Flextime and Telecommuting: Examining Individual Perceptions

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As individuals increasingly experience conflicts between their personal lives and the demands of the workplace, many employers offer alternative work arrangements that are designed to help workers achieve a better balance in their lives (Harris, 2003; Shamir & Salomon, 1985). Two such alternatives, flextime and telecommuting, have proven particularly instrumental in helping employees meet the many demands on their time, and these programs have grown dramatically over the past twenty years (Bailey &

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Kurlan, 2002; Thornthwait & Sheldon, 2004). Indeed, reports from the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS, 2005; 2006) show that the number of workers with flexible schedules increased from about 13.1 million in 1985 to around 38.0 million in 2004, representing an annual growth rate of just under 6 percent. Similarly, the number of telecommuters has grown at an annual rate of just over 5 percent, from about 17.3 million in 1986 to around 45.1 million in 2005 (Kraut, 1989; ITAC, 2005). And, while statistics show that the growth rate of both flextime and telecommuting has leveled off during the past five years, it is estimated that more than a quarter of the workforce is presently involved with one of these work options (BLS, 2005; ITAC, 2005).

The advantages of both flextime and telecommuting have been widely reported in the popular press, perhaps leaving some managers to conclude that employees will be highly receptive to these alternative work programs and willingly participate when they are offered. However, given some basic differences between flextime and telecommuting, it is reasonable to assume that not all individuals will view these programs in a similar manner. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to examine individual perceptions of flextime and telecommuting. Further, this research explored the role that personality, demographics, and work experiences play in forming these perceptions.

Flextime and Telecommuting

While both flextime and telecommuting can be useful in helping employees balance the various demands on their time, there is a significant difference between these programs. Flextime involves building flexibility into an employee's work schedule. With flextime programs, employees are often required to be at work during certain "core hours" when all workers are typically needed to satisfy

customer demand. However, employees are then granted some latitude in scheduling their remaining hours. These programs provide individuals with the ability and autonomy to schedule work around the demands of their personal life. In general, these programs have resulted in reduced turnover and absenteeism, higher employee morale and productivity, and improved worker well-being (Gale, 2001; Gill, 1998; Lucas & Heady, 2002).

Alternatively, telecommuting programs permit flexibility by allowing employees to work from different locations. In a nutshell, telecommuting is the practice of using electronic communication technology to perform work from remote locations. Some employees telecommute on a full-time basis, while others may only spend one or two days a week outside of the traditional workplace. While some studies have identified potential problems with telecommuting (McCloskey & Igbaria, 2003; Tietze, 2005), overall results have been positive (Greer, Buttross, & Schmelzle, 2002; Kurland & Bailey, 1999) . For instance, as a result of their telecommuting program, Merrill Lynch reported over a 15 percent increase in productivity, 3.5 fewer sick days per year, and about a 6 percent decrease in turnover (Wells, 2001).

Sample and Results

Respondent Profile

The sample for this study was comprised of 242 management students at a southeastern university that has a relatively large number of nontraditional students. Four classes, each of which were taught by one of the authors, were surveyed. Participation was strictly voluntary.

Two surveys were administered to the students. The first survey was designed to capture students' perceptions regarding telecommuting and flextime programs, information about their work history, and certain demographic characteristics. The second survey was the NEO Five-Factor Inventory (NEO-FFI). This instrument consists of 60 items designed to measure five basic domains of personality. The surveys were administered one week apart using a paper and pencil approach.

While there are often drawbacks associated with using students in certain types of research, we believe there are several reasons that using a student respondent group for this particular study was appropriate. First, our sample included a relatively large number of non-traditional students. For instance, 68 percent of our sample were currently working (either full-time or part-time) and 98 percent had previous work experience. In fact, respondents reported, on average, just over two years of full-time work experience. Additionally, of those currently working, we found that they worked, on average, 17 hours per week. Second, for this particular study, we did not want to survey individuals from a single organization. There was a concern that individuals from a single source might introduce a confound that would substantially limit the external validity of the results. Third, we actually wanted to include some individuals with no full-time work experience to examine, on a broad range, the overall impact that work experience plays on individual perceptions. In fact, because companies often hire individuals with no work experience, it is important for managers to understand how different work options will be perceived based on varying levels of experience.

