

# STRATEGIC FACTORS AFFECTING FLEXIBLE WORK MODEL DEVELOPMENT

## Introduction

The concepts of changes in the organization of work, variously referred to as the reform of work, humanization of work, work restructuring or job redesign, first emerged in the 1980s. The concepts sought to limit the negative impact of narrowly specialized work, depart from mechanistic attitudes towards workers and, as a result, improve the efficiency of the organization's operations [13, p. 182]. What job redesign meant was, therefore, adopting a different approach to individual and collective work, in which comprehensiveness of operation is ensured by means of more varied autonomous activities making up an identifiable work section [9, p. 2]. With time, reorganization activities began to target the area of quality of working life, focusing on measures to improve the quality of individual professional life. The trend entailed both increased independence of workers (e.g. concepts of empowerment or self-employment, which T. Peters defines collectively as "entrepreneurializing of every job" [15, p. 67]), and better reconciliation of work with life outside work (idea of work-life balance).

The above tendencies in work organization development are comprised in visions of the organization of the future [6] which – to a marked extent – refer to problems associated with the organization of labour as a key element of building a competitive advantage. Authors of the study, referred to above, draw special attention to the following issues:

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- management oriented towards diversity, e.g. in terms of age, religion and gender of employees (F. Hesselbein), which translates into varied utilization of competencies and different points of view, but also diverse and changing divisions of work and working time (D. Miller),
- innovative approach to the construction of structures supporting operation in a changing competitive environment; the method creates reconfiguration potential which, in turn, ensures smooth progression of changes and limits the hierarchical order of the organization (F. Hesselbein) – but also exerts an influence on tasks at hand which are increasingly diverse, variable and accounted for in terms of team work (R.M. Kanter),
- central role of human capital and its constant expansion by improving employee competencies and making use of them in the best way possible – as well as hiring and keeping the best staff, delegating tasks and conditions for their achievement appropriately, motivating staff members by boosting their self-esteem (A.F. Smith, T. Kelly) and by achieving equilibrium between private and professional life, largely based on the proper organization of work (E. Platt).

The phenomena outlined above currently result in a variety of solutions referred to as flexible work, flexi-work schemes, flexible forms of employment, flexitime or flexible working model [16]. The terms vary, but they all refer to various forms of flexibility in terms of tasks, time, space and status of work. Flexible work arrangements comprise both part-time work, variable work time, job rotation, different forms of telecommuting, or telework, and self-employment [for a broader discussion of various flexible forms of work, see 11; 16]. What follows is that different concepts now exist in parallel and an increasing diversity of their determining factors is observed.

Based on an analysis of studies concerning utilization of flexible forms of the organization of work<sup>1</sup>, three sources of factors can be distinguished:

- macroeconomic: phenomena occurring at the general level of the economy, affecting processes of organization and performance of professional work,
- microeconomic: phenomena at the level of the organization which determine whether enterprises are more or less eager to implement changes in their models of work,

<sup>1</sup> An overview of studies concerning this area in Poland after 2000 is presented in: *Badanie czynników warunkujących wykorzystanie niestandardowych form zatrudnienia w Polsce*, Z. Dziubiński, M. Kowalewski (eds.), Wyższa Szkoła Zarządzania Personalem, Warszawa 2008. The studies provide insights into the share of non-standard forms of employment in the entire employed population, the prevalence of non-standard employment forms among women and graduates, the attitude of employers towards various types of non-standard employment, employment preferences among workers and their opinions about working in non-standard conditions. The most recent research results are included in a report containing a diagnosis and recommendations concerning the concept of flexicurity in Poland (*Flexicurity w Polsce. Diagnoza i rekomendacje. Raport końcowy z badań*, E. Kryńska (ed.), Ministry of Labour and Social Policy, Labour Market Department, Warsaw 2009).

- individual: current features and preferences of people performing work, regarding forms of work organization.

