Work-life balance policies: The use of flexitime within a South African organisation

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COMMENTS

The reader is reminded of the following:

- The editorial style as well as the references referred to in this mini-dissertation followed the format prescribed by the Publication Manual (5th edition) of the American Psychological Association (APA). This practice is in line with the policy of the Programme in Industrial Psychology of the North-West University (Potchefstroom) that all scientific documents must use the APA style as from January 1999.

- The mini-dissertation is submitted in the form of a research article. The editorial style specified by the South African Journal of Industrial Psychology (which largely agrees with the APA style) is used, but the APA guidelines were followed in constructing tables.

DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this piece of work to the person who has always been devoted to the development and success of his many children. Thank you Dad for making my professional life possible; this one is for you.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This master's dissertation represents the culmination of many years of hard work and dedication, influenced and supported by many. I would, however, like to give mention and special thanks to:

- My supervisor, Dr Eileen Koekemoer, thank you for believing in me and the value of my research and for all the long hours you so willingly dedicated to this study.
- To the organisation that hosted this study, thank you for your support and most especially your genuine interest in the well-being of your employees. Thanks to you, this research will benefit many.
- To the participants, thank you for your time, commitment and honestly during the interview process.
- To the editor of this dissertation, Willie Cloete, thank you for all your valuable assistance.

DECLARATION

I, Caroline Downes, hereby declare that "Work-life balance policies: The implementation of flexitime within a South African organisation" is my own work and that the views and opinions expressed in this work are those of the author and relevant literature references as shown in the references.

I further declare that the content of this research will not be handed in for any other qualification at any other tertiary institution.

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Caroline Downes
May 2011

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SUMMARY

Title:

Work-life balance policies: The implementation of flexitime within a South African organisation

Key terms:

Work-life balance; work-life balance policies; organisational policies; flexibility at work; challenges; benefits; South African auditing organisation.

Work-life balance is one of the most central issues and concerns for 21st century societies, and according to the American Psychological Association balancing work and family is one of the major challenges for the current generation of employees. Helping employees balance their work and family life is viewed as a social and business imperative since work-life imbalance experienced by employees negatively impacts on employers and society as a whole. Evidence from a study of international employers indicates significant increases in the implementation and use of workplace flexibility, more commonly known as flexitime, as a work-life balance policy. Research into the use and implementation of flexitime within South Africa is limited, especially with regard to the aspects that influence the use of flexitime as well as the associated benefits, challenges and consequences for both South African employees and organisations. Consequently, organisations are left to design, implement and manage their own flexitime policies, with very little information or guidance available to ensure employee and organisational benefit.

In this study, a qualitative research design with an exploratory approach was used to explore and describe employees' perceptions regarding the implementation of flexitime. A non-probability purposive, voluntary sample of 15 participants was taken from the offices of an international auditing and consulting organisation located in Johannesburg. Data was collected by means of semi-structured individual interviews and the verbatim transcripts were analysed by means of content analysis.

Seven themes were extracted from the interviews, namely: variations in the use of flexitime; factors influencing the use of flexitime; challenges relating to the use of flexitime; perceptions regarding the use of flexitime; required aspects for the effective use of flexitime; consequences relating to the use of flexitime; and the benefits resulting from the use of flexitime.

Organisations should be made more aware of the individual as well as organisational benefits, challenges and consequences of flexitime as highlighted in this research. When implementing such policies, specific required aspects for the effective use of flexitime should be taken in consideration. Organisations interested in successfully implementing flexitime for the benefit of both the employee and organisation are advised to consider the findings of this study and take heed of the critical findings presented. Efforts should be made to accommodate employee preferences regarding their use of flexitime. Organisations should be alert to the potential challenges, consequences and negative perceptions surrounding flexitime and, consequently, the importance of ensuring that prerequisites or those aspects required for the implementation of flexitime are in place and perceptions relating to the policy are managed.

OPSOMMING

Titel:

Beleide aangaande werk-lewe-balans: Die implementering van fleksietyd in 'n Suid-Afrikaanse organisasie

Sleutelterme:

Werk-lewer-balans; beleide aangaande werk-lewe-balans; organisasiebeleide; buigsaamheid by die werk; uitdagings; voordele, Suid-Afrikaanse ouditfirma

Werk-lewe-balans is een van die mees sentrale kwessies vir 21ste-eeuse instellings, en volgens die Amerikaanse Sielkundevereniging is die balansering van werk en gesin een van die grootste uitdagings vir die huidige generasie werknemers. Dit word allerweë as 'n maatskaplike en besigheidsimperatief beskou om werknemers te help om hul werk- en gesinslewe te balanseer aangesien werknemers se ervaring van werk-lewe-wanbalans 'n negatiewe uitwerking het op werkgewers én op die samelewing as geheel. 'n Onlangse studie van internasionale werkgewers het gedui op 'n beduidende toename in die implementering van buigsaamheid in die werkplek, meer algemeen bekend as fleksietyd, as 'n beleid aangaande werk-lewe-balans. Daar is nog weinig navorsing gedoen oor die gebruik en implementering van fleksietyd in Suid-Afrika, veral met betrekking tot die aspekte wat die gebruik van fleksietyd beïnvloed, en m.b.t. die voordele, uitdagings en gevolge wat dit vir Suid-Afrikaanse werknemers en organisasies inhou. Organisasies is dus op hulleself aangewese om hul eie fleksietydbeleide op te stel, te implementeer en te bestuur, met weinig inligting of leiding beskikbaar om te verseker dat die werknemer sowel as die organisasie daarby sal baat.

Vir die doeleindes van hierdie studie is gebruik gemaak van 'n kwalitatiewe navorsingsontwerp met 'n verkennende benadering om werknemers se persepsies oor die implementering van fleksietyd te verken en te beskryf. 'n Niewaarskynlikheids- doelbewuste, vrywillige steekproef van 15 deelnemers is geneem by 'n internasionale oudit- en konsulteringsfirma wat in Johannesburg geleë is. Data is ingesamel deur middel van halfgestruktureerde individuele onderhoude en die woordelikse transkripte is ontleed deur middel van inhoudsanalise.

Sewe temas is uit die onderhoude verkry, naamlik: variasies ten opsigte van die gebruik van fleksietyd; faktore wat die gebruik van fleksietyd beïnvloed; uitdagings met betrekking tot die gebruik van fleksietyd; vereiste aspekte vir die doeltreffende gebruik van fleksietyd; gevolge van die gebruik van fleksietyd; en die voordele wat die gebruik van fleksietyd inhou.

Organisasies behoort meer bewus gemaak te word van die voordele, uitdagings en gevolge wat fleksietyd vir die individu sowel as vir die organisasie inhou, soos uiteengesit in hierdie navorsing. Wanneer sodanige beleide geïmplementeer word, moet rekening gehou word met spesifieke vereiste aspekte vir die doeltreffende gebruik van fleksietyd. Organisasies wat belangstel in die suksesvolle implementering van fleksietyd tot voordeel van sowel die werknemer as die organisasie, word aangeraai om die bevindinge van hierdie studie in oorweging te neem en deeglik ag te slaan op die kritieke bevindinge. Pogings behoort aangewend te word om werknemers se voorkeure met betrekking tot fleksietyd te akkommodeer. Organisasies moet deeglik bewus wees van die potensiële uitdagings, gevolge en negatiewe persepsies rondom fleksietyd, en gevolglik ook van die belangrikheid daarvan om te verseker dat die tersaaklike voorvereistes (of daardie aspekte wat vir die implementering van fleksietyd vereis word) in plek is en dat persepsies aangaande die beleid bestuur word.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

This mini-dissertation explores employee perspectives regarding the use and implementation of flexitime within a South African organisation. This chapter presents the problem statement and a discussion of the research objectives, where the general and specific objectives are set out. The research method is explained and an overview of chapters is provided.

1.1   PROBLEM STATEMENT

Recently, organisations have increasingly experienced competitive pressure to perform faster and better and to be more cost-effective (Blyton, Blunsdon, Reed, & Datmalchian, 2006; Duxbury & Higgins, 2003). Workplaces are experiencing the effects of a rapid rate of change, characterised by technological advancements and globalisation (Castells, 2000). Consequently, there has been a breakdown of the traditional working contract, turning the concept of lifetime employment into a notion of the past (Galinsky, Bond, & Hill, 2004; Halpern, 2005). Organisations are forced to accommodate a variety of supply and demand factors, one of which is the demand for a secure, flexible and low-cost labour force. This has contributed to the introduction of non-standard jobs, the erosion of 'standard' working hours and consequently the division of working time, resulting in very long hours worked by some employees and very short hours worked by others (Blyton et al., 2006). Employees may find themselves being sub-contracted, assigned as part-time staff, or in many cases working extended hours, as determined by the needs of the employer (Blyton et al., 2006).

These recent changes in the nature of work, along with the introduction of new technologies (e.g. cellphones, email, BlackBerries and other means of electronic communication) have led to many workers struggling to balance roles in their work and personal lives (Hayman, 2009; Hobsor, Delunas, & Kelsic, 2001). Some explanations for the lack of balance between work and personal life include the excessive job demands and constraints that result from increasing global pressures and rising financial needs that require working overtime or working two or more jobs

simultaneously. Evidence of this is found in large-scale surveys reporting large numbers of employees feeling increasing work pressure, where their jobs require 'working at high speed' or 'working to tight deadlines' (Green & McIntosh, 2001). Those working under such conditions have been proven to be highly susceptible to role overload, work-related stress and burnout, all of which could be indicators of work-life imbalance (Clutterbuck, 2003).

Until the 1970s, the domains of 'work' and 'family' were regarded as separate areas of concern (Campbell, 2001). However, since then recognition has been given to the interdependence of these areas and the importance of individuals maintaining a balance when faced by demands from either area (Mayberry, 2006). The term 'work-life balance' (WLB) has gained widespread use (Houston, 2005; Jones, Burke, & Westman, 2006; Pitt-Catsouphes, Kossek, & Sweet, 2006). This term does not necessarily refer to equal time spent in both domains, but rather to the ability of the particular individual to fulfil the roles of each domain, which would depend on the circumstances and context of the individual (Blyton et al., 2006). WLB is relative in the sense that what one individual may believe to be balance, another may not (Dancaster, 2006; Fox & Dyer, 1999). Therefore, WLB refers to an individual's perception of success, regarding the integration of his or her work and personal life, so as to achieve a satisfying quality of life, overall satisfaction and less stress caused by juggling conflicting role demands (Campbell, 2001).

Although WLB is a very important and critical issue in the 21st century, it was not until recently that human resource practitioners began viewing WLB as a business issue, with benefits for both the employee and the employer (Clutterbuck, 2003). Research supporting the benefits of WLB for the organisation is substantial, highlighting a positive though indirect influence on organisational profit (Michie & Williams, 2003; Morgan, 2009). Both organisations and employees are becoming increasingly aware of the potential benefits of employee WLB, some of which include employee satisfaction and well-being, reduced absenteeism and turnover, successful recruitment and retention, increased productivity and customer satisfaction (Mayberry, 2006; Morgan, 2009; White, Hill, McGovern, Mills, & Smeaton, 2003). Flexible working practices (2004) found that 38% of a sample of employees would consider leaving their

current employer to gain a better WLB, even if it meant reduced pay. Mayberry (2006) also states that organisations that invest heavily in WLB report lower employee turnover.