In addition to differences in work experience, our respondent group was also a diverse group in terms of demographics. Fifty-seven percent of the respondents were male and 43 percent were female. The age of those surveyed ranged from 19 to 55 years old, while the average age was 22.4 years. Sixty-nine percent of the respondents were white, 23 percent were African-American, and 8 percent were other

races. Ninety-two percent of those surveyed were single, 13 percent reported that they had others dependent on them for their primary care, and just over 4 percent reported that English was not their first language.

While this respondent group provided us with the opportunity to empirically investigate a number of differences in personality traits, work experiences, and demographics, future research would benefit greatly from surveying those in many different contexts.

Perceptions of Flextime and Telecommuting

Due to limited empirical work examining perceptions of alternative work systems, six Likert-type items were written specifically for this study and were used to form two scales: *Flextime Appeal* and *Telecommuting Appeal*. These six items are provided in Table 1.

To assess measurement reliability, we computed Cronbach Alphas on the two, three-item measures. The alphas were .75 for *Flextime Appeal* and .92 for *Telecommuting Appeal*. Further, to demonstrate the validity of the two scales, we subjected the items to an exploratory factor analysis. As anticipated, results of the scree test suggested two meaningful factors with eigenvalues of 2.46 (*Telecommuting Appeal*) and

1.18 (*Flextime Appeal*). Additionally, an examination of the rotated factor pattern revealed that all items loaded above .60 on the intended factor, and there were no mixed loadings.

As shown in Table 1, our respondents held some very different perceptions about the overall attractiveness of these two work alternatives. On average, about 88 percent indicated a very positive disposition toward flextime programs. On the other hand, the appeal of telecommuting was not as strong. Only 52 percent of the respondents, on average, reported that having the opportunity to work from home was an attractive work option. Thus, there appears to be some very different perspectives in terms of how these two work alternatives are viewed by individuals.

Considering the amount of popular press touting the benefits of telecommuting, it was somewhat unexpected that overall perceptions toward this work option were not more positive. We were especially surprised that about 20 percent of our respondents were very much opposed to the idea of telecommuting. However, given that individuals are typically offered the opportunity to telecommute on either a part-time or full-time basis, we also included a question on our survey that asked participants how many hours out of a 40-hour week they would work from home, if given the opportunity. Only 6 percent

noted they would not work at all from home, 9 percent reported that they would choose less than 10 hours of telecommuting per week, about 71 percent suggested that 20 hours or less would be appropriate, and less than 8 percent indicated that they would want to telecommute on a full-time basis. Thus, while some telecommuting seems to be an interesting alternative to most individuals, the thought of working entirely from home does not appear to be particularly appealing.

Given the different perceptions toward flextime and telecommuting reported by our respondents, we next examined a number of personality, demographic, and work experience factors that we believed might provide some insights into why these differences were observed.

The Influence of Personality

The NEO-FFI survey (Costa & McCrae, 1992) consists of five, 12-item scales that measure individuals' personality profile on five basic dimensions: neuroticism, extraversion, openness to experience, agreeableness, and conscientiousness. Our results showed that while this survey measures separate dimensions of personality, several of these traits were significantly related to each other. Specifically, neuroticism was negatively correlated with extraversion, agreeableness, and

conscientiousness, and agreeableness was significantly correlated with extraversion and conscientiousness. And, while we did not make specific predictions about how these personality dimensions would be related to perceptions of flextime and telecommuting, we anticipated that certain traits might be instrumental in determining how individuals perceived these alternative work programs. Thus, we performed an exploratory analysis to examine the extent to which personality was related to these perceptions.