Each category includes a host of factors which vary in terms of importance and strength of impact on the form of work organization. However, what is essential for work organization processes is focusing on some key phenomena which are vital for implementing changes in the organization of work within an enterprise. It is important, then, to identify a set of concepts and ideas which are global in nature (affecting various entities regardless of the industry, region of operation etc.) and are sustained on a long-term basis (or have a timeless quality to them), i.e. they have already been observed for quite a time and are expected to apply also in the future.

## 1. Macroeconomic factors

The category of macroeconomic factors that have an influence on the development of flexible work organization comprises two general sub-categories:

- socioeconomic factors,
- formal and legal factors.

Socioeconomic factors refer mainly to the labour market and, in particular, to the level and structure of the work potential, as well as problems associated with globalization and competitiveness of the economy, social efficiency of work and labour costs. Initiatives undertaken at this level, mainly by the State, seek to balance labour supply and demand. On the one hand, such actions aim at preventing and reducing unemployment (globally or structurally) within specific social groups. On the other hand, however, they are also meant to avert potential or actual staff shortages in enterprises: both qualitative (professional activation of the population, rise in employability) and quantitative (support for professional development schemes). The labour market functions as a regulator of economic and social processes and reacts very strongly to the impact of globalization phenomena in two distinct ways: enterprises facing ever increasing competition must respond quickly to changes in the magnitude and structure of supply and demand, also in the field of employment, while employees are expected to continually improve their qualifications and enhance adaptability to the fast changing economic environment. As a result, economic and social needs require smooth adjustment, which is – however – becoming more and more challenging – not only because some of the workers fail to rise up to their employers' expectations, but also because of staff shortages stemming from demographic processes (low population growth rate, ageing of the societies) and cultural transformations observed in attitudes to work (increasingly common reluctance to comply with employers' rigorous requirements in terms of staff competencies and organizational constraints). Economically and socially rational utilization of labour

resources thus points to the need to maintain on the labour market, for as long as possible, as many worker groups as possible. This is facilitated by the introduction of flexible methods of work organization, also taking into account specific expectations of older employees and very young staff members only just entering the labour market, as well as the disabled and working mothers – though without losing sight of the entrepreneurs' economic interests.

This idea, designed to combine all the interests discussed above, seems to practice flexicurity, i.e. an integrated strategy promoted on the European job market to simultaneously enhance flexibility and security on the labour market. The flexibility component represents smooth changes occurring in people's professional lives (completion of the period of education and initiation of a professional career, job changes, resumption of employment after a period of unemployment or professional inactivity, retirement), while the security element is understood as the security of employment in general, rather than the security of a particular job. The basic goal of the flexicurity model is to ensure that EU citizens enjoy a high level of employment security, i.e. employability at every career stage, high potential for professional development in the fast-changing economic environment and appropriate provisions for both employees and employers allowing them to take maximum advantage of opportunities brought by globalization [10, p. 13]. The importance of the concept is currently emphasized also in the context of preventing and combating economic crisis.

EU documents outline four basic preconditions ensuring efficient operation of the flexicurity policy [10, p. 14]:

- availability of appropriate (flexible and reliable) contractual arrangements,
- active labour market policies,
- comprehensive lifelong learning strategies,
- modern social security systems.

EU Member States are currently at different stages of preparation for implementing the idea and they seek to achieve it by various means (four flexicurity pathways have been drawn up), depending on their specific circumstances<sup>2</sup>. Whatever the exact structure and methods used for the implementation of flexicurity models, they will be a factor notably supporting the development of flexible working schemes at the enterprise level. This will happen because the general concept assumes impact on all labour market stakeholders by expanding their knowledge of flexible solutions. In this way, flexible work models will be promoted and become more widespread also through more transparent legal regulations.