Consequently, WLB is one of the top employee concerns of today and is commonly discussed during the recruitment interview process (Clutterbuck, 2003). In the 2003 Best Company to Work for Survey, 23 companies supported employee WLB as a key aspect in their retention strategies (Dex, 2004). Furthermore, in a 2008 study at Johnson and Johnson, employees who made use of WLB policies took only half as much sick leave as those who did not (Morgan, 2009). With such important organisational advantages, it is not surprising that the existence and use of WLB policies have not only become increasingly prevalent globally (Doherty, 2004; Ferber, O'Farrell, & Allen, 1991; Kossek & Ozeki, 1998; Reynolds, 1999; Sanichar, 2004) but have also led to the adoption of such policies in a few multinational organisations in South Africa (Appiah-Mfodwa, Horwitz, Kieswetter, King, & Solai, 2000; Mageni & Slabbert, 2005).

WLB policies have been defined as those policies that enhance the autonomy of workers in the process of coordinating and integrating both work and nonwork areas of their lives (Felstead, Jewson, Phizacklea, & Walters, 2002). Over 100 variations of WLB policies have been identified by Mayberry (2006). However, according to Lewis and Cooper (2005), flexitime (short for 'flexible working hours') is one of the most prevalent and commonly used WLB policies, and it is still increasing steadily. Flexitime supports significantly higher levels of WLB than traditional, fixed-hour working schedules (Hayman, 2009). According to research from the Families and Work Institute, an employee with greater control over work schedules is also more likely to demonstrate increased employee engagement, retention, job satisfaction and overall well-being (Powers, 2004). Various additional benefits for the organisation successfully implementing flexitime include savings on overtime and other premium employee payments, improved delivery time and response to client and work demands, better employee adaptability to the workload, increased employee motivation, and reduced tardiness and absenteeism (Horwitz et al., 2000).

In light of the organisational and employee benefits of flexitime as well as the potential obstacles or challenges commonly faced, such a policy warrants careful consideration by employers, since

it is the implementation of such policies that will effectively determine achieved success (Mageni & Slabbert, 2005). As a result, WLB policies such as flexitime must be developed, implemented and monitored frequently by organisations (Clutterbuck, 2003; Dancaster, 2006; Duxbury & Higgins, 2001;;; Horwitz et al., 2000). This will require insight and investigation into understanding experiences, views and perceptions of all stakeholders, specifically including the perceptions of employees regarding their use of flexitime.

Although WLB and the use of WLB policies such as flexitime have been well represented in research internationally (Clutterbuck, 2003; Hill, Erickson, Holmes, & Ferris, 2010), there is a lack of research regarding WLB policies and more specifically flexitime in the South African working context (Dancaster, 2006). Even though some WLB studies have been done in South Africa, the majority of these studies were cross-sectional quantitative studies, focusing more on the conceptualisation, measurement and associated outcomes of WLB (Koekemoer & Mostert, 2010; Koekemoer, Mostert, & Rothmann, 2010; Marais, Mostert, Geurts, & Taris, 2009; Mostert, Cronjé, & Pienaar, 2006; Mostert & Rathbone, 2007; Patel, Govender, Paruk, & Ramgoon, 2006; Pieterse & Mostert, 2005; Rost & Mostert, 2007;;;).

Up to the present, South African research on flexitime has focused on labour market flexibility (Horwitz, Allan, Brosnan, & Walsh, 2000) and atypical work (Greef & Nel, 2003), neglecting the WLB context. Consequently, issues surrounding WLB policies and flexitime are severely underrepresented in South Africa (Dancaster, 2006). Other limited research available on flexitime includes the relevance of flexitime in the South African workplace, the personal consequences of flexitime for white working mothers, and legislation and flexible working arrangements (Barling & Barunbrug, 1984; Dancaster, 2006; Mageni & Slabbert, 2005). Although these few studies do provide some information on the use of flexitime in South Africa, little information is available regarding the value of flexitime as a WLB policy and contributor to WLB for the South African employee. Without this insight, human resource practitioners are likely to develop and implement policies that are not tailored to the needs and requirements of employees, and consequently organisations might fail to attain the expected benefits (Clutterbuck, 2003; Mageni & Slabbert, 2005; Mayberry, 2006). In South Africa, most

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organisations are not adequately aware of employee perspectives regarding the use of their WLB policies, with specific reference to flexitime.

Work-life balance / work-nonwork interference

Balancing work and personal life is not easy, and employees often have difficulty integrating these domains. In the literature the balance or interaction between these two domains (i.e. work and personal life) has been well researched and various terms are used to describe this relationship, where some of the more recent terms include work-family interaction, work-family conflict, work-family interference, work-life integration and work-nonwork interference (for overviews, see Byron, 2005; Eby, Casper, Lockwood, Bordeaux, & Brinley, 2005; Mesmer-Magnus & Viswesvaran, 2005). One of the first definitions in this field of WLB research is that of Greenhaus and Beutell (1985), which states that work-nonwork interference is a form of inter-role conflict in which the role pressures from the work and family domains are mutually incompatible in some respect. That is, participation in the work role is made more difficult by virtue of participation in the family role. This definition suggests that work can either influence an individual's private life or an individual's private life can influence his/her work. Research on WLB originated as a result of the problems faced by an increasing number of working mothers battling to meet the demands of work and family (Morehead, 2002). In the literature, the personal and organisational consequences as a result of not having or obtaining WLB have been well researched (Geurts, Rutte, & Peeters, 1999; Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985; Rice, Frone, & McFarlin, 1992; Frone, Russell, & Cooper, 1993). Some of the most critical consequences, according to Hobsor et al. (2001), are increased levels of stress and stress-related illness, lower levels of life satisfaction, higher rates of family strife, violence and divorce, increasing incidence of substance abuse as well as escalating rates of juvenile delinquency. For a more comprehensive overview of consequences related to WLB, view Allen, Herst, Bruck and Sutton (2000).

Work-life balance policies and flexitime

Given the considerable influence of the lack of WLB on the employee and organisation, initiatives aimed at providing employee support with WLB problems have become more popular and indeed more commonplace in organisations (Cooke, Zeytinoglu, & Mann, 2009). Among the initiatives typically offered by organisations are (1) on-site or subsidised child and/or elder care;

(2) flexible working schedules; (3) job sharing and (4) employee assistance programmes (Dalcos & Daley, 2009; Hobsor et al., 2001). Although there is considerable variation across these initiatives, according to Dex (2004), most WLB policies can be divided into five basic categories, namely flexitime work schedules, flexiplace or telecommuting, job-sharing, part-time flexiplace, and sabbaticals or career breaks. Recently, international studies indicate a greater focus on the introduction and implementation of workplace flexibility (flexitime), as compared to other WLB initiatives (Carlson, Grzywacz, & Kacmar, 2010).

Flexitime is generally categorised as an alternative or flexible working schedule which employees use and which has been identified as central to research on WLB as well as a key strategy used by policy makers in an attempt to assist employees in today's global economy (Hill et al., 2010). Evidence from the National Study of Employers indicates a significant increase between 1998 and 2009 in the prevalence of employers offering flexitime (Carlson et al., 2010). According to Hill et al. (2010), flexitime assists employees to manage both work and family responsibilities, by creating the opportunity to minimise work-family conflict and improve functioning and performance at work and at home.

More specifically, in the literature flexitime is referred to as a variety of flexible work schedules, all of which offer the employee choice regarding the start and end of working hours. All employees must work a specific number of hours per week/month, but are free to vary their hours of work within certain limits (Robbins, Odendaal, & Roodt, 2004). Similarly, according to Dalcos and Daley (2009), flexitime is the ability of employees to make choices influencing when, where and for how long they engage in work-related tasks. Usually, flexitime involves each working day having a core of six hours, surrounded by a 'flexibility band' in which employees may exercise their discretion (Robbins et al., 2004). Therefore one employee may work from 7am until 3pm, whereas another may choose to work from 8am until 4pm, the core hours being from 9am until 3pm (Lewis & Cooper, 2005). Flexitime is, however, an umbrella concept or approach. This is evident in the different ways and varying degrees in which flexibility is offered (Horwitz et al., 2000). According to Lewis and Cooper (2005), variations of this policy often include differing starting and finishing schedules for each day, the length and timing of lunch breaks, the length of the working day, and the compressed workweek. A

compressed workweek allows for variation of the length of the week worked, so that employees may only work for three days a week, while still working in the total number of hours required for a workweek (Robbins et al., 2004).

Although flexitime has proven organisational and employee benefits, there can be no guarantee of policy success (Carlson et al., 2010). Consequently, the design, implementation and management of such a policy requires careful consideration since it is the implementation of such policies that will effectively determine achieved success (Mageni & Slabbert, 2005). As a result, WLB policies such as flexitime must be developed, implemented and monitored frequently by organisations (Clutterbuck, 2003; Dancaster, 2006; Duxbury & Higgins, 2001; ; Horwitz et al., 2000). This will require further insight and investigation into understanding experiences, views and perceptions of all stakeholders, specifically including the perceptions of employees regarding the challenges and benefits of the flexitime policy and the use thereof.

From the above-mentioned problem statement and literature overview, the following research questions emerge:

- How do employees make use of the WLB policies (i.e. flexitime) offered by their organisation?
- How do employees experience the flexibility offered by their organisation?
- What are the challenges associated with the implementation of flexitime as a WLB policy for employees?
- What are the benefits associated with the use of flexitime as a WLB policy for employees?
- What recommendations can be made to organisations regarding the design, development and implementation of flexitime as a WLB policy?

1.2 RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The research objectives are divided into a general objective and specific objectives.

1.2.1 General Objective

The general objective of this research is to understand employee perceptions regarding the implementation of flexitime as a WLB policy within a South African organisation.

1.2.2 Specific Objectives

The specific objectives of this research are:

- To determine how employees make use of WLB policies (i.e. flexitime) offered by their organisation.
- To determine how employees experience the flexibility offered by their organisation.
- To determine the challenges associated with the implementation of flexitime as a WLB policy for employees.
- To determine the benefits associated with the use of flexitime as a WLB policy for employees.
- To make recommendations to organisations regarding the development and implementation of flexitime as a WLB policy.

1.3 RESEARCH METHOD

The research method consists of a literature review and a qualitative study. The results obtained are presented in the form of a research article.

1.3.1 Literature review

The literature review includes a complete review of the following constructs or concepts: flexibility at work; work hours; work-life balance; work-life interaction; work-family conflict; family-work conflict; organisational policies; work-life balance policies
The sources include:

- North-West University virtual library.
- Search engines such as *EbscoHost, SabinetOnline, SAePublications, ScienceDirect, Emerald, Jstor* and *Google Scholar* will be utilised.
- Some of the journals to be consulted: *European Journal of Work and Organizational Psychology, South African Journal of Industrial Psychology, South African Journal of Human Resource Management, South African Journal of Psychology, Management Dynamics, South African Business Review, South African Journal of Economic and Management Sciences, Journal of Applied Psychology, Journal of Organizational Behavior, Journal of Community & Applied Social Psychology, and the Journal of Applied Psychology.*
- The Potchefstroom Campus' Ferdinand Postma Library (North-West University) and Kingsway Library (University of Johannesburg) will be visited for articles inaccessible online.
- Popular media, including newspaper articles, HR magazines, internet forums/blogs and websites will also be reviewed for recent and updated information.
- Flexitime policies as developed and implemented by the South African organisation from which the sample is extracted.

