

3 Why Flexibility? Employers and Trades Unions

Employer perspectives

There are a variety of reasons why employers adopt new, more flexible patterns of working time. In part, they may be responding to changes in the terms under which employees are willing to work, or to union pressures. In part also, change may be undertaken in order to gain more effective control over working time and adapt it more efficiently and economically to operating requirements. Some of the reasons commonly given for employers' adoption of new working time arrangements include:

- some jobs are less than full-time;
- continuous production can be maintained through flexible work arrangements without premium rates for overtime being incurred;
- seasonal peaks or otherwise irregular work flows can be accommodated. In industries such as baking and confectionery, retail distribution, and the hospital service, the work flow varies over the day or week, and for optimum efficiency, the availability of the work force must be adjusted to the work flow;
- greater freedom in meeting changing patterns in operational or customer requirements can be achieved, in particular through part-time working hours facilitating six-day working weeks;
- shortages of particular grades of staff or difficulty in retaining experienced workers unless working time is adjusted to their preferences can be overcome. Men's and women's occupations are substantially segregated in Britain; thus there may be

shortages and problems of retention within one group even when there is high unemployment among the other group;

- absence, turnover, and overtime may be reduced if work schedules fit employees' preferences better. In addition, more accurate control over working time may be achieved. Flexible hours, for example, often lead to better control over working time not only because tensions between employees' work and non-work timetables are reduced, but also because the efficient operation of flexible hours requires improvements in supervision, work timing, recording and planning;
- motivation and morale may be improved if working time patterns are made more acceptable to employees;
- direct gains in productivity may result. Part-time working and job-sharing, for example, are both associated with increased productivity;
- overheads may be saved when networking, innovative shift systems or compressed work weeks allow plant and buildings to be used more economically.

In addition, of course, the adoption of new working time patterns may be a matter of necessity, as when a general reduction of working hours makes existing time patterns unworkable.

Whatever the reasons to be considered in a particular case, employers' choices are subject to a general imperative: changes in working time must normally add to competitive efficiency or, at least, be cost-neutral. One of the advertised virtues of the adoption of new time patterns is low capital cost: no need to change organisation or technology (Piotet, 1979). There is, however, always some cost. Time and effort are needed to work out the implications of possible new patterns; to establish employees' own often unclear and changeable preferences; and to negotiate the new arrangements. There may also be continuing costs. Additional supervisors or time recording equipment may be required when managing part-timers, job-sharers, or workers on flexible hours. Overheads may increase if new patterns of working entail earlier or later openings, or extra space when part-timers or job-sharers cannot share the same equipment. Extra training costs may also arise. Despite these initial and continuing costs, however, flexibility in patterns of working time may also lead to improved operational ability and hence to improved profits.

However, despite the advantages detailed above in the reasons why employers adopt more flexible working time arrangements, it remains true that change in the direction of flexibility has been slow and uneven. Employer resistance to change provides at least some part of the explanation behind the slow implementation of new ways of working. Blyton (1985) suggests that managerial resistance arises for a variety of reasons. First, greater flexibility can, potentially, run counter to the effective control and co-ordination of labour by management. Secondly, flexibility is assumed to increase labour costs and create administrative problems. Thirdly, and perhaps most important, flexible worktime arrangements are different. Flexi-time, job-sharing, innovative shifts, high technology homeworking, etc. are new ways of working; hence, they do not fit into well-established, traditional procedures for recruitment, supervision, promotion or retirement. Inertia in the face of change is, according to Blyton, not to be neglected when seeking to explain employer resistance.

Trade union perspectives

British trade unions share with their continental colleagues an active interest in shortening working hours and lengthening holidays. In 1979, the TUC formally adopted a programme put forward by the European Trade Union Confederation for a stepwise progression towards the 35-hour week, together with longer holidays and retirement at age 60. However, in regard to the reorganisation of working time, many unions have been, if not negative or opposed, then in a number of respects, less than positive. They have, in particular, been critical of the terms and conditions associated with some variants of working time, demanding to be shown, for example, the advantages of flexible hours or job-sharing, the strength of demand for part-time work or the case for parental leave. Unions may be caught in a conflict between what their core members prefer and what might be desirable in principle, such as in the case of limiting overtime or of extending worksharing versus concentrating unemployment among the young and the elderly. In the end, however, unions have shown considerable readiness to accept new patterns of working time where these can be shown to be genuinely of interest and benefit to their members, and not lead to deterioration of the general terms and conditions of employment. In detail, union acceptance of new, atypical, ways of

working depend upon ensuring the following conditions (Staedelin, 1986:x):

