

Consultation Regarding Flexible Work Arrangements



As the primary professional association of industrial-organizational psychologists in Canada, the Canadian Society for Industrial and Organizational Psychology (CSIOP), a section of the Canadian Psychological Association (CPA), represents researchers and practitioners who actively contribute to both knowledge and practice regarding workplace issues. Our members include thought leaders that have contributed substantially to the scientific knowledge base on flexible work arrangements. Therefore, we sought to draw upon this expertise to provide an evidence-based perspective on amending the *Canada Labour Code* to allow workers in federally regulated sectors to formally request flexible work arrangements from employers.

Research on Potential Impacts of FWA

In “*Flexible Work Arrangements: A Discussion Paper*,” some research is reviewed that highlights the potential positive benefits of flexible work arrangements (FWAs) for both workers and organizations, concluding that “such arrangement are *likely* to improve their overall work-life balance, reduce workplace stress and health-related symptoms, reduce absenteeism, increase job satisfaction and organizational commitment, and maintain their attachment to the labour market” (emphasis added). Although we agree that the *potential* for positive outcomes exist, the scientific literature to date suggests a more nuanced perspective on the consequences of FWA is likely warranted (Rosin & Korabik, 2002).

There is some evidence that FWA policies could be beneficial for both organizations and workers, as their presence should signal that the organization cares about the well-being of their employees. This may lead to organizations offering FWA policies a competitive advantage in recruitment and selection. Further, workers in these organizations may also reciprocate by putting forth more effort in their work and greater committed to their organization, which should lead to greater organizational productivity (Beauregard & Henry, 2009). However, evidence regarding whether FWAs actually help workers to more effectively manage their work and personal life (e.g., family) responsibilities, often touted as one of the main reasons for enacting these policies, is more mixed. A recent quantitative review of the work flexibility literature (i.e., flextime and flexplace) reveals that although flexibility is associated with lower perceptions of work interference with family, it did not impact perceptions of family interference with work, and the overall effects of work flexibility were quite small and varied by arrangement type (Allen, Johnson, Kiburz, & Shockley, 2013). This may be due to FWAs being associated with greater blurring of work and family roles and difficulty in detaching from work during non-work time (Glavin & Schieman, 2012). Finally, although there is evidence that some types of FWAs (i.e., flexible and compressed workweek, telecommuting) are associated with higher supervisor-ratings of performance (Baltes et al., 1999; Gajendran & Harrison, 2007), it may be the case that supervisors are more likely to allow or reward high performers with flexibility rather than flexibility leading to better performance. Overall, although there is some evidence to support making FWAs available to workers, outcomes are likely not uniformly positive.

Research on Right to Request FWA

We concur with the proposed policy that the right to request FWA should reside with the individual worker. Researchers have found that not all employees desire work flexibility and that when flexibility is thrust upon workers who do not desire it, negative outcomes may result (e.g., Lapierre, van Steenbergen, Peeters, & Kluwer, 2015). Promisingly, once a request for FWAs has been made, the discussion paper cites a number of studies that highlights that managers are generally willing and able to accommodate employees. When barriers to work-life accommodations do arise, they are most commonly due to managers’ lack of decision-making authority, problematic policies or norms, and inadequate resources (i.e., staff or money; Lauzun, Morganson, Major, & Green, 2010).

Research has repeatedly demonstrated that policy availability does not necessarily equate to policy use (Kossek, 2005). Thus, any effective policy will need to consider barriers that may prevent workers from freely exercising their right to request FWA. One likely barrier is the perceived bureaucratic hassles involved in accessing these benefits (Putnam, Myers, & Gailliard, 2013). Employees may choose to not make use of available policies if they perceive that they will encounter significant red tape in accessing them. A second barrier may be workers' perceptions of organizational norms regarding the use of such policies. Research has found that workers will adjust their use of family-friendly organizational benefits (i.e., FWAs and dependent care supports, such as on-site childcare and paid leaves) to levels that they believe are normative amongst their peers, even if they personally desired to use more of these resources (Mandeville, Halbesleben, & Whitman, 2016). A third barrier is fear of negative career repercussions. Some research suggests that use of FWAs is linked with better career outcomes when managers believe a worker is using FWAs to increase his or her productivity, and may lead to more career penalties when managers believe a worker is using FWAs for reasons associated with his or her personal life (Leslie, Manchester, Park, & Mehng, 2012). Other research highlights how men may be more reluctant to seek work flexibility due to stigmatization for being not sufficiently masculine (Vandello, Hettinger, Bosson, & Siddiqi, 2013). Overall, the success of such a policy will depend upon our collective ability to change societal expectations regarding who can and should use FWAs, ease of access, what reasons for use are considered appropriate, and what constitutes reasonable and normative levels of use.

Research on Effective FWA Implementation

Scholars have highlighted that not every type of FWA may be appropriate for every job (e.g., Allen, Golden, & Shockley, 2015). Thus, successful FWA implementation will include educating and helping both workers and managers to better understand and think through both the potential benefits and drawbacks of each type of FWA and what solution is most appropriate to address the situation at hand. Given the significant complexity associated with understanding and managing work flexibility and work-life dynamics, this may require the development and/or widespread implementation of new training programs and tools (e.g., training for family-supportive supervisor behaviors; Hammer, Kossek, Anger, Bodner, & Zimmerman, 2011) as well as greater knowledge translation and mobilization between academic researchers who study work flexibility and end users.

