

Demand for flexibility

5 Demand for Flexibility

Workers achieve time free from their working responsibilities through holidays, sabbatical or educational leave, through unpaid leave, and through flexible working time arrangements. By 1981, almost nine out of ten male full-time employees were entitled to four or more weeks annual paid holiday; in 1982, only seven per cent of manual workers were entitled to less than four weeks, and one in five had a right to five weeks paid holiday. Extra entitlements for long service were available to 35 per cent of workers, and companies were increasingly extending the same entitlements to manual as to white collar workers. Sabbatical leave, when workers leave their workplaces for an extended period to do something entirely different, remains the prerogative of very few workers – in particular, managers in medium and large companies and certain professionals (Blyton, 1985). Educational or training leave, which has a long history within Britain, has grown steadily in recent decades, but in the late 1970s was being taken advantage of by only about 17 per cent of male, and 9 per cent of female employees. The distribution of unpaid leave within the working population is not known, although White (1980) reported that almost all firms he surveyed were prepared to allow unpaid leave under certain circumstances. The relatively slow spread of flexible working time arrangements has already been noted.

Paid holidays thus appear to be the way in which the majority of workers attain time away from their jobs. As Blyton notes, however, they do not always get this time in ways which suit their own preferences or their families' schedules. Blyton discusses the extent to which flexibility in taking holidays remains limited. In general, this inflexibility derives from restrictions over when holidays can be taken and prohibitions against carrying holiday time over from one period

(or year) to another. For example, although there is some movement away from set holiday periods as part of union-management flexibility negotiations, much of industry still follows the traditional annual holiday shut down. White (1980) found that 45 per cent of establishments operated at least one shut-down period lasting longer than five days. In addition, for all but a few workers, holidays must all be taken within a stated twelve-month period, or be lost to the worker. According to Blyton (1985), this invariably leads to workers taking unwanted holidays at unpopular times of the year (usually March) in order to use up leftover leave days.

One of the few studies which addresses the issue of worker preferences with respect to trade-offs between earnings and leisure time was conducted in the United States in the 1970s. Best (1980) surveyed approximately 1,000 workers across a variety of occupations and found few differences in preferences between men and women workers. He also found little wish among workers to exchange income for increased leisure time. The majority of those surveyed by Best preferred their present hours/income situation, with one quarter expressing willingness to work more hours for more income. Only about one in nine were willing to forego some part of their present income in order to increase their leisure time. However, almost two-thirds were willing to exchange some part of their *future* increases in earnings for increased holiday entitlements. Less than half would do so for a weekly cut in hours, however; and fewer still for a daily cut in working time.

In Britain, the *Women and Employment Survey* (WES) provides some evidence about the preferences of working women with regard to hours of work and flexibility in work-start/finish arrangements. Just over three-quarters of the women surveyed by WES had fixed starting and finishing times in their jobs. When asked if they would prefer more flexible arrangements, 80 per cent of full-timers and 89 per cent of part-timers reported that they were happy with their present situation. Moreover, two-thirds of full-timers and over 80 per cent of part-timers were happy with the existing number of hours they worked and did not wish to reduce their number. Somewhat surprisingly, then, there appeared to be little demand for increased flexibility or decreased working time among British women in employment. Further evidence in support of this suggestion comes again from the *Women and Employment Survey* which shows that less than one in five of the working women surveyed agreed that the statement *I have less time*

than I would like to spend with friends and family was definitely true, and almost half stated that it was not true. It should be noted, however, that almost one in three working women agreed with the statement *I never have enough time for everything* (WES:1980:61). Given that these women remain responsible for housework and childcare as well as undertaking paid employment, their agreement is hardly surprising.

The *Women and Employment Survey* does not disaggregate the findings noted above by number or age of children of the women surveyed. It may be assumed, however, that most of the women in part-time employment have dependent children and that many are happy with their present working time arrangements because they chose appropriate hours in the first place. Many of the women in full-time employment will have children of school-age or older, and may well be expressing contentment with their present working time arrangements because their need for greater flexibility has decreased with the increased maturity of their children. And it is also possible that once accustomed to a particular routine in which both family and work demands are being accommodated, change carries little attraction (cf Renda and Reuter, 1986). Whichever explanation best reflects the situation of the individual women surveyed, it remains the case that on average little demand for greater flexibility was found among these women workers.

Unfortunately, very little else can be said about British workers' desires for increased working time flexibility. In particular, little can be said about British men's preferences, for as yet few studies have asked men if they would prefer work time arrangements which would increase their participation in family life. In some early studies carried out in the United States, proponents of equality between men and women assumed that if men had more flexibility in their jobs, they would use this time to take on a greater share of domestic work. Perhaps not surprisingly, these assumptions proved faulty. Flexibility at work *logically* opens possibilities for individuals to use their released time in particular ways, but does not ensure that they will in fact do so. One of the early and well-researched American experiments with flexible working days in a Civil Service agency showed that men did not use their released time as their wives hoped they would. Rather than increasing their share of domestic work, husbands often used their time for moonlighting or for personal leisure activities (Bohen and Viveros-Long, 1981). Nevertheless, as noted earlier, studies of men's changing roles have indicated that slow though changes may be, there

are indications that some men are using their increased leisure time not only for traditional male tasks and activities in and out of the home, but for participation in childcare.

Because of the paucity of British data about the demand for flexible working arrangements in the context of their impact on families, a study was devised to assess how flexibility could be improved to the advantage of family life. Funded by the Anglo-German Foundation and carried out jointly in 1983-84 by the Institute for Family and Environmental Research and the Policy Studies Institute, the research comprised interviews with British Aerospace management and workers together with a small-scale survey of 240 men and women living in the British Aerospace local labour market (Welwyn-Hatfield). Fuller details of this study are provided in Appendix A; here it may be noted that the findings confirm many of the themes drawn out in the present review. Managers at British Aerospace were in favour of flexible working arrangements if it could be demonstrated that flexibility would not harm productivity; workers were in favour of increased flexibility if it would not erode job security or benefits. Women workers welcomed more flexible arrangements for themselves if their jobs were not threatened, and for their husbands if the men would use their extra time to help alleviate stress at home. And perhaps in the knowledge that they would be unlikely to receive this help at home, fewer women than men in the local labour market survey accepted flexible working hours as a way of improving the fit between family life and work. Table 5.1 sets out the differences between men and women with regard to the demand for flexible working hours.

Table 5.1 The demand for flexibility, by sex and by type of arrangement

	Men	Women
Flexible working hours	39	29
Starting and finishing earlier	33	20
Leave for children's illness	21	28
Compressed working weeks	20	20
Working from home	23	16
Self-employment	27	9

Most of the respondents interviewed for this study found it hard to visualise the feasibility of a scheme to implement flexible working time; widespread fears about unemployment over the period in which the research was done created an ethos of anxiety about having any work at all, much less flexible work. In such a context, flexibility with its possible abuses and reductions of employment was a peripheral consideration to the more pressing concern of job security. Nonetheless, the findings of this study confirm the general argument of the present review: there is some demand for flexibility, albeit limited, just as there is some evidence of increased provision by employers of more flexible working arrangements, however uneven and slow in implementation. Furthermore, these findings also suggest that men and women have different expectations regarding flexibility in the workplace, in large measure flowing from their different responsibilities at home. These gender differences have important consequences for the further extension of flexible working arrangements, for policy makers concerned with easing the double burden faced by working women, and for the design of future studies about the links between work and family life. With these considerations in mind, the report turns finally to the question of who benefits from flexibility.