

Proceedings of the 14th European Conference on Management, Leadership and Governance

**HU University of Applied Sciences
Utrecht, Netherlands
18-19 October 2018**



**Edited by
Prof. dr. Pascal Ravesteijn and
Dr. Ing. Benny M.E. de Waal**

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14th European Conference on Management,
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ECMLG 2018**

**Hosted By
HU University of Applied Sciences
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Preface

These proceedings represent the work of contributors to the 14th European Conference on Management Leadership and Governance (ECMLG 2018), hosted this year by HU University of Applied Sciences, Utrecht, the Netherlands on 18-19 October 2018. The Conference Chair is Prof. Dr. Pascal Ravesteijn and the Programme Chair is Dr. Ing. Benny M.E. de Waal.

ECMLG is now a well-established event on the academic research calendar and in its 14th year the key aim remains the opportunity for participants to share ideas and meet the people who hold them. The scope of papers will ensure an interesting two days. The subjects covered illustrate the wide range of topics that fall into this important and ever-growing area of research.

The opening keynote presentation is given by Brian Johnson who is Chief Architect at ASL BISL Foundation and Brian will discuss "BiSL next as a Generic Conceptual model for Digital Transformation". The second day of the conference will start with an address by Lineke Sneller from Nyenrode Business University, talking about "Agile in Control: A Square Circle or White Snow?"

With an initial submission of 120 abstracts, after the double blind, peer review process there are 98 Academic research papers, 6 PhD research papers, 2 Masters Research papers and 1 Non-academic papers published in these Conference Proceedings. These papers represent research from Australia, Bahrain, Belgium, China, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Germany, Ghana, Greece, Hungary, Iran, Italy, Japan, Kazakhstan, Malaysia, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Nigeria, Pakistan, Poland, Portugal, Russia, South Africa, Sweden, the UAE the UK, Uzbekistan, and Venezuela.

We hope you enjoy the conference.

Dr. Ing. Benny M.E. de Waal and Prof. dr. Pascal Ravesteijn
ECMLG Conference and Programme Chairs
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October 2018

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Labour Flexibility as Management Practice

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Abstract: The issues related to labour flexibility in the field of human resources management have been subject of numerous reflections in the academic field. Given the competitive and dynamic context of the contemporary business environment, organizations seek to find solutions that allow them to create value, either by introducing structural changes or by incorporating operational strategies. However, globalization and technological and economic development are factors that systematically influence companies and organizations around their strategic planning and flexibility, it also appears as an obvious need nowadays, both in the way the organization structures itself to survive the intense competitive climate of the markets and as its employees address the adversities that arise from the processes that involve the management itself. So, if these processes adopt new work practices such as labour flexibility or multipurpose functions, do they promote the development of employees' competencies? And how do the employees react to change? This article is the result of an empirical study carried out in a service sector company whose employees act in the international area, using diversified dynamics and being subject to constant technological changes. In this context, the study was conducted through an online questionnaire, directed to employees who were able to survive to organizational strategies of flexible work and multidisciplinary tasks over time. The results show that labour flexibility has a positive relation in the development of the employees' competences, although there are differences between flexibility as a practice and the expectation regarding the expected performance. On the other hand, although people agree that these processes promote motivation and creativity, there is resistance to change and assimilation and adaptation to new practices. It is emphasized that it is in this kind of environment that the profile of the employee who is able to perform different tasks, to think, to innovate and to plan strategically.

Keywords: Labour Flexibility, Learning, Competencies, Organizational Change.

1. Introduction

Globalization, technological and economic developments are factors that systematically influence the strategic planning of companies and organizations. In today's dynamic and organizational competitiveness, supported by this evolution, by changes in consumer practices and socio-political changes, organizations are forced to realign their processes and implement new management models using skills to an effective management of their human capital (Neves *et al.*, 2015).

The issues on labour flexibility processes are in this context, a very important domain of analysis in the current economic reality, from the theoretical and conceptual terms, down to the practical level of everyday life of the company (Carvalho, 2004). These practices, although divergent in their analysis, are mainly related to the way in which people seek to operate with competitiveness and sustainability (Drucker, 2000). Harness the potential of employees to the maximum in their roles through their knowledge and skills and have a set of components adapted to the new realities, are now factors of utmost importance for the success and performance of an organization (Gillen, 2000).

It is in this context that labour flexibility can make the approach to new realities and new challenges more sustainable, giving greater coverage to the knowledge and experiences in the development of capacities and the increasing demand for competent, flexible and differentiating employees (Camera, 2007). This type of paradigm, based on the construction of new ideas, new methods and new approaches based on studies, forecasts and processes, thus composes the whole system of management, will help to increase value and build new knowledge (Ferreira *et al.*, 2011). It was also these paradigm shifts that demanded of employees an extreme ability to adapt to new work contexts.