It needs to be noted, though, that legal aspects influencing changes in labour models (recognized as one of the essential factors determining the organization of

<sup>2</sup> Similar activities have also been undertaken in Poland. For detailed analyses, consult: E. Kryńska (ed.), *Flexicurity w Polsce. Diagnoza i rekomendacje. Raport końcowy z badań*, Ministry of Labour and Social Policy, Labour Market Department, Warsaw 2009.

work) are problematic because of their unambiguous effect. On the one hand, they vary between countries and, what is more, can be modified at the level of individual companies in their internal normative acts. Being such, they change over time, which makes them relatively unstable. On the other hand, they are usually perceived by enterprises as limitations – since their role is to ensure that a balance is maintained between the interests of various parties within their respective work arrangements, and to set the factors mentioned above within a framework of formal rules. As a consequence, they will always block some of the initiatives relating to the flexible organization of labour, both those regarded as desirable by employers and those considered beneficial for employees. This, in particular, pertains to the labour law which, until recently, has developed as a collection of provisions regulating, by definition, typical work schemes (full-time employment for an indefinite period) and, consequently, is not fully suitable for resolving problems emerging in relation to non-standard work arrangements despite the formally valid principles postulating equal treatment of all workers [5, p. 57]. In fact, the labour law will, most probably, never be fully adjusted to non-standard employment situations because this would hamper diversity and variability, i.e. intrinsic properties of atypical work schemes. National and international regulations, EU legislation in particular, set out general standards and principles of action restricting (mainly due to the need to protect employees' rights and employment security) the employers' freedom in increasing the flexibility of conditions of employment provision. Even if they do not ban certain solutions outright, employers are often wary of introducing measures which are not directly authorized by the law. A discussion of flexibility of the Polish labour market is usually based on two principal theses: one points to the "rigidity" of the labour market (attributed to high costs of labour and poor flexibility of the Polish laws), while the other draws attention to the existence of flexible forms of employment on the periphery of the labour contract scheme and beyond the legislative scope of the labour code [11, p. 32].

Yet another issue is that flexible organization of work does not refer to different forms of employment *sensu stricto*. In fact, it embraces a number of internal solutions which do not give rise to any employment-related consequences (such as flexible working time) and which stem from legal regulations other than the labour code – or are even completely unregulated in formal terms (e.g. task flexibility). Aside from legal regulations with a general impact, which are in force nationwide, other formal foundations supporting the development of flexible forms of work should also be enumerated. They include, among others, provisions laid down in the Community Charter of Fundamental Social Rights of Workers, Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, Directive 2003/88/EC concerning certain aspects of the organization of working time, Council Directive 97/81/EC concerning the Framework Agreement on part-time work, Resolution of the Council and of the Ministers for Employment and Social Policy on the balanced participation of women and men in

family and working life, European Employment Strategy, Social Policy Strategy and the Lisbon Strategy [11, p. 33]. The documents focus on flexible systems of work organization which are perceived as an opportunity to improve the quality of work, increase employment and improve competitiveness, and provide for easier reconciliation of work with other personal activities. In Poland, the fundamental strategic document outlining tasks and priorities of Poland's social and economic development, as well as conditions which should ensure that development, is the National Development Strategy 2007–2015. The document's third priority (increase in the employment rate and improvement of the quality of life) places a clear emphasis on the need of promotion and more widespread use of flexible and alternative forms of employment, organization of working time and conditions.

## 2. Microeconomic factors

The macroeconomic phenomena described above are of central importance also in terms of promotion of flexible work organization arrangements, however they do not automatically increase the practical application of this type of solutions. The main initiators of more flexible work organization schemes are employers who, after considering specific needs identified at the level of a particular organization, draw up solutions matching those needs. Studies conducted to date have failed to confirm the deterministic influence of such enterprise-related attributes as company size, period of market presence or business sector. More important stimuli are definitely the knowledge and skills of managerial staff involved in such solutions, as well as expected effects of the schemes<sup>3</sup>. Consequently, two phenomena with a crucial impact on the development of flexible working models can be pinpointed on the microeconomic level. They are:

- development of high performance work systems,
- development of social responsibility of business.