1.3.2 Research strategy

This study makes use of a sample of South African employees currently encouraged to make use of the WLB policy offered by their employer (i.e. flexitime), by means of interviews. The use of interviews allows for quality data, providing a rich account of the individual experiences of the implementation of WLB policies. This is appropriate since there is a lack of information regarding employee perceptions of the implementation, benefits and challenges of such policies in the South African context. The analysis of the data provides an exploration and unique understanding of employee perspectives as identified by the research objectives.

1.3.3 Research setting

Prior to data collection, it is important to establish the research setting, which, according to De Vos, Strydom, Fouche and Delport (2005), should be directly linked to the research problem. It is important to note that the interview as well as its outcomes is shaped by its 'gestalt' –

otherwise known as the whole interaction of a researcher and participant within a particular context or setting (Terre Blanche, Durrheim, & Painter, 2006). Keeping the importance and influence of this setting in mind, a private interview room situated at the organisation's offices in Johannesburg is utilised. This interview room allows participants convenient access at a time (previously arranged) that is most suitable for the participant and his/her schedule. The interview room is comfortable, temperate and quiet and a 'do not disturb' sign is posted on the door, to ensure privacy and reduce potential disturbances.

1.3.4 Entrée and establishing researcher roles

It is advised that researchers begin their research process as unobtrusively as possible and ensure that they are not viewed as threatening intruders (De Vos et al., 2005). For this reason, an employee is commonly identified within the organisation to introduce the researcher to the employees of the organisation and the purpose of the research. This employee assists by arranging for the researcher to present to the employees at their offices, so that participants may be identified and interview dates and times may be arranged by the researcher. As an interviewer, the researcher fulfils the role of facilitator, encouraging the interviewee to openly discuss perspectives, experiences, feelings and thoughts. This role implies that the researcher is the research tool and can therefore have a direct impact on the quality of research collected (Richie & Lewis, 2005). The researcher therefore ensures that content is sufficiently covered, whilst remaining alert to the influence of his/her subjectivity or bias (Richie & Lewis, 2005). In controlling for interviewer distortion, defined as 'any deviation from participant's true response as a result of interviewer action', it is critical that the researcher is aware of his/her personal views and potential bias and how such subjectivity may influence the objectivity and neutrality of the research findings (Terre Blanche et al., 2006). Reflexivity in the form of critical self-examination, incorporating feedback and input from the research supervisor is ensured during the interview process to support objectivity and neutrality of the researcher role (Terre Blanche et al., 2006). In addition, this identifies any potential subjectivity in the research process (Ritchie & Lewis, 2005).

1.3.5 Research participants

A non-probability purposive, voluntary sample of 15 participants is taken from the offices of an international auditing and consulting organisation located in Johannesburg. Although research participants are selected in a non-random manner, inclusion criteria are implemented to determine which participants could be included in the study. These inclusion criteria required that a participant should (1) have access to flexitime offered by the organisation, (2) be willing to participate in the research (be willing to give written consent) after being informed about the purpose and procedures of the research, (3) be willing to be interviewed by the researcher, and (4) be prepared to have his or her interview tape-recorded. The sample size is determined by the number of participants accessible and willing to participate, and interviews continue until data saturation is reached (Terre Blanche et al., 2006).

1.3.6 Data collection methods

Data is collected by means of semi-structured interviews held at the Johannesburg offices of a South African auditing organisation which openly encourages employee use of their flexitime policy. The semi-structured interview is used as the measuring instrument in this research and is based on the interpretive approach. This approach allows the researcher to gather data and study the phenomenon from the perspective of the research participant, without the effects of the researcher's predetermined expectations or beliefs (Neuman, 2003). This is important in this study since the objective is to identify and understand employee perceptions regarding the flexitime policy offered by the organisation. Interviews are scheduled at a place and time most suitable for the participant. Every effort is made to ensure the environment is relaxed and comfortable for the participant and consideration is given to the atmosphere of the room.

According to Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2004), it is important for the validity and success of research outcomes that the participant is at ease with the research process. The researcher therefore introduces him/herself in a warm and friendly manner, detailing the context of the interview and reiterating its purpose. The participant is also advised that feedback will be given to the organisation after completion of the research; however, their anonymity will be respected and upheld at all times. The use of a tape recorder is explained and permission is requested from the participant, who is also assured that the tape recordings will remain anonymous, labelled as a,

b, c, d, etc. In addition, all recordings are securely kept in a locked cupboard. It is emphasised that although the participant has given written informed consent, he or she may withdraw from the research study at any time. Prior to the data collection, an interview schedule is developed, determining and stating the questions to be asked during the interviews. All participants are asked three standard questions:

- In your organisation you are offered and have access to a flexitime policy. Please explain whether you make use of this policy or not, and if you do make use of such policy, how do you make use of the policy. If you do not make use of the policy, can you please explain why not?
- Could you please describe what you perceive as challenges when it comes to the use of the flexitime policy offered by your organisation?
- What do you perceive as benefits resulting from the use of the flexitime policy offered by your organisation?

In addition to the use of these semi-structured questions, the researcher makes use of communication techniques such as minimal verbal response, paraphrasing, reflection, clarifying and summarising to encourage participant elaboration on participant feelings, thoughts, experiences and perspectives (Neuman, 2003). Observation notes, also referred to as field notes, are taken by the researcher as a means to record participant behaviours throughout the interview. These observation notes are taken during and immediately after each interview and provide a written account of what the researcher hears, sees, experiences and thinks during the interview (Neuman, 2003). Records therefore include both empirical observations and interpretations highlighting the manner in which participants act or react when asked or when answering questions, as well as their general behaviour during the interview process (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2004).

1.3.7 Recording of data

The recording of data is done using a tape recorder with the permission of the participants for data transcription. It is important to note that the interview process provides the researcher with intimate knowledge that is given in confidence; consequently, it is the researcher's moral and

ethical obligation to uphold the security and confidentiality of such data (Neuman, 2003). In order to meet such ethical and moral obligations, tapes and corresponding transcriptions are labelled using specific coding according to the interview schedule followed. Tapes, transcriptions and observation notes are kept anonymous and stored in a safe place, thus ensuring that neither the data nor the interviewees are exposed as a consequence (Burns & Grove, 1997; Hess-Biber & Leavy, 2004). Throughout this process, the rights of the research participants (the right to privacy, right to anonymity, right to fair treatment, and right to protection from discomfort and harm) are considered and upheld (Burns & Grove, 1997).

1.3.8 Data analysis

Verbatim transcripts are analysed by means of content analysis in this study. This method of qualitative analysis is appropriate to the study in that it focuses on and gives attention to content and contextual meaning of the text, assisting the researcher in making replicable and valid inferences (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). To begin the analysis, interviews are read thoroughly by the researcher several times, after which participant responses are divided into meaningful units, appearing as sentences or paragraphs. All the meaningful units are then separated into categories of major themes. These themes are later reviewed and agreed upon by the co-coder. Following careful analysis of the major themes, the researcher with the help of the co-coder is able to recognise, explore and summarise smaller and comparable sub-themes.

1.3.9 Ethical considerations

High standards of ethics and fairness are upheld in this study. To guarantee such standards, the principles as represented by the bullets below are taken into account throughout the research process and are reviewed by the ethical committee of the North-West University. Struwig and Stead (2001) highlight the critical importance of research ethics and the code of guidelines to ensure moral and acceptable research conduct. This ethical approach is respected and is upheld in the following ways:

- Honesty, fairness and respect are shown towards research participants at all times; the researcher does not attempt to mislead or deceive the research participants at any time. Participants are required to provide written informed consent, which requires provision of all

appropriate information, participant competence and full understanding, voluntariness in participation and the freedom to decline or withdraw at anytime during the research process (Terre Blanche et al., 2006).

- The rights and dignity of participants are respected at all times. This includes respect for participant privacy, confidentiality and autonomy. Participant particulars, including basic biographical information, remain strictly anonymous and safely protected at all times.

- The welfare of others is of major concern. The researcher avoids and minimises any harm befalling the research participant, ensuring data and participant anonymity, whilst maximising on the potential benefits they may receive. This research provides answers to questions of value to the participants who stand to benefit along with the organisation as a result of enhanced organisational insight into flexitime and their use and implementation thereof.

1.4 OVERVIEW OF CHAPTERS

In Chapter 2, the findings of the research objectives are discussed in the form of a research article. Chapter 3 deals with the conclusions, limitations and recommendations of this research.

1.5 CHAPTER SUMMARY

This chapter presented the problem statement and research objectives. The research methodology used in this study was explained, followed by a brief overview of the chapters that follow.

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CHAPTER 2

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Work-life balance policies: The use of flexitime within a South African organisation

ABSTRACT

The general aim of this study was to understand employee perceptions regarding the implementation of flexitime as a WLB policy within a South African organisation. A non-probability purposive, voluntary sample of 15 participants was taken from the offices of an international auditing and consulting organisation located in Johannesburg, where the use of flexitime was offered to employees. Qualitative research was conducted in the form of semi-structured in-depth interviews, which were later transcribed verbatim and analysed using content analysis. Seven themes were extracted from the data: variations in the use of flexitime, factors influencing the use of flexitime, challenges relating to the use of flexitime, perceptions regarding the use of flexitime, required aspects for the effective use of flexitime, consequences relating to the use of flexitime, and the benefits resulting from the use of flexitime. It was apparent that participants were aware of the significant benefits of flexitime, both for themselves (i.e. experienced work-life balance and psychological benefits) and for the organisation (i.e. productivity and employee loyalty, commitment and motivation). Regardless of these benefits, challenges and consequences of use were experienced both on the individual and organisational level, and were described by participants in detail. Prerequisites for the effective use of flexitime were also described by research participants, who gave helpful insight into the requirements necessary for successful implementation of flexitime (e.g. effective communication; professional discipline; supportive relationships; control and measurement; and informed awareness and understanding). Negative perceptions surrounding the use of flexitime (which in some cases restricted employees' use) were also identified as an additional challenge when implementing flexitime. Based on these findings, recommendations were made for future research and for the organisation regarding the implementation of flexitime.

International trends and developments such as globalisation, deregulation and constant technological changes are placing organisations all over the world under considerable pressure (Dalcos & Daley, 2009; Horwitz, Allan, Brosnan, & Walsh, 2000; Nienaber, 2004). As a result, organisations faced with increased global competition have raised their expectations regarding employees' time, performance, energy and work commitment (Whitehead & Kotze, 2003). Such expectations mean that employees are working longer hours with greater job demands and, as a result, may find it more difficult than ever to manage a balanced commitment to both their work and personal life (Burke, 2004). One of the most central issues and concerns for 21st century societies is individuals' own perception of achieved integration of their work and personal life, also known as work-life balance (WLB) (Campbell, 2000). According to the American Psychological Association, balancing work and family life is one of the major challenges for the current generation of employees (Carlson, Grzywacz, & Zivnuska, 2011). Employees commonly fail to achieve a healthy balance due to excessive job demands and constraints as a result of competitive pressures for improved productivity and cost-effectiveness (Carlson et al., 2011). Consequently, the rising financial needs necessitate overtime and full-time employment for all adult household members (Hobsor, Delunas, & Kelsic, 2001). Serious personal and work-related problems arise when individuals fail to effectively fulfil fundamental life or family responsibilities due to excessive job demands and constraints (Hobsor et al., 2001).