Flexibility at work is a much discussed topic in academia and business, since depending on how organizations apply and put it into practice, it can have the most distinct implications (Cardoso, 2006). According to Gonçalves (2014), it is the people who contribute most to the success of organizations, and it is fundamental to foster the development of their competencies. It is according to this assumption that the development of competencies can arise directly through the stimulation of the individual skills of employees based on training,

flexibility and internal dynamics that allow the exchange of knowledge at a formal and informal level reinforcing the employees' own relational networks (Ferreira *et al.*, 2011).

One of the most important characteristics of changes in the work organization in recent decades is the use of flexible forms of work. Since the 1980s, the idea of flexibility has begun to spread in companies and to be seen as a form of workforce management, strongly supported on the increasing use of flexible work, thus generating competitive advantage in dynamic environments (Prieto and Santana, 2012). However, there are a number of internal and external factors that affect organizations, such as the tasks that employees develop, perform, or execute. With the use of functional flexibility, companies are looking for other solutions that meet their pretension to respond more easily to the current challenges, especially with the reduction of labour costs (Archive, 2014). In practice, flexibility can enhance the organization's ability to reconfigure and position itself in the marketplace through the worker dynamic capabilities (Prieto and Santana, 2012; Liao and Marsillac, 2015).

Furthermore, flexibility has been associated with constant organizational changes, creating a bigger support to strategic planning and in the direct benefits it can provide to organizations (Bessant and Tidd, 2015). On the other hand, associated with this reality, there is a need to redefine human resource management policies, such as compensation, performance evaluation or rewards, being labour flexibility capable of modifying the circumstances in which these tasks take place (Prieto and Santana, 2012). Thus, the development of human potential based on the flexible, diversified and integrated workforce in the organization's strategy will be considered as the pillar of support for the entire competitive structure in organizations, regardless of the market where they may be inserted (Thompson *et al.*, 2008). In fact, it is increasingly evident that the organization's sustainability and productivity depends on the value created by human capital. The complexity and technical diversity, with which organizations are confronted in competitive markets, makes mandatory the development of practices that allow them to prepare and anticipate the constant changes in the labour market (Sekhar *et al.*, 2016). It is in this scenario that the tendency for the use of labour flexibility shows the ability of employees to increase their performance by increasing their efficiency and quality (Rebelo, 2006).

It is in this area that the interest arises in focusing in this article some reflections on the new approaches in the management associated to the labour flexibility, bearing in mind that the strategic vector of the change brings this reality in its essence and capacity for adaptation. The objective of this study is to show what can be the impact of flexibility in an organization and how can it influence also employee skills development and its ability to adapt to new realities. Also, see if flexibility can be a source of organizational innovation.

This article is divided into three parts. In the first one, theories are presented in the context of labour flexibility with management practice in a multidisciplinary organizational concept including the importance of the development of skills and knowledge management as an important factor for the development of the flexible work strategy. In the second, it is explained the methodology used. In the third results are presented and discussed. Finally, the conclusions are drawn regarding the study objectives.

2. Theoretical Approach

The problem of labour flexibility has an important ideological dimension, often provoking debates and sometimes extreme positions as to its legitimacy, necessity and even limitations in its functionality. The multiplicity used in the classification of a set of management practices is by itself one of the reflexes of this. In recent years, organizations have been undergoing various modernization processes, avoiding efforts to respond to emerging markets in order to remain competitive and sustainable (Ferreira, 2011).

The evolution of work methods has led to an increase and diversification of qualification, to individual technical and bureaucratic work and to the development of group and integrated work (Sousa *et al.*, 2006).

According to Rebelo (2006), the fundamental problem that arises in the labour and employment market is how to reconcile the implementation of flexibility in the organization of work, essential for economic competitiveness. On the other hand, it is necessary for organizations and employees to see a way of articulating flexibility with the proper qualification of human resources.

The constant macroeconomic downturn and the lack of sustainability of the companies provoked an immediate sense of opportunity for organizations to exercise power over employees who, in order to avoid the

direct consequences of losing their jobs, became more available and predisposed to adapt to new functions. It is therefore a challenge for management to be able to provide employees with an environment of professional achievement, with opportunities for personal growth and development (Lima and Ferreira, 2007). The success of organizations depends on their resources and on a flexible adaptation of employees to new processes such as turnover, flexibility and internal mobility within the organization (Drucker, 2000).

