarce and inconsistent. It is obvious that

limitations are inherent to the qualitative approach, i.e. it is not possible to generate results that provide generalizability. However, it is important to note that this is not the aim of the paper. The aim of this paper is to develop a model that can be subject to quantitative empirical testing afterwards.

Interviews: Findings

A summary of the findings from the interviews structured along the main topics is presented below. Quotes from the interviews, translated into English by the author, are used to add voice to the text and to provide additional insights for the reader. For reasons of confidentiality, interviewees were numbered, the letter attached to the number indicates the sex of the individual (F=female, M=male).

Preference: As expected the interviewees differed in the degree to which they preferred flexible employment. Whereas some stated that they would prefer permanent employment, others preferred to have a flexible employment arrangement. About two thirds of the interviewees were able to state which kind of employment arrangement (permanent vs. flexible) they would prefer (11 preferred a permanent work arrangement, nine a flexible one). However, a third group emerged as well; eight of the interviewees were not able to state a clear preference. It seemed that the type of work-arrangements did not matter so much to them (e.g. “I am mainly interested in directing. Whether this is in a permanent position or whatsoever...” M26/stage director). There was a tendency for those from this group to be more or less satisfied with their actual work situation. After all, they also expressed *some degree* of preference, however it would not have been possible to sort them into one of the two categories of voluntariness.

Typical statements within this third group are: “I very much appreciate to have that. Because I thought, after I was quitting permanent employment, that’s it.” F21/teacher; “Because you always have to ask, what’s connected to it. So, let’s say, yes, I would prefer [permanent employment] if everything else was different. As it is not different, but it is like it is, I prefer to have less security.” M27/stage director; “It wasn’t a decision taken consciously, it just happened.” F19/personnel consultant.

Interestingly, none of those who stated a preference for flexible work said that he/she would never again consider permanent employment; it was just deemed to be unlikely as they would only consider it under certain conditions and were not looking for it at the moment. The reverse was true for those who preferred permanent employment; e.g. not all of them were currently looking for a permanent position.

It became obvious that in line with the findings by Ellingson et al. (1998) and Feldman et al. (1995) that a dichotomous classification into the categories of ‘voluntary’ and ‘involuntary’ is not able to reflect the several degrees of preference stated by the interviewees. For the ease of presentation I will stick to the three groups as they were introduced, however it is important to note, that they are not homogenous. However, preference should be defined and measured along a continuum as individuals reported various degrees of preference for a flexible or a permanent position.

Commitment:

Regarding commitment interviewees were asked whether and whom or what they felt attached or obliged to or identified with if thinking about their workplace. Generally interviewees stated the need and desire for commitment, identification and integration at the workplace. Commitment towards co-workers, supervisor and work-tasks was described more often and as stronger than organizational commitment (e.g. “If you have three levels, the individuals who work here, the organizational structure and the product itself, I would divide it as follows: 80 % people, about 15 % the product and maybe about 5 % the whole organization.” M1/journalist). Whether commitment towards supervisor and co-workers or the work task was more important or stronger differed between the interviewees. Some of those who preferred flexible employment reported very low organizational commitment (e.g. “I don’t care what happens to the organization.” H2/IT-freelancer). Really high levels of organizational commitment were only described by some of those who preferred a permanent position.

In line with the conclusion drawn from literature, flexible workers thus appear to be willing to invest emotionally into an attachment to their workplace – the relationship is not reduced to an economic transaction. Affective commitment seems to arise primarily from work done and the individuals met at the workplace. As membership of the organization is limited in time flexible workers are probably less prone to develop affective commitment to the organization itself.

Extra-Role Behaviour:

Interviewees generally report to be apt to engage in extra-role behaviour. The kind and the amount of extra-role behaviour they relate to engage in depends on their commitment and aspired incentives. A clear connection between commitment and extra-role behaviour appeared in the interviews. Those who reported to be attached to the work task also reported to behave on behalf of the fulfilment of the work task even if this exceeded formal requirements.

Interviewees reporting commitment towards their co-workers also said that they helped their co-workers with their work etc. However, extra-role behaviour was also used to make a good impression, primarily by those who preferred to have a permanent position (“Of course, indirectly, I was hoping, that something’s [permanent employment] going to result from this job and that’s the reason you want to do it well.” F12/teacher).

However, a limitation to the willingness to engage in extra-role behaviour also emerged from the interviews. Three of the flexible workers who preferred flexible employment had vainly been hoping for a permanent position within the organization they were currently working for. Those three said that after it became clear that their hopes will not be fulfilled they decided to reduce their engagement and cut back all kinds of behaviour that were not obligatory. However, the three said that they still felt committed towards their co-workers and the work task. But the disappointment from not getting a permanent position was so strong that they tried not to let their commitment have an influence on their behaviour.

This points to the direction that low levels of preference for flexible work may disrupt the connection between commitment and extra-role behaviour.

To sum up, the interviews confirmed the conclusions from literature that flexible workers are committed towards the workplace and engage in extra-role behaviour and that there is a connection between the two. However, extra-role behaviour was also used for instrumental means. Additionally, the interviews helped to clarify the importance of preference for flexible work.

