Workplace Flexibility and Worker Agency:
Finding Short-Term Flexibility within a Highly Structured Workplace

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Abstract

“Worker agency”—the idea that workers have free will and will exercise it to meet their needs—is a fundamental part of organizational psychology and the sociology of work. Drawing upon qualitative research conducted in a Midwestern factory, the authors examine how workers create opportunities for short-term flexibility within a workplace characterized by shift work, strict production quotas, and team-organization. Coping mechanisms involve sympathetic supervisors and supportive co-workers. Workers also describe taking independent action when the structure does not permit meeting obligations to their families. These exercises in worker agency can be understood in terms of their legitimacy in the workplace and their potential for disruption of work. Worker agency also can be a positive factor in the workplace. Workers describe a supportive work environment as a critical factor that promotes loyalty and a willingness to go beyond workplace requirements for the good of the organization.

Workplace Flexibility and Worker Agency

The lack of flexibility in work schedules is a defining feature in many workplaces. Workers are often expected to function in accordance with highly structured timelines and schedules, as well as firm guidelines and expectations. With only a minimal regulatory apparatus, such as the Family and Medical Leave Act, flexibility in most jobs is a function of the nature of the work processes and protocols, values of management, and the needs of workers. When the demands of personal and family life come up against rigidity, workers often feel compelled to maneuver around these formal bounds, thus allowing them opportunities to attend to and resolve emergencies, crises, and unexpected, yet important, family and personal matters. The myriad ways in which workers respond to these external demands invites further exploration of how worker agency unfolds within the context of inflexibility at the worksite.

This paper explores how employees at a manufacturing plant have incorporated informal but durable mechanisms for managing work-family conflicts in the face of structural rigidity. While the examples are drawn from a manufacturing context, the imperatives of coverage responsibilities and shift work in many service-sector jobs create
similar tensions. The durability and intensity of commitment to such informal mechanisms calls for reconsideration in policy and research communities of how the scheduling of work in that sector has been implemented by management, how worker agency can counter efforts at control, and the implications for management seeking to create stable and productive workplace structures.

**Human Agency and Workplace Flexibility**

The focus of this paper is how a lack of formal flexibility can lead to informal ways of coping with work-family conflicts—ways that are often problematic for workers and their employers. In this way, “worker agency” provides an important dimension that is often not a part of management decision-making about work-family flexibility. Essentially, if worker agency is not considered, an important aspect of the management situation and the realities of the workplace are missing from the discussion. As we illustrate below, omitting such a consideration has consequences not only for gauging and assessing worker satisfaction, but also for better understanding of how the production process, itself, unfolds.

Although the term “worker agency” is a recent coinage, “free will,” the underlying idea, is fundamental to organizational psychology and the sociology of work. Frederick W. Taylor, in his seminal 1911 book on “scientific management,” provides an early example of how “worker agency” impacts management decisions. He describes an employer’s dilemma in setting productivity expectations for workers. In large part it arises because workers have “the deliberate object of keeping their employers ignorant of how fast work can be done.” (Taylor 1911, 21):

> It evidently becomes for each man’s interest, then, to see that no job is done faster than it has been in the past. The younger and less experienced men are taught this by their elders, and all possible persuasion and social pressure is brought to bear upon the greedy and selfish men to keep them from making new records which result in temporarily increasing their wages, while all those who come after them are made to work harder for the same old pay.  
> (p. 22)

Taylor’s approach is often criticized as an overly mechanistic view of workers. But “worker agency”—the acknowledgement that workers are not passive actors in the workplace—is fundamental to his analysis.

Our discussion of work-family flexibility and the centrality that worker agency has in consideration of this issue is based on work-family research at a mid-sized factory that we call “Sylvania.” For over two years, a research team interviewed employees, reviewed documents, and engaged in participant observation at this Midwestern auto-parts plant. Our goal was to understand a range issues related to how workers thought about and dealt with their work, their family and community situation, and the conflicts experienced in meeting family obligations in the face of the demands of the workplace. A key part of our efforts was to explore and document how workers sought work-family balance in a setting characterized by team-based operations, shift-work, and challenging production quotas. Hence, this paper is not about the experiences of manufacturing workers *per se*, but rather about workers whose time at work, and the timing of that work, is directly managed if not uniformly observed.