Technological evolution itself and its predominance in organizations may imply a greater diversity of professionals and a coexistence of people with differentiating characteristics (Lasierra, 2007). It is therefore a myth to consider that in the middle of the 21st century one can still think that things happen by chance and that a professional should only keep focused on what he was asked to do (Archive, 2014). The professional must have an adaptability to work with a diversity of colleagues, under the guidance of different superiors, in short periods of time and before levels of high competitive requirement.

Depending on the point of view adopted by the organization, functional flexibility can be considered as one of the preferred strategies by reducing the levels of division and fragmentation of the work, developing the multidisciplinary tasks and the polyvalence of the collaborator (Thompson *et al.*, 2008; Gerling and Aptel, 2014). Thus, the employee is able to perform different tasks, to act, to think, to act, to plan strategically, as well as to innovate in the solution of new problems (Sequeira, 2008). With this new profile, the behavioural requirements and qualifications essential to the desired performance, such as: adaptability, specialized training, global comprehension capabilities for a set of tasks and functions, and the ability to select or appropriately manage information arise (Neves *et al.*, 2015).

More than the simple reasons pointed out to the different variants of flexibility used by organizations, these organizations are looking for more and more employees capable of adapting to various work contexts (Gonçalves, 2014). This is a trend that will be reflected in the models of recruitment and selection and in the contractual management of organizations. On the one hand, the need to recruit more flexible and versatile employees for the function / project and, on the other hand, the need for them to use temporary work to make their cost structure more flexible (Rebelo, 2006; Gonçalves, 2014; Mantovani, 2014).

The past competition models were about big business – meaning managerial hierarchy, vertical integration, Taylorist work organisation, uniform standards and long-lasting production runs – the ‘new competition’ involves continuous improvement, industrial restructuring, networked districts of firms and a multi-skilled workforce. In employment policy, it signals the collapse of old employment standards – especially job-for-life norms, standard working hours and collective wage negotiation. New forms of ‘open innovation’ in services, for example, suggest organisations may need to access specialised creative, technical and professional skills on a temporary, part-time or freelance basis in an effort to build ‘outside-in knowledge’ (Chesbrough, 2011).

Where competitive strategies are based on flexible employment forms, the risk is that employers neglect investments in training and HR practices that strengthen employee motivation and raise productivity. Employers tend to match their use of flexible employment with a strategic preference for hierarchical management models, tight controls over the pace of work, limited worker autonomy and weak investment in worker competences. Research evidence has also long confirmed the argument that employment flexibility negatively interacts with innovation and productivity.

Zhou *et al.* (2011) argue that ‘functional flexibility on internal labour markets has advantages for the continuity of (organisational) learning and strengthens the historical memory of firms’ (Zhou *et al.*, 2011: 960). The labour market flexibility strategy is therefore in contradiction with a policy goal of shifting out of low value-added business segments into higher productivity activities. The second contradiction is that flexible employment displaces various advantages that the standard employee relationship offers for productivity performance. Broad job definitions and the willingness of employees to operationalize their tacit knowledge for an agreed wage are more likely to embed sustainable performance improvements at a workplace than an HRM approach focused on negotiating a series of sales contracts for work tasks, as currently applies to temporary, zero hours or freelance contracts.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research model

This study relies on data from January and March 2015 in companies who operate in Portugal, with a variety of industries insurance with more than 2.500 employees, differentiating themselves from the other markets for their ability to innovate and diversity core business.

Considering the purpose of the study to try to understand and analyse the relationship that labour flexibility has in the performance of the function, an empirical study was focused on a survey applied online to employees of service organizations. In this sense, a questionnaire was elaborated, based on an organized mapping that aims to present the theoretical base model of this investigation. The main objective of the survey was to collect as much information as possible about the opinions of employees who were part of the company's turnover processes and if they felt that this influenced their performance or development at work.

3.2 Research Questions

For a more detailed specification of the data under study, table 1, allows the analyses of the relationship between the objectives of the study, the research questions elaborated in the chapter of the theoretical approach and the connection with the previous literature review.