New patterns of work must:

- not be harmful to workers' health;
- be subject to collective agreement;
- have a positive effect on employment;
- benefit from social security protection;
- respect the basic rights of social and family life;
- provide guarantees regarding wages and salaries;
- include entitlement to annual holidays and weekly rest;
- allow workers to achieve their potential.

With union agreement, then, many new shift systems have been negotiated, including features such as annual hours, compressed working weeks, personal flexibility, and the elimination of overtime. In 1975, white collar unions tended either to reserve judgement on flexible hours or to oppose them, but by 1981 the same unions showed a majority in favour and none against flexible hours, provided that flexi-time plans were negotiated and not imposed. Many manual unions, however, remain sceptical - the National Union of Coalminers provides a recent example - at least in part because of the potential for employers to abuse systems of flexible hours by exerting pressure on employees to work long hours without the benefit of overtime premiums (Fogarty and Brooks, 1986). The report of the TUC's General Council to the Congress in 1983 noted that the unions' approach to job-sharing had for some time been cautious, but that a consultation at the end of 1982 showed that most unions responding were either considering or had agreements on job-sharing, or were in favour in principle. Advantages seen to accrue from job-sharing included the avoidance of redundancies and assistance for older workers and women with family commitments. Unions with many part-time workers were particularly enthusiastic. Again, the unions expected that the introduction of job-sharing would be negotiated not imposed, and would not lead to either the displacement of full-time workers or poorer conditions of employment.

The conditions of employment facing homeworkers have also been a cause for concern among unions, together with the possible effects of the use of homeworkers for on-site employees. In recognition of the often inferior position of homeworkers in the labour force, the TUC proposed a policy intended to improve their working

conditions. Among other recommendations the TUC has suggested that unions insist that homeworkers become employees of their firms; that homeworkers should be visited by union officials and invited to join the union; that homeworkers should be included in collective agreements; and that unions should monitor the rate and method of remuneration given to homeworkers as well as the volume and regularity of their homework (IDS, 1983:39). Similarly, the TUC has supported the EEC draft Directive designed to provide part-time workers with the same rights in employment enjoyed by full-time employees. According to this draft Directive, not yet ratified by the UK Government, part-time employees would not be excluded from statutory or occupational benefit schemes; instead, contributions to and benefits from such schemes would be calculated for part-timers on a *pro rata* basis in comparison with full-time employees. In addition, all legislation concerning employment protection rights would be extended to part-time employees regardless of the number of hours worked.

Despite these actions by the TUC, and the new practices adopted by individual unions noted above, the trade union movement as a whole has not – until very recently – been rigorous in demanding flexible working arrangements which could lead to greater harmonisation between the demands of the workplace and the demands of family life. Many of the reasons behind union reluctance have already been noted. In addition, it is also possible that the overwhelmingly male membership of most unions, as well as the male leadership of virtually all unions, contributes to their slowness in demanding more flexible ways of working. Most men, after all, want full-time work. Moreover, if offered overtime, many men willingly take it up, despite the fact that overtime working takes them away from participation in family activities. Male bias in union demands for better conditions of employment might well be an impediment rather than a facilitator of the introduction of flexible working time arrangements. This appears set to change, however, as unemployment and other factors have taken their toll on union membership and increases in female employment over the last decade provide potential new sources of membership. The 1988 TUC annual convention set equal opportunities for women firmly on the agenda; an equal rights department has been established within the TUC; and individual unions, particularly those in the public and private service sectors, have introduced new measures aimed at attracting women members.

Flexible working time and family life

Trade unions have not yet begun to bargain for increased flexibility at work in order to ease the harmonisation of work with family life for both their female and male members. Nevertheless, the drive to attract more women into their ranks may well have an unintended consequence of placing flexibility higher on the unions' scale of priority issues.