Attending to employees who work in such a regulated environment offers a novel and important insight into how worker agency unfolds around the need to balance workplace and family goals and interests. As employees in this arena (presumably) must be on the clock for specific points of time during the workday, any form of worker agency that creates opportunities to leave the workplace or attend to family-specific needs while at work often involves the complicity of co-workers and/or supervisors, or otherwise a careful negotiation of the workplace or of co-workers such that one does not encounter sanctions (formal from bosses or informal from colleagues whose performance at work often is directly affected by the performance of other employees).
In fact, in the course of our interviewing, we found that “worker agency” was a major part of dealing with work-family conflict. When flexibility wasn’t built into the workplace, workers developed informal coping mechanisms to meet pressing family obligations. An interview early in the research triggered interest in the specific situation of fathers who wanted to be a part of the organized sports lives of their children. (Root & Wooten, 2008) James, a long-term employee described how he coached their teams in order to be more directly involved in an important activity in their lives. “I had two boys and two girls and they all were on one of my teams or another. So I always had basketball, football, softball, Branford Raiders, flag football, or whatever. All year ‘round. Whatever it was, my kids were always on the team. So when I came home, they came home with me.” Unlike others we interviewed, James was usually able to work on the day shift, freeing up his afternoons and evenings for these activities with his children. One time, however, he was asked to work on a Saturday when his team was playing their championship game. He said that he could work a half-day, but had to leave in the afternoon.

I told that foreman on Monday of that week that we got the championship game, which is like a super bowl, our league against the other league—the top team. We got this super bowl game Saturday. I got to leave no later than 12 or I’m not goin’ come that Saturday at all. He said, “Well, come on in, and I’ll make sure you get off.”

I get there that Saturday mornin’, I’ll never forget that. I said, “Phil, you know I gotta leave at 12.”

“... I can’t let you go.”

I said, “Phil, I told you about it.”

“Yeah, but I gotta run this job, I can’t— no, no.”

All right. So I go to lunch at 11. I go left to the pay phone, stick my little money in, call back in, and say, “Hey, my car fell in a ditch. I’m waitin’ for AAA to come. I don’t know how long they gonna’ be.” Okay. I said “I may be back and I may not.” So to the game I go.

Come back in that Monday and, at that time, I was workin’ off the line doin’ shock repair. I was just repairin’ shocks on the side. Just take ‘em off the line and, don’t nothin’ come of it, set ‘em down. I come back that Monday, he posted my job on the board. Now here’s a man put in for it with 20 more years’ seniority than me. Now I’m back on the (assembly) line (because he took my job)…

When there wasn’t a sanctioned way of getting the short-term flexibility he needed, James acted on his own. His exercise of “worker agency”—disappearing with an unconvincing excuse—didn’t go unpunished. He was transferred to a much less desirable job. It is important to note that the day he left work early his department also missed its production target. Hence, his behavior created a lose-lose situation; for himself and for the plant more generally.

Work-Family and the Work Routines at Sylvania

When the auto economy was hot, Sylvania hummed with activity throughout the day and most of the night. Formally, there were two shifts for production and a third “midnight” shift mainly for maintenance. In principle, the eight-hour “day shift” would be roughly from 7:30 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. (eight hours plus one-half hour for an unpaid lunch period). The “afternoon shift” was from 3:30 p.m. to midnight. In practice, however, most people worked longer shifts. Workers routinely worked 10-hour or 12-hour shifts. When overtime was scheduled, it usually meant an earlier starting time rather than staying later. A twelve-hour shift “day shift” might begin at 3:30 a.m. and end at 4:00 in the afternoon. In response to a question about the structure of her daily routine, Cynthia, a single mother, described her early days at Sylvania. She described how she had to allow a half-hour for the drive from her home and then

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1 During the course of the research, Sylvania experienced decreased orders and steady downsizing. Eventually, after the recession took hold in 2008, the plant closed.
additional the time to walk from the parking lot to her department, stopping to change clothes and prepare for her time on the line.