Table 1: Model of analysis that relates the study objectives to the research questions and the literature review

Study objectives	Research Questions	Literature review
It is intended to check if the employee's expectations regarding the path that the organization should take should be linked to a greater flexibility in the employee duties.	Q1 - Given the employee's vision, is flexibility at work the right way for the organization to survive?	Caetano, 2011; Pomi, 2005; Thompson et al., 2008; Lasier, 2007
It is intended to verify the perception that the employee has about the ideas of the organization regarding the development of his competencies.	Q2 - Does the employee's view of the companies flexibility, added value to promote and develop their skills?	Drucker, 2000; Ferreira and Martinez, 2008; Thompson et al, 2008; Gerlin and Aptal, 2014.
It is intended to verify the employee's perception regarding his ability to accommodate new functions supported in multidisciplinary processes.	Q3 - Evaluate if there is a reaction of the employees to the change in the assimilation of the new processes, when faced with labour flexibility	Atkinson, 1988; Archive, 2014; Bresciani, 1997; Neves et al., 2015; Kovacs, 2006.
It is intended to verify, by age groups, if, from the employees perspective, flexibility promotes motivation and performance improvement.	Q4 - Does job flexibility improve the worker's creativity and motivation? Are the young people doing better at this level?	Cardoso, 2006; Gillen, 2000; Gonçalves e Gonçalves, 2014; Pomi, 2005

Source: Author's elaboration

3.3 Data gathering and analysis

For the accomplishment of this study we used a process of exploratory nature through a sample for convenience (Vilelas, 2009). In this context, the criteria for verification and demonstration of what is claimed in terms of the research, in terms of the purposes that support it, implied an exploratory nature with the obtaining of answers by the respondents belonging to directorates, managers and other collaborators in the most diverse functions (except Call Centre and Back Office).

In order to avoid responses of workers with Back Office functions and the like, the sample was defined for convenience. The characteristics of the population desirable for the empirical study fell on workers who exercised various functions (flexibility) in their day to day activities or whose professional career had been marked by internal changes (turnover).

Considering the purpose of the study, an empirical study was carried out, using a survey applied online to employees of companies in the services sector, 200 questionnaires (built on the Google Forms application) were sent by e-mail, with the mention of the objectives and with a Link, in order to give immediate access to

the questionnaire online. After the survey was completed, IBM® SPSS® Statistics statistical analysis program was used for data analysis - a likert scale from 1 to 7 was used, where 1 - completely disagree and 7 - completely agree.

4. Results And Discussion

There were 51% of responses (102 from a total of 200), of which 40% were female and 60% male, with a higher prevalence of respondents between the ages of 36 and 44 (55.9%). The sample is concentrated in the age group between 36 and 44 years (mean age of the 42-year-old sample). It can also be verified that 84.3% of respondents currently perform management and leadership roles within the organization. In regard to the academic background, most of the respondents have a major degree (83.3%), 80% of which intend to continue updating their academic education.

4.1 Q1 - Given the employee's vision, is flexibility at work the right way for the organization to survive?

As far as these data are concerned, the results of the study are practically in contrast with the literature (Caetano, 2011; Pomi, 2005), since the respondents see the experience of this reality as something that must be assimilated and natural. In this context, we can affirm that flexibility, as a management practice should be implemented because it can have a positive relation to performance.

Also, employees show a strong involvement with flexibility (78 employees have already been involved in these dynamics), which reveals a high knowledge of the results that these processes can mean for the organization. This position is in line with Pomi (2005), who emphasizes the importance of employees in adopting learning that can easily adapt to rapid organizational changes.

From a performance perspective, it was found that there is a significant correlation as to whether respondents recognize that labour flexibility processes have a greater impact on the organization (87.3% consider the existence of these processes and dynamics very important for the companies) than on themselves, which reveals the importance management strategies, but also the opinion that they are based on the fact that certain practices may undermine their own performance.

4.2 Q2 - Does the employee's view of the companies flexibility, added value to promote and develop their skills?

It is in this learning capacity that competency management and the implementation of consistent strategies that allow its employees to build new skills and new capacities through actions and training. It is noticeable that this context is framed by the study, since the training is assumed to be extremely important for employees, as it is supported by 80% of the respondents that shows the intention to continue to develop their training. On the other hand, the study was demonstrative in identifying flexibility as an opportunity to develop skills, with 48% of the respondents agreeing with the statement "I am going to take the opportunity to learn more and help the company" (presenting an average in the item of 6.2) and 38.2% fully agreeing.

However, although the skills management may have a high degree of association with the organizational change itself, it is certain that when labour flexibility is accompanied by technological evolution, invariably, there must be the involvement of the organization and of the employee in order to meet the new requirements. In this context, the literature refers to the fact that the organizations' strategy in the implementation of these practices should be treated with reservations and cautions since there must always be an investment in training by the organization (Thompsons et al., 2008, Gerlin and Aptel, 2014).