Model Development

On the basis of the literature review and the findings of the interviews commitment clearly emerges as a predictor of extra-role behaviour of flexible workers.

For this research, commitment in the workplace is conceptualised as commitment towards co-workers, commitment towards supervisor, commitment towards work tasks and organizational commitment. Supposedly flexible workers' commitment arises from everyday-interaction with their co-workers and from working on the assigned work task as well as temporary membership to the organisation. Successful completion of work as well as mastering challenges and positive interaction may lead to the development of attachment and identification resulting in affective commitment because it provides information positively shaping social identity. Holding a positive attitude about the workplace and having positive feelings about the situation at work will likely enhance workers' willingness to engage in extra-role behaviour.

Hypothesis 1: Commitment in the workplace is positively related to extra-role behaviour of flexible workers.

Extra-role behaviour is discretionary and implies workers' willingness to act on behalf on the organization beyond formal requirements. However, if workers do have a low preference for flexible work this may lead to a disruption – even if they still feel committed about the workplace, they will no longer be willing to invest additional time and energy on behalf of the organisation.

Hypothesis 2: Preference for flexible work moderates the relationship between commitment in the workplace and extra-role behaviour such that the relationship is stronger if preference for flexible work is high.

One of the conclusions drawn from the interviews was that flexible workers report to show extra-role behaviour because they want to attain a certain goal. This tactic was primarily reported by flexible workers who did not prefer flexible employment and hoped to gain a permanent position. Feather and Rauter (2004) who found higher levels of extra-role behaviour for flexible workers than for permanent workers also assumed that extra-role behaviour was used instrumentally by their respondents to raise the chances for permanent employment.

That extra-role behaviour is used to reach certain goals in the workplace was shown by a study by Hui et al. (2000) who examined extra-role behaviour in the context of promotion. Wheeler and Buckley (2001) developed a model predicting performance behaviour of flexible workers assuming that instrumentality for gaining a permanent position is always an incentive for flexible workers to work harder. However, keeping in mind that a substantial percentage of flexible workers prefers a flexible work arrangement it is likely that this assumption does only hold for those who want to find permanent work.

Hypothesis 3: Perceived instrumentality of extra-role behaviour will be positively related to extra-role behaviour, if preference for flexible work is low (moderating effect).

Conclusion

The purpose of this paper was to develop a model predicting extra-role behaviour for highly-qualified flexible workers. As research on flexible work has just begun a literature review was enriched by an explorative interview study. The resulting model (figure 1) assumes two kinds

of predictors, commitment and instrumentality. Both relationships are expected to be moderated by preference for flexible work.

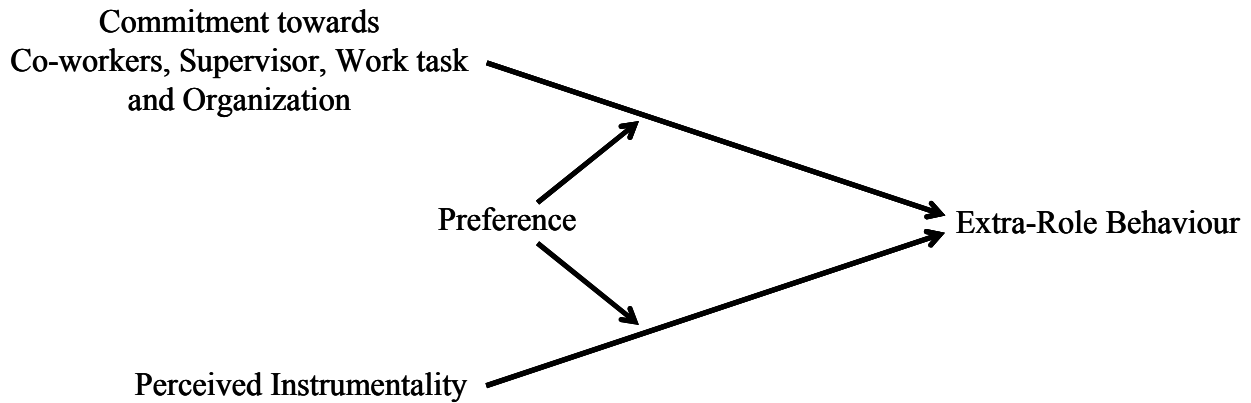


Figure 1: Summary of proposed relationships

To further test this model empirically questionnaire data was collected using an Online-questionnaire. About 500 individuals took part in the survey, mainly IT-freelancer, interim-managers, journalists and temporary workers with varying professions. The last group was surveyed to contrast highly qualified individuals with less qualified individuals. As the process of data analysis has just begun it is not possible to report any results. However, at the workshop, I will be able to include the results from the data analysis into my presentation.

Notes

1 If the willingness is successfully transferred into behaviour may depend on additional factors that will not be discussed within this paper.

2 In the following, when the term „commitment“ is used it always refers to affective commitment.

3 E.g. In the survey by Feldman et al. (1995) 77 % of the interviewed temporary workers indicated that they took up temporary work voluntarily; at the same time 41 % said they were forced to work as temporaries due to no other employment alternatives.

4 Dual organizational commitment stems from the fact that flexible workers who are employed by an agency or a contractor find themselves in a kind of triangular relationship between worker, agency, and client organization.

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