

Work Precarity and Flexible Work Arrangements

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Work Arrangements

- Work arrangements can reflect the interests of employers, employees, or both and are unequally distributed across different subgroups of employees
- Work arrangements can affect employee retention, conflict between work and care obligations, and psychological well-being both positively and negatively
 - Inflexible ways of working can have deleterious effects on retention and on health
- Work flexibility is an important component of job quality for workers, but there are many ways to define flexibility

Types of Flexible Work Arrangements

- Schedule flexibility
 - Work hours and/or days may shift from week to week
- Location flexibility
 - Work may occur remotely, potentially through telecommuting
- Contingent work
 - Work is provided on a temporary or fixed-term contract basis to provide specific services for a specific project or period of time
- Paid leave
 - Allows employees to take time off from work without reducing pay or benefits
- Partial or phased retirement
 - The ability to reduce work hours without leaving the labor force entirely as a transition step toward retirement

Whose Interests Do Flexible Work Arrangements Serve?

- Although workers report a strong desire for “flexibility,” not all forms of flexibility are desirous for workers
 - Schedule flexibility could occur when employers regularly determine schedules based on need and assign workers variable schedules and work hours with little recourse or time to adjust family and other responsibilities
 - Schedule flexibility can lead employers and coworkers to see workers as “on call” at all hours, increasing stress and reducing work-life balance
 - Location flexibility could allow employers to hire workers without providing dedicated work space
 - Contingent work could allow employers to hire workers as contractors, which reduces their obligation to provide benefits such as health insurance, retirement contributions, and safe working conditions
- The effectiveness of flexible work arrangements, such as remote work or alternative schedules, appears to be essentially determined by whether they are voluntary, chosen and desired by workers, or involuntary, implemented by managers or employers for business reasons, with disparities in options and constraints around them.

Workplace Studies of Flexibility in the U.S.

- Natural experiment of employer-generated change within a Fortune 500 company
- Randomized introduction of more (schedule and place) flexible work policy to professionals, technicians, and managers in a Fortune 500 company
 - Reduced expectations of exiting, lowered employees' actual turnover rates, and produced later ages of anticipated retirement
 - Reduced work-family conflict and time strain and enhanced psychological well-being
 - No differences by worker age
 - Working remotely involuntarily has negative impacts on worker health and well-being
- A study of health-care workers in extended care settings finds that those whose managers are supportive of employees' work–family needs, including offering flexibility regarding work schedules, report lower cardiovascular disease (CVD) risk and longer sleep than those with less supportive supervisors
- Less is known about how involuntary work arrangements push older workers out of the labor force and disparities in these processes

Flexible Work Arrangements and Retirement

- Older workers often have a preference for options to scale back on job obligations, including reducing their work hours, whether as part-time work, through phased retirement paths, or by being rehired for contract work
- Much of what is known on flexible work arrangements draws on data from Europe
 - European data finds that older workers who decrease their hours actually exit the workforce earlier than those continuing in full-time schedules, but it is not clear whether decreased hours were voluntary
 - Older English workers working in high-demand jobs reported preferences for earlier labor force exits than other workers
 - Another European study found older workers in non-physically-demanding jobs would consider working longer if they had greater flexibility
- Clear need for research in the United States that examines what kinds of flexible arrangements affect the timing of retirement exits and how this differs across subgroups

The Role of Social Policy

- Social policies can enable or restrict the types of work arrangements available to workers
 - Federal retirement policies intent on clarifying the distinction between “worker” and “retiree” impede some organizations from hiring their own recent retirees for a year after their retirement
 - Disability policies that classify workers as either “disabled” (and unable to work) or “not disabled” often prevent the option of possible part-time work
 - The Fair Labor Standards Act regulations constrain possible flexibility policies around the time and timing of work

The COVID-19 Pandemic and Changes in Work Arrangements

- During the COVID-19 pandemic, workers who could do so were pushed into working remotely
 - Remote working has gained acceptance in organizations as managers have seen that workers can be productive working from home
 - Could jumpstart a nationwide trend toward partial (hybrid) or full remote work practices for jobs that make it practical to do so
- Older workers were more vulnerable to experiencing severe COVID-19
 - Introduction of vaccine requirements
 - Shortage of workers
 - Potential increase in the risk of age discrimination in intersection with other forms of discrimination

Conclusion



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Two Overarching Conclusions

CONCLUSION I:

Older workers' preferences for work and specific work arrangements, their expectations about available work opportunities and financial stability, and the constraints on their work opportunities and behaviors ***all reflect the impact of both age bias and social and economic inequalities*** that structure economic opportunity throughout the life course and lead to ***wide disparities in employment and retirement pathways*** at older ages.

CONCLUSION II:

The experiences of ***vulnerable older populations***, including women; racial and ethnic minorities; immigrants; those with less education, low income, or limited savings and wealth; those living in rural or economically disadvantaged areas; and those with multiple intersecting vulnerabilities ***remain understudied*** within the current literature. This limits our understanding of the ways in which inequality in retirement and work opportunities and outcomes contributes to broader social and economic inequality that affects the well-being of older adults.

New Data Collection Strategies

- Addressing the research gaps with respect to the workplace practices outlined here requires gathering data that:
 - provides information about the organizational context and the perspectives of managers and older workers within the employment relationship
 - matches employer and employee information
 - is longitudinal to allow for evaluation of change over time
- **Nationally representative longitudinal panel, sampling U.S. workplaces, also containing multilevel matched data between employers and workers**, does not currently exist, but such a panel would be invaluable for advancing research on the role of employers and workplaces on older workers' employment experiences