A Study of Part-time Professional Work: Case Study Analysis of the Practice in the United Kingdom and the United States

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Introduction

I researched part-time professional work in the UK and US because I wanted to understand why part-time work is more prevalent in the UK than in the US. The goal of this project is to help Americans understand the British approach to, and perceptions of, professional part-time work.

Why

• This way of working is important to certain populations (i.e. women with dependent children in dual-income households)
• The UK is different from the US in that it is not keeping up with the rest of the industrialized world

Context

• Qualified women are leaving the workforce in the US because of a lack of flexibility
• Perceptions of part-time workers need to shift for three reasons: they are viewed differently, can be discriminatory, and are bad for business
• Cultural norms play into this: “flexibility stigma” and “disability norm”

Methods

This exploratory project uses a case study approach to explore how workers experienced flexibility

Why a Case Study?

• It can inform an issue or concern
• It includes multiple sources of information (i.e. used interviews, literature review and policies at the institution studied)

Participants and Design

• Case study of prominent British higher education institution
• Exploratory interviews with four employees; additional interview with a man at a separate institution
• Used snowball sampling technique

Procedure

• Semi-structured interview format
• Sample interview question: Why did you seek part-time work? Is it important to you that you continue working? Why? Why do you think part-time work helps (or does not help) your organization? What works come to mind for you with the idea of part-time work?

Results

Research

“The Work Life Balance policy has a stated purpose of: [name of institution] acknowledges that its staff are most productive when they have achieved a work-life balance that enables them to meet their responsibilities outside work. This policy provides a framework within which departments can consider how best to enable staff to achieve an effective balance between work and life outside the workplace.” – policy at the institution studied

Analysis

How part-time workers are often perceived: “uncommitted,” “not available when you need them, so less inclined to rely on them,” “Mom”

How part-time workers see flexibility: “being treated like a grown-up,” “agility, respect,” “an enormous privilege,” “so often more committed, rather than less”

Crucial to making this way of working successful:

• The ability to choose to work part-time
• Eliminate negative perceptions of flexibility
• Support of the organization’s leadership
• Focus on output
• Ability for the worker to control their own time

Challenges to this way of working:

• Team cohesion – “sociologists have pointed out that physical proximity enhances the development of trusting relationships among participants” (Scott and Davis 2016, 297)
• Slow down in activity because of scheduling issues
• Perceived as something only for mothers, or parents

Conclusions

Werk

“Our society understands women when they’re in a 100% care-taking role, our society understands women when they’re in a 100% working role, but they have not yet figured out how to understand women who want to tackle both of those with equal passion. Flexibility is the way to achieve that.” – Werk co-founders Anna Auerbach and Annie Dean in “Women Killing It!” podcast from October 17, 2016

What is Werk?

• An American company, led by two women, focused on increasing flexible working opportunities
• Jobs marketplace with approximately 900 high-paying, senior-level roles – all with some type of flexibility
• Types of flexibility offered: remote working, DeskPlus™, Travelite™, TimeShift™, MicroAgility™; and, part-time (described by Werk as, “an advancement-track job on a reduced hours schedule”)

Lessons Learned

• From the UK: recognition from the UK government that flexible working is the future; perceptions matter, but laws do as well; “right to request” legislation for all Brits
• Three areas where we can gain tangible insights for the path forward: 1. The United Kingdom’s 2005 Equal Opportunities Commission (EOC) report; 2. The efforts to increase diversity in the United States workforce; and, 3. Best practices in change management

Literature Cited


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Further Information

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