High Performance Work Systems (HPWS) are collectively defined as a specific combination of HR practices, organization of work and working processes, oriented towards the maximization of employees' knowledge and skills, commitment and flexibility (S. Snell), or more like HIWS (High Involvement Work Systems) – work systems based on high employee commitment, arising as a consequence of responding to employees' needs associated with access to information, participation in decision-making processes and reconciliation of work and family life [2, pp. 32–43]. Some varieties of the systems have names with clear references to the organization of

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<sup>3</sup> The Author of the article has been conducting research into flexible organization of work for several years now. Results obtained in recent studies, covering the period 2009–2011, have not been published yet.

work: HPWO (High Performance Work Organization) or HPO (High Performance Organization). A distinctive feature of the concept is the establishment of autonomous teams of workers responsible for a defined scope of activities in the business process. Workers, individually enjoying a very high degree of empowerment, are expected to initiate improvements within their respective job profiles [3, pp. 259–260]. High performance work systems emphasize the importance of a flexible approach to the workplace accompanied by employment security and expansion of the range of skills, which implies that internal flexibility is preferred to external flexible arrangements (less rotation within the enterprise-labour market contact area but greater task flexibility including – as a precondition – multidisciplinary competencies of staff members and flexible working time adjusted to the tasks at hand). The guiding idea of such systems is the organization's global performance taking into account the problem of labour costs (i.e. a key factor determining the form of employment) but developed in conformance with the bottom-up approach (individual workers' performance translating into team performance and then affecting the performance of the enterprise as a whole).

Adoption of this concept of management by an enterprise also results in the emergence of new organizational forms which are determined by the organization's operation in a modern and constantly changing business environment, requiring the organization to be smart, flexible, critical, open, creative, innovative and capable of ongoing transformation [4, pp. 287–297]. New business models, largely embracing disintegration of organizational ties and expansion of organizational boundaries, are meant to come up to these requirements. The starting point for identifying an optimum organization formula is increasingly based on key competencies and precise definition of what should remain within the organization and what should be outsourced [12]. The basic features of a traditional enterprise include hierarchy and maintenance of all the functions required for business operation. New forms, surfacing in the wake of widespread expansion of advanced communications solutions and reduced transaction costs, but also specific preferences of Generation Y whose members have a different approach to their professional activity (and are more eager than the older generations to opt for freelancing instead of a full-time job contract scheme), destroy the traditional systems, inspiring a trend towards more loose business structures. In these new systems, the enterprise is the main initiator and coordinator of outsourced processes which are performed in the enterprise's environment, with the main decision-maker concentrating key competencies for a particular business sector without weakening the competitive position. The operational scheme outlined above, used by a number of large international concerns, creates a favourable environment for the growth of smaller businesses. With large enterprises, switching to a new organizational model entails "slimming down", i.e. separation and contracting out of some of the business functions (outsourcing). On the

other hand, in smaller companies opting for a modern organization model, the size and scale of operation necessitate flexible working arrangements, particularly in the external dimension. As a consequence, outsourcing and other forms of work incorporating external flexibility are required (civil law contracts, on-call job schemes, self-employment), which – particularly in smaller businesses – results in retaining only a limited number of permanent staff. This tendency, in turn, increases the risk of instability of human resources within an organization (while it should be noted that network arrangements call for an increased level of coordination, with control replaced by compromise).

Therefore, enterprises which introduce new working models become more flexible, while greater flexibility makes them gravitate more towards a genotype based on competencies. Identification and reinforcement of the key competence becomes the central goal. In addition, new business organization forms are associated with optimum utilization of the human potential (also in ethical aspects) which – though flexible – may not be unstable. The situation results in a major emphasis on the social dimension of the new business model and on the importance of employee preferences in flexible work organization systems.