Recently, helping employees balance their work and family life is viewed as a social and business imperative since work-life imbalance experienced by employees negatively impacts on employers and society as a whole (Kattenbach, Demerouti, & Nachreiner, 2010). According to Hobsor et al. (2001), some of the most critical consequences of poor WLB include stress, stress-related illness, family strife, violence, divorce, reduced life satisfaction and substance abuse. Such consequences have been proven in research to translate into escalated absenteeism, turnover and healthcare costs, as well as reduced productivity, employee satisfaction, commitment and loyalty towards the organisation – all of which negatively impact on organisational performance and, consequently, on organisational profits (Rodgers & Rodgers, 1989; Thomas & Ganster, 1995).

Given the considerable influence of WLB on the employee and in turn both society and the organisation, policies aimed at providing employee support with WLB problems have become more popular and indeed more commonplace (Cooke, Zeytinoglu, & Mann, 2009). The general scope of such policies commonly includes employee assistance programmes, flexible work schedules, child and/or elder care, and job sharing (Dalcos & Daley, 2009; Hobsor et al., 2001).

According to Carlson, Grzywacz, and Kacmar (2010), recent research indicates a greater focus on the introduction and implementation of workplace flexibility (more commonly known as flexitime), as compared to other WLB initiatives or policies. Flexitime is defined by Dalcos and Daley (2009) as the ability of employees to make choices influencing when, where and for how long they engage in work-related tasks. In the literature, flexitime is generally categorised as an alternative or flexible work schedule which employees use, and has been identified as central to research on WLB as well as a key strategy used by policy-makers in an attempt to help employees cope with today's global economy (Hill, Erickson, Holmes, & Ferris, 2010). Evidence from the National Study of Employers indicates a significant increase between 1998 and 2009 in the prevalence of employers offering flexitime (Carlson et al., 2010). According to Hill et al. (2010), flexitime assists employees to manage both work and family responsibilities, by creating the opportunity to minimise work-family conflict and improve functioning and performance at work and at home.

Benefits for the individual, organisation and society have been proven as direct consequences of the successful implementation and use of flexitime (Cooke et al., 2009; Fischer, Bulger, & Smith, 2009; Richman, Civian, Shannon, Hill, & Brennan, 2008). Previous studies highlight a relationship between flexitime and significant individual benefits, including reduced psychological distress, lower levels of depression and anxiety (Frone, Barnes, & Farrel, 1994; Major, Klein, & Ehrkart, 2002) and increased life satisfaction (Adams, King, & King, 1996; Aryee, 1992). Research additionally indicates that flexitime is particularly beneficial for parents of young children and those responsible for the care of elders, affording them increased capacity to overlap work time effectively with unexpected child/elder care situations (Byron, 2005; Hill et al., 2010).

Global studies on IBM employees found that the mere perception of an allowed or accessible flexitime policy results in increased levels of employee WLB, suggesting that the mere perception that flexitime is available is impactful (Hill et al., 2010). According to Hill et al. (2010), on average when organisations allowed employees to use flexitime, employees worked an extra half-day a week, dramatically increasing overall organisational performance. Additional noteworthy benefits of flexitime, according to Grzywacz, Carlson and Shulkin (2008), include happier, more motivated and effective employees who are in greater control of their work and private lives. These employees feel more trusted and valued by their employers and are thus more likely to stay with their organisation. As suggested in the literature, flexitime creates a win-win situation for employers and employees alike, providing an essential strategy for dealing with workload stress in today's global workplace (Grzywacz et al., 2008).

Regardless of these benefits associated with WLB and flexitime, challenges are to be expected during the organisational implementation and use thereof (Cooke, 2005). According to Fleetwood (2007), the success of flexitime as a WLB policy can never be guaranteed. For those tasked with ensuring the coverage of critical functions and the maintenance of optimal workflow, flexitime presents a significant challenge (Akyeampong, 1993). The loss of direct supervision of more flexible employees during working hours is consequently a common complaint, especially where work is allocated in teams and meetings have to be carefully coordinated (Akyeampong, 1993; Clutterbuck, 2003). The potential loss of employee availability for both clients and colleagues presents another critical challenge – the implications of which include reduced productivity and team efficiency, restricting the application and use of flexitime in many industries (Fleetwood, 2007). According to the Chartered Institute of Personnel Development (2000), flexible scheduling is not possible for factory or shift work environments.

Additionally, the negative impact of poor communication and education regarding flexitime on employee awareness and understanding and, consequently, on their use of

flexitime is highlighted in previous literature (CIPD, 2000). Negative perceptions surrounding employee use of flexitime is evident in literature and is presented as a major challenge and frequent cause of stigmas and career penalties (Dancaster, 2006). Such stigmas and career penalties are described as to be expected where the organisational culture values and rewards long working hours and high organisational commitment (CIPD, 2000). According to Dancaster (2006), where management/organisational leadership implicitly or explicitly discourages the use of flexitime, and starts judging staff on presence as opposed to productivity, such stigmas and career penalties are more likely (Dancaster, 2006).

According to Mageni and Slabbert (2005), the implementation and management of such a policy will effectively determine its achieved success. It is therefore critical that organisations interested in the achievement of organisational and employee benefits are aware of the potential obstacles and challenges regarding the implementation of flexitime and take the necessary precautions to ensure success. This requires close monitoring as well as investigation and insight into the experiences, views and perceptions of all stakeholders, especially those of the employee.

In South Africa, most organisations are not adequately aware of employee perspectives regarding the implementation of their WLB policies, with specific reference to flexitime. The general objective of this study then is to understand employee perceptions regarding the implementation of flexitime as a WLB policy within a South African Organisation. The more specific objectives are to determine how employees make use of WLB policies (flexitime) offered by the organisation, how employees experience the flexibility offered by their organisation, the challenges associated with the implementation of flexitime as a WLB policy for employees, the benefits associated with the use of flexitime as a WLB policy for employees, and, finally, to make recommendations to organisations regarding the development and implementation of flexitime as a WLB policy.

Without such insight, organisations are likely to develop and implement policies that are not tailored to the needs and requirements of employees and, consequently, might fail to

attain the expected and desired benefits (Clutterbuck, 2003; Mageni & Slabbert, 2005; Mayberry, 2006). This article will provide South African organisations with some insight for the development and implementation of flexitime policies which could be more beneficial for both employee and employer.

Work-life balance

The balance between work and personal life, commonly referred to as WLB, has gained widespread interest since the 1970s (Houston, 2005; Jones, Burke, & Westman, 2006; Pitt-Catsouphes, Kossed, & Sweet, 2006). This balance or interaction between work and personal life has been well researched, with many terms used to describe this relationship, some of the more recent including work-family interaction, work-family conflict, work-family interference, work-life integration and work-nonwork interference (for overviews, see Byron, 2005; Eby, Casper, Lockwood, Bordeaux, & Brinley, 2005; Mesmer-Magnus & Viswesvaran, 2005). One of the first definitions is that of Greenhaus and Beutell (1985), which states that work-nonwork interference is a form of inter-role conflict whereby role pressures from family and work domains are mutually incompatible, i.e. participation in the work role is made difficult by participation in the family role. Initial research on WLB was in response to the problems faced by an increasing number of working mothers battling to meet the demands of both work and family (Morehead, 2002). WLB is a critical issue in the 21st century, with business only recently becoming aware of the immense value and impact of WLB for the employee and organisation (Clutterbuck, 2003). The personal and organisational consequences of not having WLB are well documented in the research (Frone, Russel, & Cooper, 1993; Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985; Rice, Frone, & McFarlin, 1992). According to Hobsor et al. (2001), some of these consequences include increased stress and stress-related illness, lower life satisfaction, escalated levels of family strife, violence, divorce, juvenile delinquency and substance abuse.

Overview of Work-life balance literature in South Africa

In South Africa some work-family interaction studies have been done, the majority of which were cross-sectional and quantitative in nature. These studies mainly focused on

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the interaction of work-family demographic differences (Coetzer, 2006; De Klerk & Mostert, 2010; Mostert & Oldfield, 2008; Rost & Mostert, 2007), the use and psychometric properties of work-family conflict instruments (Marais, Mostert, Geurts, & Taris, 2009; Pieterse & Mostert, 2005; Rost & Mostert, 2007), possible antecedents and outcomes of work-family conflict (Koekemoer & Mostert, 2006; Mostert, Cronje, & Pienaar, 2006; Mostert & Rathbone, 2007; Patel, Govender, Paruk, & Ramgoon, 2006), and finally the measurement of work-family conflict within the South African context (Koekemoer & Mostert, 2010; Koekemoer, Mostert, & Rothmann, 2010). Although WLB policies are very important, they are poorly researched within the South Africa context (Dancaster, 2006).

Flexitime as a WLB policy

In light of the influence of WLB on the employee and organisation, initiatives such as flexitime have become more popular in organisations (Cooke, Zeytinoglu, & Mann, 2009). International studies, more specifically in North America, the UK and Australia, have placed far greater focus on flexitime as compared to all other WLB initiatives (Carlson, Grzywacz, & Kacmar, 2010; Goodstein, 1994; Ingram & Simmons, 1995; Milliken, Martins, & Morgan, 1998). Flexitime, according to Hill et al. (2010), is increasingly used to assist in the management of work and family responsibilities by providing an opportunity for employees to minimise work-family conflict. Flexitime is referred to as a variety of flexible work schedules that allow the employee choice as to when, where and for how long he or she wishes to engage in work-related tasks (Dalcos & Daley, 2009). Variations in flexitime often include differing start and finishing schedules for each day, the length and timing of lunch breaks, the length of the working day, and the compressed work week (Lewis et al., 2004).

Research has highlighted positive outcomes of flexitime for both the employee and the organisation (Richman, Civian, Shannon, Hill, & Brennan, 2008). Flexitime has been associated with better mental health and resilience, greater productivity and effectiveness, higher levels of job satisfaction and engagement and lower turnover intention (Galinsky, Bond, & Hill, 2004; WFD Consulting, 2007). Research has proven that even a small

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measure of employee flexibility can significantly increase job satisfaction and engagement whilst lowering stress levels (Corporate Voices for Working Families & WDF Consulting, 2007). Burud and Tumolo (2004) commented in a summary of 550 studies that flexible work practices reduce stress, absenteeism and turnover, and increase employee satisfaction, morale, commitment and productivity. Even the perception that flexitime is available had a significant impact on WLB and overall satisfaction of the employee (Hill, Hawkins, Ferris, & Weitzman, 2001). Research has also examined the impact of organisational climate and culture on the outcomes of flexitime (Lewis, 2003), as well as whether such positive outcomes cease with too much flexibility (Lewis, Rapoport, & Gambles, 2003).

Research regarding the implementation and use of flexitime as a WLB policy is, however, limited within the South African context (Dancaster, 2006). The few studies that have been conducted regarding flexitime in South Africa focus on labour market flexibility (Horowitz, 1998) and atypical work patterns (Greef & Nel, 2003; Valodia, 2000) as efficiency measures rather than tools for enhancing employee WLB. South African research has ignored the application of flexitime as a WLB policy, as well as its potential benefits, challenges and consequences for both South African organisations and employees (Dancaster, 2006). In addition, the prerequisites or requirements for the implementation of flexitime in the South African context currently do not exist in research, nor do the surrounding perceptions or variations in its use. This information provides an essential guide for the successful development and implementation of flexitime; consequently, the absence thereof presents a critical gap in this field of research and a source of concern for organisations.