When I started here, I started on days, so I had to find somebody to sit with my daughter until—because I had to leave at 4:00, so someone sat with her until 6:30, they would drop her off at school for me. I was getting off in enough time to pick her up….If I’m really lucky, some days I can come back and get 2 to 3 hours more later in the day before I go in. You find that people here take a lot of No-Doze or over-the-counter stuff to keep you awake. But all that does is, eventually it wears off and then you’re really tired [chuckles]. So it’s not a good thing. I try not to do it.

As her description unfolded, it started to get confusing about whether she was talking about 4:00 in the morning or 4:00 in the afternoon. In trying to clarify this, she was asked whether she meant a.m. or p.m. Cynthia responded: “When you work my shift, there is no a.m. and p.m. It all blurs together.”

Long working hours were endemic at Sylvania. A supervisor commented on the toll that these kinds of hours take on family life: “I don’t know [pause] how their kids know who they are. I have no idea. And that’s sad to me. Another guy that does work here, his father, you know, when he was growing up he father worked in the automotive industry and he’s like, ‘I never knew my dad.’”

Shift work itself—working an alternative to the traditional 9-5 job—is not necessarily a problem for work and family balance. In some cases it can be an advantage in coordinating responsibilities. For example, one production worker talked about the convenience of not having to start work until the afternoon:

…if I need to do something during the day, I can get it done. All businesses are operating during the day, so most things shut down after 5:00 as far as business. Like your bills, you need to call somebody or do whatever, I can get that done during the day. I can, you know, go or do anything I need to during the day and still go to work. And when I come home if there’s still something I need to go shopping for, Meijer’s is 24-hours [chuckles].

I like having that morning time or whatever, to do whatever I want to do. And I don’t like feeling like I have to be rushed to come to work. A big disadvantage, I believe, as far as day shift, is how their overtime is scheduled. They have to come in earlier. If they’re only working 9 hours they start at 6:00 or 7:00. But if they are working 11 or 12, they’ll be starting at 3:00 or 4:00. So that sleep fluctuation, I couldn’t do that.

Some Sylvania workers described how working the afternoon shift allowed them to share childcare responsibilities with a spouse who worked a different shift. One woman, whose husband also worked at Sylvania, talked about literally handing over the baby in the parking lot at the shift change. (Rudd and Root 2008) In fact, national statistics suggest that about one in six of those working an afternoon shift and one in ten working evenings say that they do so for family or child care reasons. (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics 2005: table 6)

But the dominant view at Sylvania was that the afternoon shift was bad for family life. You’re away from home from the early afternoon until well into the night:

…if your kids are in school, it’s even worse. You don’t see them except on the weekends. They’re in school all day. You might see them in the morning. You get up in the morning and take them to school. But by the time they get out of school, you’re at work and by the time you get home from work, they’re in bed. So you see them in the morning to take them to school and that’s it. See, there’s no time. There’s no family time, other than the weekend. And of course, as your kids get a little older they have friends and things they want to do on the weekends. . . . you have to really make an effort to put that time with them.

Workers talked about missing out on key aspects of the lives of his children. For example, one father talked about his grown son who is now a swimming coach, but he was never able to watch him compete when he was in high school. “I never got to see him do any of his extra-curricular activities because most of my time I spent on the number 3 [afternoon] shift.” Because seniority is a major determinant of work assignments, younger workers—those who were more likely to have children at home—tended to be on the afternoon shift. Hence, these workers were most susceptible
to experiencing instability in contact hours with their children while these children were at ages where they would be in most need of such contact.

Creating Flexibility Amidst a Rigid Structure

Christensen and Schneider identify five types of flexibility: short-term flexibility; flexibility in scheduling full-time employment; alternatives to full-time, full-year employment; extended time-off; and alternative career paths and timing (Christensen & Schneider 2010: 4). In the course of our research at Sylvania, workers provided examples of each of these types of flexibility. Because of the nature of the production process, which included assembly lines, work teams, coverage demands, and high production targets, we were particularly struck by the challenges of involved in getting short-term time off. Short-term flexibility is particularly problematic for lower-status workers. Managers and professionals tend to have greater control of their time, in the sense that although they may work long hours, they more often can flex their time. As they supervise lower-tier workers, they typically may be charged with issuing directives and enforcing policies concerning production, but not with actually generating that production. In contrast, workers in line positions and with coverage responsibility—whether in manufacturing or service jobs—have the particular challenge of producing the goods or services. (Baltes, et al., 1999). Hence, short-term flexibility is something more than a minor inconvenience in these work sites. Instead, it is a source of considerable disruption of the productive process, itself.