4.3 Q3 - Evaluate if there is a reaction of the employees to the change in the assimilation of the new processes, when faced with labour flexibility

Considering the study sample, the respondents do not have a good perception about the practice of these processes since the average shows a low value (4.56). It is also worth noting that in this analysis, "I always did this function, I do not want to do anything else that has nothing to do with me", only 7.8% of the respondents agree or totally agree with this assumption, with about 74.5% (76 respondents) who disagrees partially (1 to 3) with the same assertion.

Also, labour flexibility can boost the employees' qualification and motivation by the influence of the multidisciplinary functions that they can assume throughout their professional life (Ferreira and Martinez,

2008). This assumption is in line with the results obtained, since 77.5% of the respondents have already been involved in these practices and see it as important in helping to break routines (average of 6.3).

At the same time, the overall mean values of the practices are quite satisfactory (5.82), varying from 5.2 for "the accumulation of functions is important for all" and 6.3 for "polyvalence allows breaking routines" being this item the most valued. It is also showed that 48% of respondents present a high expectation regarding performance in these management practices, agreeing or fully agreeing with the questions of the survey.

4.4 Q4 - Does job flexibility improve the worker's creativity and motivation? Are the young people doing better at this level?

On the other hand, the organization's own role in the implementation of culture and organizational climate that can stimulate the employee to develop new ideas, skills and different forms of action is crucial for their survival. It is these employees' creative capacities that can generate value, add differentiation, and generate flexibility in reaction to change and ability to adapt quickly to the constant adversities of the market. In this context, it is reported that 89.1% of the respondents agree or absolutely agree with the importance of the processes of flexibility for the development of their capacity for motivation and creativity.

If we consider that the organization in this study has invested in the areas of innovation and differentiation, it can be seen that respondents seem related with this assumption and see in the organization an organizational environment and culture that allows them to put into practice their ideas, opinions and suggestions.

It was verified that the older ones are the ones that give greater agreement (57.1%) to the fact that being flexible helps to be more creative and motivating, although it is in the younger group that shows a greater homogeneity in responses.

Considering that the group of the youngest (64.7%) shows an average of 12 years of service and that the older ones shows an average of 23 years, it can be seen that the older ones followed the evolution in a continuous way, being that they recognize it as a necessity and identify and assume it.

5. Conclusions

This study aims to reinforce, and above all enhance, the role of people in the success of organizations. If, since the 1980s, there has been a paradigm shift on the view of people as a competitive advantage for organizations (Carvalho, 2004), it is imperative in the current market to think that organizations need to invest more and more in their resources (Archive, 2014).

The reality of today's markets forces management to have a determining role in the organization's strategy in order to realign its processes and management models based on skills, competence and behaviours (Neves *et al.*, 2015). It is clear that organizations are increasingly exposed to extreme reality and hallucinating rates of change, surviving only those that are empowered with all their resources in a differentiating and sustainable way (Cardoso, 2006). It is in this context that the problem of flexibility in work arises. Although it is a very controversial and debatable issue, it is also the process that is adjusting more to the economic reality of the companies and more has changed the current labour market (Gerling and Aptel, 2014).

Although each organization has its own specification, the study demonstrates that it is possible to implement flexibility processes at work, resisting the adversities that the changes in these practices involve, and promote the development of the skills of its professionals. In this study, it is noticeable, the reason why organizations use current and sustained flexibility processes in their management strategy.

It should be noted that these processes usually promote the internal competitiveness of the organization. However, it is the employees themselves who recognize the need for this practice for the survival of organizations. Given these facts, we must consider that organizations are compatible with a long-term vision in the use of processes such as flexibility since this involves the valuation and developments of their human capital.

This study allows us to conclude that the new and current dynamics developed by strategic management usually entail consequences that must be analysed and weighed against the risk of undermining the entire

strategy of the organization. The responsibility for the success of these strategies lies in the way all processes are implemented and how change is managed by all the areas.

However, although the results presented in the study indicate that labour flexibility is well understood by the people, the relationship with these new dynamics depends very much on factors and variables that must be adequately taken care of. In order for these dynamics to meet the needs of the organizations, as it can be seen, there must be a great deal of training and adaptability for new functions, new practices and / or ways of working. For this, it is extremely important to recognize the need for new learning and the development of the skills of all involved.

It is up to the organization to accept the challenge and implement new processes in a world that is too complex by this transformation. It is necessary to continue to study and understand this reality in the increasingly interdisciplinary world of work and to identify the knowledge necessary to better understand new ways of working in an increasingly virtual world in organizations. On the other hand, the findings allow us to pave the way for further and more extensive investigations, associated with a more segmented approach, especially in its functional applicability.

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