In this way, Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) – a concept allowing enterprises at the stage of strategy development to voluntarily incorporate social interests and environmental protection, as well as relations with various stakeholder groups – is gradually becoming a measure of corporate ordinance and a priority in building a comprehensive strategy of corporate development. Social responsibility is a process whereby companies manage their relations with different stakeholders who may have an actual influence on business success. Consequently, it should be regarded as an investment, not a cost. At the same time studies devoted to the perception of social responsibility show that whether a company is regarded as socially responsible or not depends largely on the opinion of the company's workers, with CSR activities recognized as a sign of organizational maturity. Trust, sense of security, respectable working conditions, transparent communication, participation capacity – these management elements are increasingly present largely due to CSR expansion. In Poland, the idea of CSR is growing in popularity and acquiring an increasingly institutionalized status [cf. 14]. A key stage in CSR development is believed to be the RESPECT index launched by the Warsaw Stock Exchange (GPW) in November 2009. RESPECT, an index of socially responsible GPW-listed companies, offers Polish enterprises an opportunity to get closer to the true CSR idea, i.e. an added value for the business coherently incorporated in corporate strategic goals, and to SRI (Socially Responsible Investment), i.e. investing in business entities which in their operation rely on CSR, at the same time improving the company's value in a manner clearly appreciated by the market (i.e. investors). Other important developments include activities under-



taken by the Polish government such the Team for Corporate Social Responsibility established under the Order issued on 8 May 2009 [14, p. 8].

Good CSR practices in the area of employee relations focus on two main goals pursued by the employers: maintenance of the work-life equilibrium and improvement in the quality of work (in terms of the quality of tasks delegated to staff). Consequently, schemes which support young mothers in combining a professional career with child rearing (part-time work, individually set working hours or telecommuting) and organizational changes concerning the division of work and aimed at reducing mundaneness and increasing the level of competence (e.g. job rotation, team work) have already become a standard.

The above phenomena will result in estimation of the added value of work organization and its effectiveness, as well as a strategy of interchangeable application of flexible and traditional forms of staff acquisition for the organization. However, they will also require managers to gain an extensive knowledge of flexible forms of work and workers to acquire competence in their utilization.

### 3. Individual factors

The flexible working model, if proposed to staff members, assumes that workers are able to and want to work. Consequently, the development of flexible organization is crucially dependent on the following aspects:

- professional career models associated with the process of shaping and using professional competencies,
- individual features of staff members and their attitude to flexible work organization schemes.

In May 2009 there was an announcement of results in the Polish Student Survey carried out by the Unversum polling organization in approx. 50 of Poland's largest universities and colleges [14, p. 15]. Students of different majors were asked to give their replies to questions concerning their vision of a perfect employer, as well as their expectations regarding the workplace. The most important professional goal mentioned by the surveyed student was competence improvement and becoming an expert (66%), followed by the need to achieve proper work-life balance (47%). Studies with a similar target group<sup>4</sup>, investigating students' opinions about flexiwork systems, also revealed the two basic preferences, namely improvement of professional qualifications coupled with achieving a flexible equilibrium between professional work and private life. What is more, the respondents could not imagine spending their

<sup>4</sup> The surveys were performed in a group of students in their final year of studies at Poland's largest universities and colleges in 2010/2011 (results were processed and submitted for publication) in collaboration with the Poznań University of Economics and the Pracujflexi.pl website.

entire professional career working for the same company and having a job they did not enjoy. In order to cater to these needs in their HR programmes, employers may turn to social responsibility solutions or new business models which also incorporate freelancing as a concept of workforce acquisition (within a framework formally referred to as self-employment).

It should be pointed out, though, that the studies mentioned above only analyzed one category of potential employees: future white-collar workers living in big cities (the majority of students prefer not to come back to their smaller home towns, seeing the development of the labour market in a large city), young and with only limited professional experience. Different preferences are, naturally, identified in older workers with family duties (higher employment stability and greater flexibility of working time because of family commitments), living in smaller towns and villages in which a steady rhythm of life determines the rules of work. An interesting comparison of generational differences in approaches to work is given in B. Jamka [7, p. 235]. Major differences can be distinguished in the pursuit of professional career, each of them being specific to a different generation group: traditionalists (born before 1945), “baby boomers” (born in 1946–1964), Generation X (born between 1965 and 1980) and “millennials”, also called Generation Y (born after 1981). The younger the generation, the more its members are oriented towards lifelong learning and job variability, and the more they appreciate the content and flexibility of tasks which allow them to juggle various activities. Even though the oldest generation is essentially leaving the labour market now, the models of professional activity mentioned above can also be observed independently of any clearly defined age ranges. The general conclusion is as follows: there is growing diversity among employees, their attributes and attitudes, which is particularly prominent in staff teams of various nationalities and with different cultural backgrounds, and an increasing trend to integrate people from disadvantaged groups into professional activity. The diversity was used for developing an enterprise business model based on the diversity of the workforce potential [7, p. 264], which is inherently associated with flexibility, also in work terms.