Work-family problems associated with the afternoon shift came up in a number of interviews, particularly around the problems of getting time off for occasional family events or commitments. Workers talked about finding ways informal ways to gain some short-term flexibility even within the demanding production structure. There were a number of examples of workers on the afternoon shift who talked about the importance of being a part of their children’s participation in organized sports. In the face of the rigidity of the organizational structure, workers coping strategies reflected three general approaches: making informal arrangements with sympathetic supervisors, getting the support of their co-workers, and taking independent actions (such as James’ decision not to return to work after he left for his Saturday lunch break).

The importance of supportive supervisors for coping with work-family balance is broadly recognized (Brunetto, et. al. 2010; Friedman & Johnson, 1997; Scandura & Lankau 1997) and it has been identified as having specific import for those who experience the impacts of shift work. (Pisarski, et. al., 2008) As one individual at Sylvania put it:

My boss was great …[he] knew what my issues were with my wife…his family values are strong like mine. The family comes first. He has never given me a hard time for taking time off for my family

Another worker described how he would arrange to leave temporarily during his shift to have a glimpse of his daughter’s cheerleading:

I’d give up Friday night, a couple hours, and tell my boss to stop my pay. I’d go to football games and watch her cheer, come back and go to work. As long as you’re in an off-line job in the afternoon shift, the bosses are fairly flexible.

In contrast, there were other supervisors who “want to make a name for themselves” as tough managers:

…they’re not very good “people persons” like they should be. You can spot them. You can look at the numbers and spot them right off the bat where all the trouble is. Where’s the absenteeism? Where’s the [disciplinary reports]?… They will follow that person around.

In other cases, supportive co-workers were the key to informal arrangements. One worker described how he was able to leave early on days when his son was playing his high school baseball games. He was working a twelve-hour
day shift at the time and arranged for a co-worker who wanted more overtime to come in early on those days. He would put in eight hours, starting at 3:00 a.m. and then leave in time to go to the games.

I was supposed to be working from 3:00 to 3:30 [p.m.], but the guy on afternoons was complaining about he wasn’t making enough. So I just told the foreman, “Hey, I’ll work from 3:00 to 11:30 and by the time my son’s game come up, I’ll be there to watch him.” I didn’t have no problem. I was at my son’s games.

The reliance upon co-workers to assist in the informal implementation of worker flexibility is rooted in the culture of the workplace. In explaining that culture, many workers said that the plant maintained a “family” atmosphere. Co-workers would simply work out a way to cover for someone who wanted to slip out briefly to make an appearance at a child’s event:

…it’s nice here because if you’re on afternoons and you have a kid, a lot of guys will let you sneak out. Not that it’s right, but they’ll let you sneak out to go see your son play a football game or whatever, and sneak back in. They’ll cover you in that respect. So that’s kind of nice. That’s part of the family aspect here. A couple of guys have said that. They’ve been stuck on afternoons and their son was at a football game. They were determined to go see it, so they worked it out with the buddies. “I’m just going to be gone for an hour, just so I can go see him and wave to him and let him know I’m there.” And then they come back.

Aside from flexibility gained through informal agreements with supervisors or with the collegial support of co-workers, there were independent actions taken by workers to meet family obligations. James’ story is one example. Another highlights how a worker “worked” the system, with her doctor’s help. A supervisor was unwilling to grant a leave when her husband’s father hospitalized in northern Michigan.

…my father-in-law had Parkinson’s that he had been diagnosed with probably 6-8 years before that. We were up there at the 2-week shutdown and he had taken a turn for the worse. They had him in the hospital and didn’t know if he was gonna make it or not. We had spent 2 solid weeks [during the shutdown] at the hospital in Marquette every day with him. They had admitted him and, like I say, they didn’t know if he was going to live or die.