Table 2 reports the correlations between the five dimensions of personality and perceptions of both flextime and telecommuting. Openness to experience emerged as the only personality dimension that was positively and significantly related to both

Table 1
Perceptions of Telecommuting and Flextime

	Disagree or Strongly		Agree or Strongly
FLEXTIME APPEAL			
Flexibility in work schedules is a major factor I look for in job opportunities.	3%	13%	83%
Having some control over my work schedule is important to me.	2%	5%	94%
Having the ability to adjust work schedules is important to balancing my work and personal life.	1%	11%	88%
Flextime Appeal Averages	2%	10%	88%
TELECOMMUTING APPEAL			
I would rather work from my home than go to the office each day.	20%	34%	46%
Working from home is an attractive alternative to me.	19%	20%	61%
For me, the advantages of working from home outweigh the disadvantages.	22%	29%	49%
Telecommuting Appeal Averages	20%	28%	52%

Table 2
The Influence of Personality

	Flextime Appeal	Telecommuting Appeal
Neuroticism	-.07	.02
Extraversion	.11 *	.04
Openness to Experience	.11 *	.12 *
Agreeableness	.14 **	.00
Conscientiousness	.08	-.01

*** p < .01, ** p < .05, * p < .10

programs. Specifically, those who where highest in openness to experience were, likewise, more open to these alternative work arrangements. Thus, individuals who enjoy variety and are most willing to consider new ideas seem to be most favorably disposed to changes in their work environments.

Extraversion also followed a fairly predictable path. Extraverts are friendly, gregarious individuals. They very much enjoy being around others and crave excitement. Thus, as shown in Table 2, there is a significant, positive relationship between extraversion and one's feelings toward flextime. Simply, these programs allow individuals, who very much enjoy the company of others, to better schedule their work around their personal life, while still maintaining interpersonal relationships in the workplace.

Alternatively, the relationship between extraversion and telecommuting was not significant. Because extraverts are not loners, the idea of working in isolation from home may not be as appealing to this group. Thus, while a limited number of hours away from co-workers may hold some appeal, spending significant time away from the company of others during the workweek may not be considered a desirable alternative.

In addition to extraversion, agreeableness proved to be another personality dimension that was positively and significantly related to flextime, but was not significantly related to telecommuting. Those high in this dimension have an active concern for the well-being of others and a strong desire to help them. Thus, while individuals high on

agreeableness desire flexibility in their work schedule, it is likely that the thought of being unable to interact with co-workers on a regular basis creates a void that may not be particularly appealing.

Demographic Differences

As shown in Table 3, we found highly significant relationships between age, marital status, number of dependents, and overall perceptions toward telecommuting. Specifically, older respondents, those who were married, and those with children at home were more favorably disposed toward telecommuting programs. This is hardly surprising given that telecommuting allows those with family obligations to work from home where, supposedly, their family is located. Additionally, one might surmise that individuals who are married might not

seek out the social environment available in the workplace to the same extent as those that are single.

Gender was not significantly related to telecommuting. Considering the traditional role of women as the primary caregiver, this is somewhat surprising. However, given the relatively young age of our respondent group (average of 22.4 years old), it may be that a sufficient number of the females completing our survey did not yet have the family obligations to make telecommuting attractive. Another explanation for this result may be the increasing role of males in providing care where both partners may be engaged in full-time work. And, in fact, 63 percent of our respondents who reported they were married also reported that their spouse worked full-time.

The demographic characteristics considered in our study were not significantly related to flextime. It appears that the appeal of having a flexible schedule, while also remaining an active participant in the workplace, appears to be equally appealing to individuals regardless of their demographic profile.

The Impact of Work Experience and Schedules

Correlations related to the impact of work experience are reported in Table 4. One interesting finding was that those with more full-time work experience were more favorably disposed to telecommuting than those with less work experience. The rationale behind this finding is

not totally apparent. However, it is possible that individuals who are just starting their career may believe that being seen in the workplace each day is essential to receiving promotions, pay increases, and favorable performance evaluations. Additionally, workers with less experience may consider that being visible at work is vital to networking and establishing important contacts. Alternatively, those who have more experience may feel that they can sufficiently maintain prior, established relationships without this physical presence. Also, workers with more experience may feel more comfortable working from home because they already have an understanding of the organization's culture and its expectations for workers.