At the same time, flexible organization of work confronts workers with high requirements. Depending on the specific solutions applied, it translates into a lower or higher degree of employee responsibility for the organization of their work, for discipline (e.g. in telecommuting) and coordination of their activities with other staff members. Flexibility is viewed as an ability and as a property of cognitive processes, emotional and motivational processes and social functioning – and as a competence of workers [8, p. 56–69]. However, mentality-related barriers are evident and people need to be educated in flexibility. This applies in particular to highly specialized knowledge workers who are often favoured due to their sought-after competencies. The idea of flexibility turns out to be more problematic in their case than for less specialized staff. Knowledge workers are reluctant to switch to the flexible organization

of work because task-changing makes them lose their specialization and, thus, competitive advantage. Consequently, the reluctance to embrace a working system based on flexible work organization, which is sometimes observed among staff members, probably applies in an equal measure to workers with an average set of competencies and to highly specialized employees, though it is motivated by different factors (e.g. concern about losing stability – for temporary work, problems associated with a place for performing professional tasks – for telework, potential adverse effect on income – for flexible working time which eliminates overtime). Workers should, therefore, be shown the means and benefits of functioning within a flexible work organization scheme, which is a great challenge – in coordination and motivation terms – for the managerial staff. The development of a flexible working model is also conditional on the “maturity” of workers at various management levels and their readiness to embrace the flexible working model.

## Summary

Analyzing the factors which are at play in the strategic development of the flexible working model and the general idea behind that model, two main aspects emerge: the central status of the individual employee and the job, and the necessity to combine social and economical goals in the organization of work at the enterprise level.

In this context, the basic limitation hindering work flexibility is the perception of flexible working schemes as solutions designed specifically for disadvantaged groups (young mothers, the disabled, people with family commitments) and emergency situations (to prevent job cuts and reduce costs). It is in this light, though in good faith, that flexible work models are put by regulations adopted at the level of economy and society. Consequently, in “normal” conditions of enterprise operation, interest in flexible working systems is rather low. The division of work into stable (i.e. “better”) and flexible (perceived as “worse”, sometimes also referred to as precarious, peripheral, second-rate) tends to make flexible working arrangements appear synonymous with unstable employment. As a result, workers are not eager to undertake employment of this type, especially in the long-term perspective, while employers are equally wary of offering such employment schemes. It is for this reason that the Council of the European Union adopted the term “adaptable forms of contracts” to replace the adjective “flexible” and thus free atypical forms of employment from negative connotations. The flexible work model, however, encompasses much more than forms of employment as such. The concept includes an array of other solutions which produce flexibility without adversely affecting the employee status, employment stability and workforce resources for the enterprise. This gives rise to a hypothesis postulating the key importance of skills required for the design

and implementation of flexible systems in enterprises, combining both macro- and microeconomic aspects, and individual factors.

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## Abstract

The aim of the article is to outline phenomena affecting utilization of the flexible model of work organization which is typically associated with team work, mobile in terms of space and tasks and involving flexible working time arrangements. In view of the multitude of factors which currently influence work systems within an enterprise, they were divided into three categories: macroeconomic, microeconomic and individual. Within each category, a particular focus was given to the phenomena which have an impact on the nature of work systems in enterprises now, and are likely to have a similar effect in the near future, which means they need to be duly considered in work design processes. The factors include flexibility, high performance work systems and new professional career models.

**KEY WORDS: FLEXIBLE WORK MODEL, WORK ORGANIZATION, FLEXICURITY, HIGH PERFORMANCE WORK SYSTEMS, SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY OF BUSINESS**