Well, when it come time to comin’ back to work, the Family Medical Leave Act was in effect. My husband could take it because it was his father. In-laws are not considered immediate family, so I was not allowed to take the FMLA. I called my boss, told my boss what was going on. And he said, Mrs. Dougherty, you will be back to work on Tuesday. I had called him on Monday. I said, “Jim, I can’t make it back.” “Mrs. Dougherty, I’m tellin’ you, you will be back to work on Tuesday.” I said, “Jim, I’ve gotta do what I’ve gotta do.” And I hung up from him, called my family doctor, explained the situation I was under. He says, “Sounds like it’s stress to me.” He put me off on 2 weeks medical [leave].

Other workers talked about the leverage they had, as workers, to gain the agreement of management. For example, supervisors have to “make the numbers”—meet specific production goals—and the workers in the department could subtly decrease output if they so chose. Such individual or concerted group efforts are a topic in the literature, identifying a range of activities from inaction and slowdowns to wasting materials to outright sabotage. (Analoui 1995; Roscigno & Hodson 2004) One worker at Sylvania told of single-handedly slowing down production on his single-operator machine in response to new restrictions on overtime. Another person remarked that if his supervisor didn’t authorize altering his work schedule so he could attend his son’s “Bible quiz” tournament, he could create havoc by leaving his machine out of adjustment in a way that would make it very hard for anyone else to fix:

I [could] mix it up a little bit to where the guy came in on the next shift couldn’t put it back together and be sittin’ there waiting for me to put it back together [laughs]...You gotta know your machine—machinery—well enough to be able to do it that way. You’re really not sabotaging the machine...It’s just that “Oh, I guess I should have put it back that way.”

Although he didn’t say he actually had done this, he felt his supervisor knew that he could take these kinds of retaliatory actions if his request for flexibility wasn’t approved.
The coping mechanisms described—expressions of worker agency—suggest different levels of legitimacy and control (see figure 1). Having the cooperation of a supportive supervisor, even when it involves going against formal rules, tends to be the least disruptive to the operations of the organization. Although it may go against formal rules, it acknowledges the authority of the supervisor and, presumably, the involvement of the supervisor ensures that such actions are not excessively disruptive in terms of the work that needs to be done. Hence, worker satisfaction and production can both remain high.

Creating flexibility by getting co-workers to help “cover” during an absence has less management control and a greater potential for disruption in the workplace. It also may reinforce a sense of competitiveness between the worker group and managers. In this case, workers may find themselves generally satisfied with the workplace (at least as far as relations with co-workers is concerned), but less satisfied with management. This minor but consistent tension has the capacity to inhibit productivity. Finally, the third method discussed—workers taking independent actions, possibly in direct defiance to the rules—has the least legitimacy within the workplace and has the potential to be severely disruptive. This condition can severely cripple production while also sustaining, and potentially enhancing, worker dissatisfaction with the workplace.

**Implications for Work-Family Policy/Practice**

Our emphasis on worker agency in regard to the tensions involved in managing the work-family balance is not an affirmation of sabotage or coercion (as reflected by the third method) as a critical resource for workers. Rather, we aim to highlight both the impact that constraints place upon a certain sector of workers in their effort to manage the tenuous balance of work-family obligations and how a lack of workplace flexibility can result in individual and group responses that can have negative impacts on the workplace. Workers in an inflexible environment will seek to create their own flexibility when pressured by competing obligations.

Our discussion of worker agency has focused on its exercise against constraints in the workplace. But we should not neglect the positive aspects of “worker agency” that arise from a sense of commitment to the organization—loyalty and the willingness to go beyond the basics of what is required. When workers at Sylvania talked about the characteristics of a “good job,” they usually mentioned factors that we typically associate with job satisfaction: pay...
levels that are considered fair; good working conditions; and a sense of accomplishment. But they also talked about how the quality of their relationship to supervisors influenced their commitment to their work. The importance of the “workplace culture” and the nature of relationships were suggested earlier in our earlier discussion of the “family” environment that facilitated “informal” flexibility. Interviews suggested the depth of feeling—at least for some workers—about the nature of supervision as a key to how they feel about their work.