Table 3
Demographic Differences

	Flextime Appeal	Telecommuting Appeal
Age	.04	.26 ***
Gender	.00	-.05
Marital Status	-.04	.23 ***
Dependents	.03	.23 ***

*** p < .01, ** p < .05, * p < .10

Table 4
The Impact of Work Experience and Work Schedules

	Flextime Appeal	Telecommuting Appeal
Hours Worked Per Week	.15 **	-.02
Days Worked Per Week	.18 ***	-.03
Full-Time Work Experience	.06	.19 ***

*** p < .01, ** p < .05, * p < .10

Findings in Table 4 also suggest that those who work more hours or days per week are more likely to favor flextime programs. For those that spend more of their time working, there is a greater potential for conflict between work demands and non work-related interests. Therefore, flextime programs are likely attractive because they allow these individuals to achieve a better balance between work and personal life. On the other hand, it is quite possible that individuals working less hours and days have purposely selected jobs that do not interfere with personal interests.

Managerial Implications

Flextime and telecommuting are two popular work alternatives that many firms offer their workers to help them balance the personal and professional demands on their time. However, as we found, perceptions of these programs vary widely among individuals. Thus, it is important for managers to gain insights into when these programs are likely to be favorably received by workers. Based on this study, we believe there are a number of useful suggestions that can be offered.

Survey Your Employees First

A number of alternative work arrangements such as flextime, telecommuting, compressed workweeks, and job sharing are increasingly being offered by organizations in a attempt to help their employees balance both the work requirements and personal demands in their lives. And, there is sometimes a tendency among managers to believe that their attempts to respond to the needs of their employees will be universally perceived in a positive fashion. Yet, our study demonstrates that employees may not always view these programs in a similar manner. For instance, only about 52 percent of our respondents reported that telecommuting was an appealing alternative. Thus, it might be helpful to survey employees before implementing these alternative work programs to ensure there will be sufficient participation. Match Programs With Personalities

Based on our results, we found that respondents who were high on the dimensions of extraversion, openness to experience, and agreeableness also tended to have more positive views of flextime programs. However, extraverts and those high on agreeableness did not perceive telecommuting programs in a similar manner. Because of their need to be around others and/or help others, it seems that these individuals embraced the idea of having flexible work hours as long as they could still come to the workplace on a frequent basis. Thus, if a firm is in an industry that typically attracts individuals who prefer a more social context, telecommuting programs may well be met with resistance.

Consider Demographic Profiles of Employees

The demographic factors considered in this study were not significantly correlated with flextime programs. It seems these programs appealed to individuals regardless of their demographic profile. Yet, the relationship between a number of demographic characteristics and perceptions of telecommuting were very strong. Older individuals who were married and had children were more likely to view telecommuting as a positive work alternative. Therefore, for managers with a more mature workforce, it is more likely that telecommuting programs would be well-received by employees.

Examine Your Employees' Work Patterns

Our results indicated that one's work experience and current work schedule were significant indicators of individual perceptions. For those working more hours or more days per week, flextime was especially appealing. It is likely that individuals who spend more time in the workplace encounter more conflicts with demands in their personal life. Thus, flextime would help alleviate these problems. Alternatively, those with more full-time work experience were more inclined to view telecommuting in a positive light. It is possible that those with little experience feel a greater need to be visible in the workplace to enhance career opportunities.

Conclusion

Firms increasingly offer programs such as flextime and telecommuting to their workers. A primary reason that such work alternatives are offered is that they generally help employees balance the requirements of the workplace with the many demands in their personal life. This study examined individuals' perceptions of both flextime and telecommuting. Results showed that perceptions differed among respondents in how they viewed these two work alternatives. Additionally, a number of personality, demographic, and work characteristics were found to be significantly related to these perceptions. While additional empirical studies are necessary to understand the many alternative work programs being offered by employers, this study presents an initial attempt to understand differing perceptions and proposes a number of factors that may contribute to these differences.

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