RESEARCH DESIGN

Research approach

This study made use of a qualitative research design with an exploratory approach to explore and describe employees' perceptions regarding the implementation of flexitime

within a South African organisation. Using a qualitative approach, researchers endeavour to understand the world from the participant's perspective and to uncover the meaning of their experiences prior to scientific explanation (Kvale, 1996). Qualitative research, according to Terre Blanche, Durrheim, and Painter (2006), collects data in the written or spoken language, to be analysed through the identification and categorisation of themes and sub-themes and therefore allows the researcher to study a selected phenomenon in depth and detail. Such in-depth and detailed analysis of a phenomenon is critical when the aim of research is to provide preliminary investigation and insight into previously unexplored phenomena, as required for this study (Terre Blanche et al., 2006). Emersion into the detail of data permits the identification of important dimensions, categories and relationships as required for the investigation of employee perspectives regarding flexitime (Neuman, 2003). The approach used was empathetic to the context of the individual, so that one might understand experience from another's perspective and get inside the way an individual may see or experience the world (Neuman, 2003).

Research method

Sampling

A non-probability purposive, voluntary sample of 15 participants was taken from the offices of an international auditing and consulting organisation located in Johannesburg. Although research participants were selected in a non-random manner, inclusion criteria were implemented to determine which participants could be included in the study. These inclusion criteria required that a participant should (1) have access to flexitime offered by the organisation, (2) be willing to participate in the research (be willing to give written consent) after being informed about the purpose and procedures of the research, (3) be willing to be interviewed by the researcher, and (4) be prepared to have his or her interview tape-recorded. The sample size was directed by the number of participants willing and accessible to participate, and interviews continued until data saturation was reached (Terre Blanche et al., 2006). The profiles of the demographic characteristics of the participants are provided in Table 1.

Table 1

Characteristics of the participants (*N*=15)

Item	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	6	40
	Female	9	60
Age	20 – 29 years	2	13,30
	30 – 39 years	10	66,70
	40 – 49 years	2	13,30
	50 – 59 years	1	6,70
Language	Afrikaans	1	6,60
	English	8	53,30
	Sepedi	3	20
	isiZulu	3	20
Level of position	Assistant Manager	2	13,30
	Manager	5	33,30
	Senior Manager	4	26,70
	Partner	3	20,00
	Associate Director/Director	1	6,70
Household situation	Married/With partner children at home	8	53,30
	Married/With partner children no longer living at home	4	26,70
	Single with no children	3	20
Number of children	0	5	33,30
	1	4	26,70
	2	3	20
	3	2	13,30

Table 1 continued

	4	0	0
Number of children	5	0	0
	6	1	6,70
Support at home	Domestic helper	15	100
	Nanny/Au pair to care for children	2	13,30
	Stay-at-home husband	1	6,70

Table 1 indicates that the sample was mostly representative of female (60%), English-speaking (53,3%) employees between the ages of 30 and 39 years (66,7%). Although most participants had children (66,7%), some participants had no children (33,3%). The majority of participants were married or living with a partner, with their children still living at home (53,3%). All of the participants had a domestic helper to assist with household chores (100%), but very few were assisted by a nanny/au pair to mind children (13,3%) or by a stay-at-home husband (6,7%). The sample was more representative of participants from the senior levels, such as the managerial (33,3%) and senior managerial level (26,7%), with a few at partner (20%) and associate director or director level (6,7%).

Research setting and establishing researcher roles

Prior to data collection, it is critical to establish entry into the research field, which should be in line with the choice of the research problem (De Vos, Strydom, Fouche, & Delport, 2005). This research field required identification of an organisation offering employees access and use of flexitime as a work-life balance policy. Prior to the interview process, meetings were established with the management of an appropriate organisation, to discuss the objectives and procedures of the research as well as to obtain written permission to undertake the research.

It is advised that researchers begin their research process as unobtrusively as possible to ensure they are not viewed as threatening intruders, thus potentially reducing the

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accuracy and reliability of the information gathered (De Vos et al., 2005). For this reason, an employee was identified within the organisation to introduce the employees to the researcher and the purpose of the study. This employee arranged for the researcher to be introduced to the employees, in order to identify research participants and schedule suitable interview dates and times.

It is important to note that the interview as well as its outcomes is shaped by its 'gestalt', otherwise known as the whole interaction of a researcher and participant within a particular context or setting (Terre Blanche et al., 2006). With the importance and influence of this setting in mind, a private interview room situated at the Johannesburg offices of the organisation was utilised. Care was taken to ensure the interview room was comfortable, temperate and quiet, located within a convenient distance from the offices for privacy. A 'do not disturb' sign was posted on the door to ensure privacy and reduce potential disturbances.

The researcher acting as the research tool encourages the interviewee to openly discuss perspectives, experiences, feelings and thoughts, and consequently has a direct impact on the quality of research collected (Ritchie & Lewis, 2005). In light of this, the researcher attended qualitative training with emphasis on interview skills and specifically communication techniques. Interview training has a major effect on the quality of data collected and, according to Lewis-Beck, Bryman and Liao (2004), is especially necessary where in-depth and detailed data is required. In efforts to control for interviewer distortion, it was critical that the researcher was constantly aware of her personal views and potential bias and how such subjectivity may influence the objectivity and neutrality of the research findings (Terre Blanche et al., 2006). Reflexivity in the form of critical self-examination took place during the interview process. The researcher took time to reflect on interview performance and influence after each interview and any concerns were discussed with the co-researcher. A co-researcher assisted with the development of the interview schedule, provided support during data collection and reviewed the quality of the information gathered.

Data collection methods

Data was collected by means of semi-structured individual interviews, which, according to Fontana and Frey (2005, p. 645), provide one of the most influential ways in which researchers try to understand fellow human beings. The semi-structured interview refers to a method of data collection where a single interviewer is guided by a flexible interview schedule and makes use of active listening and probing to allow for in-depth detail and understanding (Forrester, 2010). Common to all semi-structured interviews, these interviews focused on subjective accounts of individual experience, without presuming that the issues or experiences were known in advance (Forrester, 2010). Based on the interpretive approach, these interviews allowed the researcher to gather data and study the phenomena from the perspective of the participant, probing further when unanticipated topics came up (Neuman, 2003).

Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2004) state that it is important for the validity and success of the research outcomes that participants are at ease with the research process. The researcher therefore gave a warm and friendly introduction, detailing the context of the interview and emphasising its purpose. The participants were further advised that feedback would be given to the organisation after completion of the research and that their anonymity would at all times be respected and upheld. The use of a tape recorder was explained and permission was requested from the participants before the interviews commenced. Tape recordings were anonymous but alphabetical labels were used to allow for interview differentiation and were kept locked in a cupboard during the research process. According to Creswell (2003), the protection of data is an important research issue, since data should be protected from loss, destruction and unauthorised access in a secure location. It was emphasised to participants that although they had given written consent, they could withdraw from the research at any time.

Prior to the data collection, an interview schedule was developed and evaluated, stating the questions to be asked during the interviews after rapport was established and participants felt comfortable and ready for conversation. All participants were asked three standard questions: (1) In your organisation you are offered and have access to flexitime,

please explain whether you make use of flexitime or not? If the participants stated that they did use flexitime, the researcher would ask (a) How do you make use of flexitime? If the participants stated that they did not use flexitime, the researcher would ask (b) Why not? Next, participants were asked: (2) Could you please describe what you perceive as challenges when it comes to the use of flexitime offered by your organisation? And then: (3) What do you perceive as benefits resulting from the use of flexitime offered by your organisation?

Semi-structured questions and the use of communication techniques such as minimal verbal response, paraphrasing, reflection, clarifying and summarising were used by the researcher to encourage participant elaboration on feelings, thoughts, experiences and perspectives (Neuman, 2003). Observation notes, otherwise known as field notes, were taken by the researcher immediately after each interview and were categorised into three types: methodology notes, personal notes, and theoretical notes (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2004). Methodology notes referred to possible influences on the research process, such as environment, comfort, interruptions, etc. (Bester, 2010). Personal notes reflected the researcher's experience of herself, including her emotional and physiological state, as well as her experience of the participant, which included references to body language and behaviour (Bester, 2010). Theoretical notes included remarks on factors contributing to the content of the interview, such as research questions adjusted, emerging themes/topics, reminders for the researcher, and suggestions for interviews to follow (Bester, 2010). These observation notes therefore provided a written account of what the researcher saw, heard, experienced and thought during the interview, and consequently contributed more depth and detail to the research findings.

Recording of data

With the permission of participants, interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed verbatim for later analysis. In addition to this, the researcher wrote detailed observation notes immediately after each interview, to be used for later analysis. In order to ensure confidentiality, the corresponding observation notes, transcriptions and tapes were labelled using alphabetical coding according to the interview plan (e.g. interview one

coded as interview A and interview two as interview B) known only by the researcher. Observation notes along with the transcriptions and tapes used were safely stored to ensure data could not expose or exploit participants (Burns & Grove, 1997). Throughout this process, the participants' rights to privacy, anonymity, fair treatment, and protection from discomfort and harm were upheld and appropriately respected (Neuman, 2003).

Data analysis

Verbatim transcripts were analysed by means of content analysis in this study. Content analysis, according to Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2004), refers to a systematic technique that gathers and compresses large bodies of text into specific and identifiable content categories for analysis. This method of qualitative analysis is appropriate to the study in that it focuses on and gives attention to content and contextual meaning of the text, assisting the researcher in making replicable and valid inferences (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). To begin the analysis, interviews were read thoroughly by the researcher several times, after which participant responses were divided into meaningful units, appearing as sentences or paragraphs. All the meaningful units were then separated into categories of major themes identified, which were later reviewed and agreed upon by the co-coder. Following careful analysis of the major themes identified, the researcher with the help of the co-coder was able to recognise, explore and summarise smaller and comparable sub-themes as presented in the tables highlighting research findings to follow. Although comprehensive field notes were taken after each interview to be included later as part of the data analysis process, no noteworthy new meaning was abstracted or contrasting evidence or findings suggested. As, according to De Vos et al. (2005), researchers do not always utilise the observation notes in the final report, rather they have the prerogative to review observation notes and decide if inclusion is warranted based on the content and value added.

Strategies employed to ensure quality data

Quality data provides a detailed description of the researcher's experience and immersion into the research and represents the authentic perspectives and context of the research participants (Neuman, 2003). Quality data principles of credibility (checking the truth

value of the findings), transferability (ensuring applicability of the findings), dependability (ensuring consistency of the findings) and conformability (ensuring neutrality or freedom from bias) were upheld in the research (Appleton, 1995; De Vos et al., 2005; Guba, 1981). To ensure that such principles were upheld, particular methods were incorporated in the following ways: (1) pre-pilot interview training was done to enhance the interview skills and confidence of the researcher; following this training, pilot interviews were conducted to evaluate the interview schedule and to give the researcher the opportunity to gain the necessary interview practice. (2) Each stage of the research was clearly and carefully described, explaining what was done and why; this was done to ensure that the exact process was maintained and neutrality upheld throughout all the interviews. (3) Comprehensive observation notes were collected after each interview for additional detail, depth and quality of data. (4) An independent co-coder was utilised for applicability, where an expert researcher was approached to independently review the main and sub-themes identified and to confirm agreement between researchers. (5) Finally, the interpretations of findings were discussed with participants and peers to ensure truth value. This was done following a presentation of research findings made to the organisation by means of a feedback session to management.