...for me what distinguishes one job from another is really the people. And for me, I need to feel appreciated. If I don’t- because I’ve had an experience in my career where I didn’t feel appreciated and I felt unproductive and it didn’t motivate me one single bit. So a good job to me is when you have leadership that you would do anything for. And that’s what I- the kind of job I enjoy the most. So it doesn’t really matter what it is content-wise. But it’s more the way it’s run. The way it’s run and if you have a good leader who appreciates you as a valuable member of the team, that’s a good job.

Another worker, talking about a “good job,” emphasized the importance of the help she received that helped her get through a difficult period in her life.

And before, it was, at work they didn’t want to hear about anything at home. They don’t care about anything at home. “When you’re at work. You’re at work. Don’t bring your [home issues up]” But you can’t help it. When it’s in your head and in your heart….And especially if you’re having a tough time, whether it be a divorce or the loss of a loved one or an illness or something, before you weren’t allowed to bring that to work with you. And now they’re realizing that um, that is part of your life and you do have to deal with that when you’re at work. And if just having some benefit of the Family Medical Leave, you know, the person can take off for a month or whatever and get their life back in order, they’re glad to come back. They didn’t really want to leave. You know, they really just need a small amount of time or consideration or something to get through this. They don’t want to give up their job and things like that. I think that’s often great.

A salaried worker talked about how his sense of his employer changed after the insensitive response of his supervisor at his previous job.

My brother-in-law committed suicide just before I left [my earlier job]. I got an emergency phone call one morning from my nephew, his son, that he had shot himself. And when I told my boss, he said, “Why do you have to leave? It’s just your brother-in-law?” [pause] That was a hard thing to do. In fact, that was probably one of the things that led me to leave...

As we stated in the introduction to this paper, some broad-based commitments to flexibility in the workplace have already garnered significant public attention and have been inspired by policy formation. The Family and Medical Leave Act of 1993 provided employees of medium and large companies up to 12 workweeks of unpaid leave during any 12-month period. Leaves can be taken for a number of reasons, including the birth and care of a child, the care of spouse, son, daughter, or parent of an employee who has a serious health condition, or a serious health condition of the employee that makes the employee unable to perform the essential functions of his or her positions. The creation and implementation of this act served as a major transformation in formal policy concerning workplace flexibility but, as is the case more generally with federal government policy, was an initiative imposed from outside of the workplace.

From the perspective of government policy, the scope of the Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA) is generally limited to medical care and time-off related to birth or adoption. Several states have passed their own family leave statutes that extend FMLAs coverage to smaller employers and/or to additional relatives (e.g., parents-in-law rather than only biological parents; domestic partners). Some states have also added provisions for short-term flexibility, such as attending meetings at a child’s school or addressing issues arising from problems of domestic violence. (e.g., Florida’s Employee Leave Act for Victims of Domestic and Sexual Violence). For the most part, however, short-term flexibility is largely a function of the internal policies of the firm. While federal government policy concerning workplace flexibility has direct impact on many worksites, the effect on smaller employers and on work-family
conflicts other than those identified by the legislation other employment arenas may only be psychological—that is, calling attention to the importance of the issue.

Our research suggests that there may be important advantages for companies that seek to create an environment in which there are options for informal flexibility, so that worker agency should be an important factor in considering of policies and practices concerning workplace flexibility and work-family balance, more generally. Management has a primary responsibility for maintaining an effective workplace. Accordingly, initiatives that target the behavior of middle-level managers extend the possibilities for the transformation of the workplace. But attempts at control can be thwarted when they do not give adequate attention to the real pressures facing workers and the pressures on workers to actively seek ways to meet competing demands work and family. How employers deal with these issues can go a long way toward influencing the positive dimensions of worker agency—commitment to the job, loyalty, and willingness to take initiatives beyond the basic requirements of the job. Rather than solely emphasizing the creation and implementation of formal government policy, an important step toward the transformation of the workplace so that worker flexibility can be more fruitfully incorporated is to recognize and encourage new behavior from employers themselves (or at least their personnel managers). In the case of manufacturing firms, a change-from-within approach rests not solely on a moral foundation of fairness to workers, but also on the basis that such efforts may benefit the workplace more generally and enhance productivity.

References