The proposed policy builds in and encourages flexibility in the specific FWA negotiated between workers and their employers or managers. Therefore, issues that may arise in FWA implementation include the fact that some workers may be more effective advocates for themselves than others when negotiating nonstandard work arrangements (e.g., Hornung, Rousseau, & Glaser, 2008), and that supervisors may be particularly motivated to negotiate and accept these arrangements with workers with whom they already have a good working relationship (e.g., Rosen, Slater, Chang, & Johnson, 2013). Both of these factors may contribute to significant variation in types of arrangements, and this diversity could be perceived by co-workers as unfair and evidence of inequitable treatment (Ryan & Wessel, 2015). Thus, successful FWA implementation must include a plan for ensuring and managing workplace fairness perceptions.

Conclusion

Above, we offer an evidence-based perspective regarding the creation and implementation of a proposed "Right to Request FWA" policy for workers in federally regulated industries. We are excited by the Canadian government's commitment to promoting the rights and well-being of Canadian workers and hope to offer our expertise and be involved in this process.

Sincerely,

The Executive Committee of the Canadian Society for Industrial & Organizational Psychology (CSIOP)

References

- Allen, T. D., Golden, T. D., & Shockley, K. S. (2015). How effective is telecommuting? Assessing the status of our scientific findings. *Psychological Science in the Public Interest, 16*, 40-68.
- Allen, T. D., Johnson, R. C., Kiburz, K. M., & Shockley, K. S. (2013). Work-family conflict and flexible work arrangements: Deconstructing flexibility. *Personnel Psychology, 66*, 345-376.
- Baltes, B. B., Briggs, T. E., Huff, J. W., Wright, J. A., & Neuman, G. A. (1999). Flexible and compressed workweek schedules: A meta-analysis of their effects on work-related criteria. *Journal of Applied Psychology, 84*, 496-513.
- Beauregard, T. A., & Henry, L. C. (2009). Making the link between work-life practices and organizational performance. *Human Resources Management Review, 19*, 9-22.
- Gajendran, R. S., & Harrison, D. A. (2007). The good, the bad, and the unknown about telecommuting: Meta-analysis of psychological mediators and individual consequences. *Journal of Applied Psychology, 92*, 1524-1541.
- Hammer, L. B., Kossek, E. E., Anger, W. K., Bodner, T., & Zimmerman, K. L. (2011). Clarifying work-family intervention processes: The roles of work-family conflict and family-supportive supervisor behaviors. *Journal of Applied Psychology, 96*, 134-150.
- Hornung, S., Rousseau, D. M., & Glaser, J. (2008). Creating flexible work arrangements through idiosyncratic deals. *Journal of Applied Psychology, 93*, 655-664.
- Kossek, E. E. (2005). Workplace policies and practices to support work and families. In S. Bianchi & R. King (Eds.), *Work, family health and well-being* (pp. 97-116). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Lapierre, L. M., van Steenbergen, E. F., Peeters, M. C. W., & Kluwer, E. S. (2015). Juggling work and family responsibilities when involuntarily working more from home: A multiwave study of financial sales professionals. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*.
- Lauzun, H. M., Morganson, V. J., Major, D. A., & Green, A. P. (2010). Seeking work-life balance: Employees' requests, supervisors' responses, and organizational barriers. *The Psychologist-Manager Journal, 13*, 184-205.
- Leslie, L. M., Manchester, C. F., Park, T.-Y., & Mehng, S. A. (2012). Flexible work practices: A source of career premiums or penalties? *Academy of Management Journal, 55*, 1407-1428.
- Mandeville, A., Halbesleben, J., & Whitman, M. (2016). Misalignment and misperception in preferences to utilize family-friendly benefits: Implications for benefit utilization and work-family conflict. *Personnel Psychology*.
- Putnam, L. L., Myers, K. K., & Gailliard, B. M. (2013). Examining tensions in workplace flexibility and exploring options for new directions. *Human Relations, 67*, 413-440.
- Rosen, C. C., Slater, D. J., Chang, C.-H., & Johnson, R. E. (2013). Let's make a deal: Development and validation of the ex post i-deals scale. *Journal of Management, 39*, 709-742.
- Rosin, H. M., & Korabik, K. (2002). Do family-friendly policies fulfill their promise? An investigation of their impact on work-family conflict and work and personal outcomes. In D. L. Nelson & R. J. Burke (Eds.), *Gender, work stress, and health* (pp. 211-226). Washington, DC: APA.
- Ryan, A. M., & Wessel, J. L. (2015). Implications of a changing workforce and workplace for justice perceptions and expectations. *Human Resource Management Review, 25*, 162-175.
- Vandello, J. A., Hettinger, V. E., Bosson, J. K., & Siddiqi, J. (2013). What equal isn't really equal: The masculine dilemma of seeking work flexibility. *Journal of Social Issues, 69*, 303-321.