Reporting

In the findings that follow, each of the major themes that emerged from the data as agreed upon by researchers will be described separately. Participants' experiences of each of the major themes are presented and discussed with the help of selected quotes (interview excerpts), to illustrate the typical responses as well as those more complex requiring some further explanation. Minor modifications involving the omission of words were made to some of the interview excerpts without affecting meaning, in order to achieve a more compact statement and to assist with reader understanding (De Vos et al., 2005).

FINDINGS

From the data analysis of the interviews, seven main themes were identified. The first two themes related to the various ways in which participants seem to use flexitime and to the factors influencing their use. Thereafter an additional three themes on the challenges, perceptions and required aspects for effective use of flexitime were extracted. The last two themes that were evident from the interviews were the consequences and benefits relating to the use of flexitime. These seven themes and their sub-themes are described in more detail below. For illustrative purposes, associated meaning and explanations are also provided in the tables to follow.

Theme 1: Variations in the use of flexitime

The initial theme that emerged from the interviews was the participants' individual preferences regarding the use of flexitime. From the responses it was evident that flexitime is used in a variety of ways, which are presented in Table 2 below.

Table 2

Variations in the use of flexitime

Sub-themes	Associated Meaning / Explanation
Rearranged working hours per day	Employee determines the start and finish work times; Arriving earlier/later at work, leaving earlier/later from work (e.g. working from 9 am to 6 pm instead of 8 am to 5 pm).
Interval work	Interrupting working hours for nonwork activities (e.g. leaving work for two hours to attend to family matters); Dividing one's working day into smaller hours of work and nonwork (e.g. working only until 2 pm to be able to spend time with children in the afternoon, and resuming work after a few hours when it is more convenient.
Overflow of working hours	Spillover of working hours to the following day; Working longer or later hours to catch up on time lost on previous days; Working overtime in order to meet deadlines or make up for lost working time.

Table 2 continued

Compressed/Extended work week	Working extra hours per day in order to still work the full amount of hours per week and thus allowing for time/days off later during the week (e.g. working longer hours for three days to allow for two days off); Working more days in a week to allow for days/time of later (e.g. working six consecutive days and taking one working day off the following week).
Flexi-location	Using individual freedom to work from locations other than the office premises (e.g. working from home or client offices).
Reduced portfolio	Reduced workload resulting in reduced working hours (e.g. 50% reduced portfolio to allow for only a half-day work or a four-hour working day).

In this study, it was evident that the use of flexitime was unique to each individual and his/her work preference. Individuals seem to chose or rearrange their work and their use of flexitime depending on their own work schedule and personal preferences. Interestingly, although the *rearrangement of working hours per day* was seemingly the most popular among the participants, this was such a common practice that participants did not regard it as a formal use of flexitime, but rather as an example of a normal working arrangement. Some participants admitted to never formalising or signing documents affirming their use of *rearranged working hours*, even when making frequent use of it. More formal use of flexitime was the *compressed work week* as a means to work additional hours/time each day to work the required 40 hours and as a result take time/days off for personal use. Alternatively, some participants use the *overflow of working hours* as a way to work in or catch up on unproductive working time in order to complete/meet deadlines. The following quotes illustrate how some employees make use of flexitime:

> You can work until Wednesday and finish your 40 hours, then Thursday and Friday are your own. If I have something planned for Friday afternoon with my parents then I work hard for maybe four days putting in an extra two hours every day so I then my Friday is off. (Participant 1.)

> I took off last week for a wedding in the middle of things, so I just had to work in the time back to meet all my deadlines. (Participant 8.)

Flexi-location was also very popular among participants where participants were given the freedom to work from locations other than their desks or the office premises. Few of the participants made use of or referred to either the r*educed portfolio* or the *extended work week. Reduced portfolio* was utilised to reduce employees' responsibilities and consequently the required working hours, allowing the employees more time for nonwork activities. The extent to which a portfolio was reduced was dependent on the employee's situation and preference, this use of the policy was interestingly, more commonly used by women and working mothers. Illustrated in the following quote:

> A lot of women went on reduced portfolios which meant that their workloads were cut and their pay was cut accordingly. (Participant 9.)

Additionally, employees would occasionally claim or take time/days off work to make up for extra time worked as a result of demanding workloads or deadlines, therefore extending their work week. An example of this is highlighted in the quote below:

> If you work two days over a weekend, you can just take those two days off later. (Participant 4.)

As participants discussed the variations in the use of flexitime, they also highlighted some aspects that, in addition to their own work preferences, also influenced their use of flexitime. Consequently, these factors were categorised as theme two, i.e. factors influencing the use of flexitime.

Theme 2: Factors influencing the use of flexitime

From the interviews, it became evident that the ways in which participants used flexitime were not always just dependent on the individuals' own preference, but were also dictated by other specific factors, which are presented in Table 3 below.

Table 3

Factors influencing the use of flexitime

Sub-themes	Associated Meaning / Explanation
Clients' needs and expectations	The use of flexitime depends on clients' expectations of working hours and presence at work; Flexitime differs for client-facing employees.
Work pressure and workload	Heavy workload; Deadlines (e.g. closely scheduled and/or changing deadlines); pressure to complete work on time.
Leader/manager perceptions/approach/needs and expectations	Managers 'buy in' into flexitime; Managers' understanding and support towards flexitime; Demonstrated use of flexitime, the way management uses flexitime influences the access and use thereof for employees.
Scope of work	Nature of the work; Inherent job requirements (e.g. job requires employees to be at the office all day); Level of position (e.g. partner or director less likely to make use of flexitime than a trainee, due to workload and work pressure); Departmental working culture.
Personal choice/style	Use influenced by personality of individual; Working preference (e.g. rather work early in the mornings or later in the evening); Lifestyle and individual preferences regarding use of time (e.g. would rather spend time with family as opposed to working late evenings).
Personal commitments and responsibilities	Having private/personal concerns and obligations (e.g. family responsibilities); Personal responsibilities which influence the scheduling of working and nonworking hours.
Support and infrastructure of flexi-location	Access to support at home (e.g. having a childcare/parental care/ domestic help) that is able to adjust or be flexible as required when there are changes in the work schedule; Having an infrastructure available to comfortably work from home (e.g. connectivity and working space).

Workload and work pressures, frequently referred to as deadlines, proved to be significant influencers dictating the majority of participants' use of flexitime. Although employees are offered and have access to flexitime, deadlines are often so tight that employees cannot always afford to take time off and are sometimes forced to work overtime. In addition, client-facing participants highlighted the expectation of some clients for employees to be present during traditional working hours, as a means to monitor their input, which makes the use of flexitime

challenging and difficult. Participants indicated that individual visibility during client working hours is often necessary and very important to clients, as they may become concerned that the work is not being done, as illustrated by the response below:

> When you have a client, they want to see you working during their working hours. If you are not working those hours, they wonder where you are and what is going on. (Participant 11.)

Although flexitime was formalised in a policy available to all employees, participants conveyed that its use could not be assumed throughout the organisation. Rather the attitude, support or lack thereof offered by a manager would directly influence an employee's access and consequently use of flexitime. Participants highlighted that some managers disallowed or frowned upon employees who utilised flexitime, whilst others, although more supportive, were still not completely comfortable with employees' use thereof. Interestingly, according to the participants, managers who were married with children were perceived to be more understanding and supportive of the use of flexitime. Only a few participants stated management's full support in the use of flexitime, as noted in the following quote:

> Some partners buy into flexitime easier than others. There are always those that say 'oh you are leaving early?' (eyebrows raised) or those that don't take it into account that I worked until 11 pm yesterday. (Participant 7.)

The quote above highlights that participants are aware of the negative perceptions surrounding the use of flexitime, as well as the importance of managing such perceptions. This need to manage the perceptions of others was mentioned as the reason why some employees choose not to make use of flexitime. An illustration of participants' awareness of these perceptions is provided in the quotes below:

> Also, just to add, if you are seen it is good, but when you are not around but you are still working somewhere, it's like 'what's going on?' (Participant 2.)

> I know some people feel guilty leaving the office even for lunch when their managers are around just because there is this belief you are not working. (Participant 4.)

> There is this idea that if you work flexible hours you don't care about your career, you don't take it seriously and so the company won't take you seriously. (Participant 7.)

Managers are seemingly aware of these perceptions, and caution employees accordingly:

> So what I say to people is work at home if you need to do something, that's fine, but bear in mind the perception that you may be creating. (Participant 8.)

An interesting perception noted during the interviews was that the use of flexitime negatively impacts on career development and that in order for employees to have career success, they need to be visible and work extra hours. The following quote illustrates this perception:

> There is a perception of one of my senior managers that she won't progress in her career if she uses flexitime… So she just won't use it. (Participant 7.)

Negative perceptions were also apparent when some participants commented on *personal preferences*. These participants mentioned that one's priorities would influence one's use of flexitime and therefore if one's career were a priority, then the use of flexitime would be less likely. Senior employees emphasised their greater workloads and work pressures limiting their ability to take time off, as opposed to more junior level employees who, with less workload and work pressures, enjoyed greater access and use of flexitime. Additionally, participants from the support staff, tasked with providing internal support to the organisation (HR, Finance, etc.), saw the nature of their work and job requirements as the reason why they were not granted access to flexitime.

Also noteworthy was the influence of personal choice or working style on the participants' use of flexitime. Participants frequently referred to their choice of working hours as a logical reflection of their lifestyle, stage of life and priorities, or simply their preference as a 'morning' or 'evening' person. Additionally, *personal commitments and responsibilities* that individuals have, such as childcare, largely influenced their use of flexitime, illustrating the influence of the participants' life stage. Those participants with children especially emphasised the influence of flexible *support and infrastructure at home,* where they were able to accommodate any changes in the work schedules, which allows them to make use of flexitime in order to meet tight deadlines:

Some people have nannies, maids or even their parents at home that they can just call and say please stay with the kids I am going to be working late, which is great, but like me, if you don't, you have to leave work at a specific time. (Participant 7.)

Very closely related to these above-mentioned factors were the specific and more general challenges which employees experienced when implementing flexitime. These challenges are categorised as theme three, i.e. challenges relating to the use of flexitime.

Theme 3: Challenges relating to the use of flexitime

From the responses, it became clear that the use of flexitime is not without challenges. Participants experienced specific individual challenges such as having to maintain productivity/performance, disengaging from work, the infrastructure or alternative work locations, managing and maintaining balance between personal life and work as well as time management. The more general challenges identified by participants related rather to the implementation of flexitime and included aspects such as the inconsistent understanding and knowledge of flexitime, possible misuse of flexitime, management of perceptions, formal and informal use of flexitime, managing employee productivity and output, availability of employees, ineffective communication and, finally, the nature of work. The individual and general challenges are elaborated on in Table 4 and 5 below.

Table 4

Individual challenges relating to flexitime

Sub-themes	Associated Meaning / Explanation
Having to maintain productivity/performance	Keeping up productivity while using flexitime; Achieving deadlines and outputs; Maintaining performance/productivity equal to those individuals who work regular hours and not use flexitime; Not being able to compare or compete with the productivity of individuals who do not use flexitime.

Table 4 continued

Disengaging from work	Having difficulty disengaging mentally from work when participating in nonwork activities (e.g. working or thinking about work when at home or participating in nonwork activities); Constantly working; Working longer and more hours.
Infrastructure of alternative work locations	Critical resources lacking at home (e.g. no connectivity at home); Unsupportive work environment at home (e.g. difficult to work at home with children present).
Managing and maintaining balance between personal life and work	Finding it difficult to balance children/babies and work/career responsibilities; Mothers want to be home, but also wish to pursue a career; Maintaining/pursuing personal life and career goals; Calculating and maintaining outputs of reduced portfolio.
Time management	Challenge to successfully plan, juggle and meet work with nonwork demands and responsibilities, when employees are managing both at the same time (e.g. difficulty to meet deadlines and attend to personal responsibilities such as children all in one day).

Challenges for the individual

Maintaining one's productivity/performance was described by some participants as more challenging when working flexitime as compared to working fixed hours. This challenge is most common when flexitime is used to postpone work as a result of personal commitments/responsibilities, laziness or poor *time management,* which then understandably negatively impacts on the achievement of deadlines and outputs:

> It is hard keeping up with the productivity of a person working eight until six, sometimes you look bad because you can't go the extra mile. (Participant 6.)

In contrast, other participants admitted to working far longer hours or even working consistently, taking little or no personal or free time as a result of their inability to *disengage from work*. This inability to disengage was further mentioned for its negative influence on *management and maintenance of participant personal life and work*, where, rather than spending time with family or friends, some participants utilised this time to continue working. The lack of infrastructure such as connectivity was highlighted as a significant challenge and reason why some of the participants preferred not to work from alternative working conditions.

Table 5

General challenges with implementation

Sub-themes	Associated Meaning / Explanation
Inconsistent understanding/ knowledge of flexitime	Poor communication and information on what is meant by flexitime within the specific organisation; Unclear information on how employees should use flexitime; Unclear information on who qualifies for flexitime; Lacking and inconsistent information regarding the management of employees' use of flexitime; Misconceptions and misunderstandings surrounding flexitime.
Possible misuse of flexitime	No discipline procedure established for employee abuse/misuse of flexitime; Lack of discipline of employees leads to misuse of flexitime; perceptions that junior staff are inclined to misuse flexitime.
Management of perceptions	Managing assumptions/beliefs that one must be seen working to be working; Misconceptions of who should use flexitime (women with children only); Perceptions influence individuals' attitude towards flexitime.
Formal and informal use	Use of policy unstructured and informal by some employees, making it difficult to monitor and control the use thereof.
Managing the productivity/outputs of employees	Control and management of employees' productivity when not at desk/office; Knowing whether or not employees are working; Controlling teams and team productivity; Trust in employee' commitment when they are not present.
Availability of employees	Infrequent access to employees; Expectation of face-to-face availability; Employees not always available for urgent matters; Availability for the client.
Ineffective communication between employees	Poor, inconsistent communication between manager, employee and colleagues; Employees not always present or contactable to discuss work schedules; Location and task progress/completion.
Difference in nature of work	Departments and positions with specific expectations and requirements for face availability, limiting employee ability to work from home/alternative locations.

Challenges with the implementation

One of the major challenges relating to the implementation of flexitime is the management of employees in terms of their productivity, performance, availability, and their perceptions regarding flexitime. Irrespective of the apparent awareness of flexitime in the organisation, responses revealed a significant lack of knowledge and understanding regarding the use thereof among employees. Misconceptions were common around who may use it, who may not and how one might apply for use. Responses made it apparent that few employees actively discuss the use of flexitime with their managers, possibly as a result of the negative perceptions surrounding its use. According to participants, women, and more specifically mothers, were regarded by many employees as the only rightful users of flexitime, thus restricting the use to other employees. Another common perception was that if you are not at work, you are misusing flexitime and not working. Employees aware of this notion would therefore restrict their use. These perceptions pose a greater challenge when they are held by managers and directors who have the authority to restrict employee access and use.

The misuse of flexitime was a major challenge for participants in managerial positions, who referred to their inability to determine whether employees are in fact working or even at client locations when they are not at the office. In addition, many participants highlighted their concern regarding the lack of disciplinary processes available for the misuse and abuse of flexitime. Common in the responses was the likelihood of junior employees to misuse flexitime and the consequent challenge for managers to monitor their use more closely. Some managers stated that they refuse access until junior employees have proven their 'professional maturity' and earned the use of flexitime.

Availability of employees, and in some cases face-to-face availability, is often an expectation of clients and colleagues dependent on an employee for assistance or the completion of tasks. This expectation, coupled with the dynamic and ever-changing demands of the environment, influences employee access and use of flexitime. Some participants cited the unavailability of colleagues as a significant challenge and concern:

> I don't have a problem with people using flexitime until the point where it impacts negatively on my ability to deliver, then I get voicey about it. (Participant 14.)

Client-facing employees who were not always granted access to flexitime by managers or their departments consistently cited this as a challenge, since clients do not understand or support flexitime and are known to become irritated by employees who do use it.

It is clear from the above that negative perceptions or perceptions regarding flexitime pose a significant challenge to management and employees. From the participants' responses, various specific and more general perceptions came to light. It was apparent that perceptions play an important role, and may be considered a contributor to the dynamic between factors of flexitime. The specific perceptions mentioned were categorised as the next theme, indicating the perceptions that exist regarding the use of flexitime.

Theme 4: Perceptions regarding use of flexitime

Various specific perceptions exist regarding the level of position and management, personal life and situation, and visibility. The most common and frequently identified perceptions are listed in Table 6 below.

Table 6
Perceptions regarding flexitime

Sub-themes	
Perceptions regarding level of position and management	*Perceptions regarding personal life and situation*
Flexitime is more attractive to the younger generation, as the older generation is not educated about it.	*Flexitime is more popular with working mothers and/or women*
The use of flexitime will hinder career progress/ development	*Flexitime promotes self-fulfilment*
Not all managers buy in and support the use of flexitime	*For managers to be supportive, they need to be married with kids*

Table 6 continued

Perceptions regarding level of position and management	Perceptions regarding personal life and situation
Only senior staff use flexitime correctly and efficiently	Employees with children are granted more access to flexitime
Support staff should not have access to flexitime	Employee feel cared for by the organisation due to flexitime
Junior staff need to prove themselves before given access to flexitime, and this use must be supervised	Employee feel more in control of their work and time due to flexitime
Employees from higher management level have work overload, always work overtime and cannot afford access to flexitime	
Flexitime is an attraction and marketing tool, useful for talent management	
Flexitime helps avoid employee burnout	
Flexitime encourages employee loyalty	
Flexitime reduces organisational overheads	
Visibility	
Visibility at work is important	
Less visibility means you are not working – must be seen to be working	

Clearly, numerous perceptions exist among participants regarding the use of flexitime. In addition to these perceptions regarding flexitime, participants also indicated certain aspects that are very important for the effective use of flexitime within the organisation. These aspects were almost seen as minimum requirements for the effective use of flexitime (categorised as theme 5).

Theme 5: Required aspects for effective use of flexitime

Participants emphasised significant aspects that if present would greatly improve the implementation and individual use of flexitime. These are presented in Table 7 below.

Table 7
Required aspects for effective use of flexitime

Sub-themes	Associated Meaning / Explanation
Critical resources	Resources such as 3G and cellphones are required to ensure connectivity and access to employees at all times; Availability of support staff is a requirement to provide assistance when necessary.
Individual planning and management	Individual planning and managing of unique working time/schedules/day for successful management of work and nonwork responsibilities (e.g. use of personal diary or organiser to manage time and ensure that objectives are met).
Effective communication	Continuous and advanced communication between employees, clients, colleagues/teams. Continuous and advanced management regarding work schedule/hours, work locations, work progress, expected completion of work and availability of employees.
Professional discipline	Required employee accountability, responsibility, maturity and motivation towards the organisation and the work and in their use of flexitime.
Job performance	Achievement of deadlines, completion of required work and fulfilment of working hours and satisfaction of client needs and expectations.
Supportive relationships	Good and trusting relationships between employees, managers and colleagues; Guidance for employees in the scheduling of working times and arrangements.
Employee availability	Employee availability and some visibility are required by colleagues, managers and clients for the mentoring and transfer of knowledge within the organisation.
Control and measurement	Guidelines for careful management of use of flexitime; Guidelines for immediate and effective discipline for misuse; Measurement of outcomes/output and productivity as control for misuse; Making use of a planning or scheduling board to communicate and measure use of flexitime, and recording the use thereof; Ensure there are employees to 'stand in' or cover for those employees that are unavailable.
Informed awareness and understanding	Education and awareness for all organisational levels to promote access; Understanding of employees' working preferences/differences and, consequently, their unique use of flexitime; Expectations regarding employees' use should be known.

The need for *critical resource*s such as connectivity and employee face-to-face availability was continuously referenced by participants, aware of the importance of continuous *communication*. This communication was highlighted as a critical requirement for the successful *planning and management* of work tasks:

> This environment is tough; people expect things, so even if you are working flexible working hours or flexi-location, you have to be responding all the time. Connectivity helps me send a reply – if not that night, then early the next morning. (Participant 6.)

The need for *individual planning and management* was also consistent in the responses. Participants provided personal examples of when they failed to effectively plan and manage their schedules, and of the consequences they faced. Failure to plan was described by some of the participants as disrespectful towards colleagues, clients and managers who are likely to be affected. Consequently, *professional discipline* was largely emphasised by participants in managerial roles, who, as evident in the quote below, described the demonstration of qualities such as maturity and responsibility as necessary for employee access and use of flexitime:

> You need to own it, just because you are on flexitime doesn't make it anyone else's problem. You need to be responsible and professional in your use. If you go to lunch, put your phone on forward and follow up on the calls, be responsible. (Participant 14.)

Associated with professional discipline was *job performance,* which all participants emphasised with equal fervour. Participants agreed that employees should not make use of flexitime if its use negatively impacts their performance, as illustrated below:

> If you do not complete what you need to it will affect other employees and the service lines within the organisation, our clients, targets and deadlines, so you have to be respectful of that. (Participant 12.)

The apparent lowered employee job performance was also raised as a concern for management. As a result, some managers seemed to lack trust in employees' use of flexitime and consequently offered less support. Many participants described management trust in employees as a critical determiner of employee access and use of flexitime. Communication in the form of scheduling/planning boards was suggested and requested by participants who felt that this was a necessity for the management and scheduling of work tasks, and as a means to notify colleagues when working different hours or from different locations. Such communication is critical to

ensure awareness when an employee is not available, so that other employees can be on standby to assist if necessary.

Employee availability and visibility was emphasised as an essential support for the transfer of knowledge and the development of supportive relationships, as necessary for the mentorship of junior employees and the successful planning and use of flexitime. Such sentiments are shared in the participant quote below:

> Employees need to have access to more senior employees. They need to know who they are and build relationships with them; this will help them grow and develop to their best potential. (Participant 10.)

Participants with children highlighted the importance of flexible support staff at home, able to adjust in response to changing work schedules of the employee, especially where client deadlines and demands so easily change, as highlighted in the following quote here:

> Sometimes you have many client deadlines, you have to be flexible and so does your support at home because you cannot get rigid in terms of your professional capacity. So you need to be flexible and make sure your support structure at home fits that model. (Participant 9.)

Central to control and measurement of flexitime was the expressed need for careful recording and scheduling of the ways in which employees use flexitime. Several requests for established guidelines were made, as well as for a company disciplinary process for the misuse of flexitime. This misuse was taken as a serious concern for the organisation and management, especially the frequent association of the misuse of flexitime and junior employees:

> Some rules or guidelines should be established to help managers; there should also be some kind of criteria to explain why some people get flexitime and others don't, just to make it fair (Participant 14.)

> When you notice they are abusing it, which happens, you must address it quickly and disciplinary processes must be followed. (Participant 7.)

Participants frustrated by the lack of support of management in their use of flexitime expressed a need for managers to understand the employee's unique lifestyle and daily challenges with reference to their working preferences, and to allow appropriate employee access and use as required by the employee. An additional need for employee guidelines for use of flexitime, criteria for qualification of use and expectations regarding employee performance and use were raised by participants . Illustrated below:

As a manager, you need to know who your employees are and what is their working preference, much like you need to know their strengths and weaknesses. (Participant 7.)

Education around the policy is necessary, particularly since several old school managers don't recognise the benefits or know-how to manage its use, so they just refuse employee use who lose out. (Participant 5.)

Not all of the required aspects as referred to by participants were in use at the time of the interviews, although their importance was emphasised. From the interviews, it became clear that when some of the above-mentioned required aspects are absent there are consequences.

Theme 6: Consequences relating to the use of flexitime

The use of flexitime evidently is not without cost, and many consequences can be linked to required aspects not currently present. These consequences are presented in Table 8 below.

Table 8
Consequences relating to the use of flexitime

Sub-themes	Associated Meaning / Explanation
Delay in work/deadlines	Delays in work and client deadlines due to rescheduling or postponement of work, and poor planning.
Reduced productivity and performance	Reduced output; Employee not present at the office and therefore unavailable, so that when new work is received, it is assigned to other employees present; Team members not all present, effecting team performance.
Perceived influence on career growth	Lack of potential experience/opportunities when out of office; Reduced exposure to mentors/ more senior staff; Poor career development/ achievement of career goals.
Increased workload	Given more work than normal; Working longer hours; Work shifted to available colleagues.
Health consequences	Sickness and tiredness due to a busier life, balancing work and personal responsibilities/pressures.
Influencing personal life	Less time for family, friends and themselves when working, as opposed to enjoying personal time (e.g. scheduling of time so that employee works during what traditionally or ordinarily should be 'off time', thereby reducing available personal time with family, etc.).
Development of perceptions	Assumptions are created when employees are not present and no indication is given where the employees are or what they are doing.

Delay of work/deadlines was the most frequently cited consequence due to freedom with regard to work schedules, lack of planning and laziness. Many participants described times when they kept postponing work, which resulted in their working tirelessly without sleep to meet deadlines or missing them completely. Interestingly, those who mentioned delays of work/deadlines as a consequence also warned of the potential of working too much, using flexitime to work after hours when they should be with friends and family.

Surprisingly, productivity or rather *reduced productivity* appears as a consequence and later again as a benefit. Several participants recalled times when colleagues failed to make up for time taken off work, and consequently their productivity suffered. Moreover, participants described times when colleagues were not present when new clients/projects were allocated, consequently these colleagues contributed less productivity to their team, department or organisation:

> There are people that are not working their forty hours a week. They see flexitime as a way to do something else and to take the time off, and they don't necessarily catch this time up. (Participant 9.)

In light of this reduced productivity/performance, close monitoring of employee use of flexitime was described and openly despised by some of the participants, who labelled it patronising and saw it as a reason to rebel, as illustrated here:

> I have been in situations where I have been monitored and I get very defiant and say fine I am out of here at four on the dot. (Participant 14.)

Interestingly, where some participants mentioned *reduced productivity/performance* as a consequence, others experienced an increase in their workload due to flexitime – possibly highlighting a shift of workload from employees using flexitime and not present in the office to those present and available at work. When employees working flexitime are not present to accept urgent work, this work is reallocated to those employees present, regardless of whether or not they are already busy, as evident in the following comment:

> If you are in a meeting and one person has gone at three o'clock, it often results in other people shouldering what would be their load and then it is a disproportionate amount of work getting shifted to other people. (Participant 14.)

Complaints about increased workload were common. Many participants stated that after working overtime for many days to meet deadlines, managers would see that employees were not so busy and, instead of allowing time off, give additional work. In some cases, participants admitted to acting busy just to avoid getting more work, as evident in the following quote:

> When you work towards a deadline, you work in eight hours and then overtime to get it done, but then afterwards other managers see you are not busy so they give you more work. You end up working sixty or seventy hours a week, so it is better to just look busy. (Participant 1.)

Participants commented that it was not uncommon for personal time to be spent working instead of enjoying personal activities such as meditation, exercise and relaxation. Some of the participants attributed their tiredness and exhaustion to doing too much in one day, made possible by flexitime, which was pushing them to what some described as the point of illness and *health consequences.*

Concerns for *career growth* were evident in some participants, who blamed the *development of perceptions* within the organisation. In particular the perception that if one is not at the office, one is not working and does not take one's career seriously was blamed for the extra hours that some participants chose to work just to ensure that people could not comment on their productivity. The awareness of the danger of such perceptions is clearly illustrated in the following quotes:

> I always say to people: work at home if you need to do something but bear in mind the perception you may be creating. (Participant 8.)

> So that is why I choose to rather work for about two extra hours at home, just to be safe. (Participant 6.)

Despite the above-mentioned consequences, participants also indicated the benefits that they reaped from working flexitime (theme 7).

Theme 7: Benefits resulting from the use of flexitime

Many individual and organisational benefits were also present and are presented in Table 9 below.

Table 9

Benefits resulting from the use of flexitime

Sub-theme	Associated Meaning / Explanation
Individual benefits	
Opportunity to manage responsibilities in personal life	Employee free to attend to and manage personal responsibilities, commitments and appointments when necessary.
Opportunity to control work	Structure and management of working hours to suit employee responsibilities, preferences, workload and deadlines.
Experienced work-life balance	Personal time for relaxation, exercise, study purposes, family, domestic responsibilities and social time.
Traffic management	Ability to avoid peak traffic times; Less time spent/wasted in peak traffic times.
Psychological benefits	Reduced anxiety and stress, and increased experienced happiness, passion, energy, enjoyment and gratitude.
Organisational benefits	
Attraction and retention	Assists talent attraction and retention of employees; Employees attracted by flexitime; Employees less likely to leave and often return to the organisation due to flexitime policy.
Productivity	Increased output from efficient use of time; Use of flexitime to work later, longer hours to meet outcomes and client deadlines and make up for time lost.
Employee concentration	Improved focus due to preferred working times, i.e. morning person and afternoon person; Improved focus due to working in quieter locations (home); Reduced distractions/interruptions (e.g. e-mail and calls) due to a quieter working environment; Ability to concentrate easier.
Employee loyalty, commitment and motivation	Employee commitment, loyalty and support for an organisation that cares for their well-being; Results in increased motivation and willingness to go the extra mile; Employees are happy to work overtime to complete work in time.

Individual benefits

Opportunity to manage responsibilities in personal life and *control work* were benefits consistently mentioned in the interviews. Participants expressed *experienced work-life balance*

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as a result of their new-found feeling of control and freedom to spend time at their own discretion, rather than feeling anxious to just leave the office, as highlighted in the following quote:

> There is no feeling of anxiousness that you have to be at work. You cannot schedule a personal appointment, you know that if you have to step out to go see your specialist or go get medicine that it is not going to be frowned upon. (Participant 4.)

Participants went into great detail when describing their experienced *psychological benefits.* These benefits included reduced levels of stress and anxiety, and increased levels of energy, passion and overall happiness in participants' working environment, and were attributed to increases in experienced work-life balance.

The achievement of bonuses or performance incentives was expressed by participants as individual benefits of improved *productivity* as a result of flexitime. Participants felt that they were achieving more and attributed this to their *opportunity to control work* according to unique working preferences, such as working early in the morning or at home to avoid distractions and interruptions. In addition, participants stated that flexitime allowed them to maintain *productivity* by making up for unproductive work time as a result of exams or illness. Many of the participants commented on the avoidance of peak traffic times as optimisation of productive time; consequently, many employees arrange working hours in order to miss such times, the benefits of which are detailed in the quote below:

> There are distinct examples of improved productivity. An audit team in Midrand started work at six in the morning and then left at three because they were very early and were not stressed from traffic; therefore they were more productive. (Participant 14.)

Organisational Benefits

Critical in a demanding, client-facing environment is the ability to be flexible in response to changing deadlines and workloads. Flexitime allows for this adaptability and in doing so assists the organisation with achievement of client deadlines and overall organisational productivity and performance, as illustrated below:

> Because the needs of the client change all the time, you might be slow this week and have many deadlines the next. So you need to have that flexibility to meet the client's deadlines. (Participant 8.)

Flexitime as an *attraction and retention* strategy was a recurring sub-theme within participant responses. Several of these participants detailed cases where employees returned to the company primarily due to the 'privilege' of flexitime. Other participants described flexitime as the reason they worked at the organisation, stating that they could not work and manage their personal lives without it. Several participants commented on flexitime as a marketing tool for the organisation, most frequently delivered by word of mouth and especially effective with younger generation employees. An example of flexitime as a marketing tool is offered in the following quote:

> Flexitime makes the company attractive to the outside world. You would be surprised how many people are interested in working here just because of it alone. (Participant 7.)

Many participants interpreted flexitime as an expression of organisational care and concern for the employee. Attributed to this were according to participant responses, heightened levels of *employee loyalty, commitment and motivation,* resulting in enhanced *productivity*. Participants commented on their willingness to work overtime to meet deadlines and complete tasks, knowing that they would be granted time off. Some participants declared their obligation to work longer and harder in exchange for the care the organisation offers employees, as noted in the following quote:

> If they are giving you that flexibility, then I always feel I have to do all my work. I can't not. They are being so nice to me, how could I let them down by not finishing my work. (Participant 8.)

In addition to *employee loyalty, commitment and motivation,* participants described enhanced levels of *employee concentration* and energy as contributors to improved *productivity*, a repeatedly referenced sub-theme. Interestingly, while some participants use time off to relax, others use this time to start and complete additional work.

DISCUSSION

WLB and the associated organisational policies such as flexitime have recently become an important research area for human resource practitioners (Dancaster, 2006; Kossek & Ozeki, 1998; Reynolds, 1999; Sanichar, 2004). Due to the various organisational and employee benefits associated with WLB, the popularity and use of such policies (i.e. flexitime) by organisations both internationally and nationally have increased (Appiah-Mfodwa, Horwitz, Kieswetter, King & Solai, 2000; Mageni & Slabbert, 2005). The general objective of this study was to explore and understand employee perceptions regarding the use of flexitime as a WLB policy within a South African organisation.

The findings of this research give valuable information with regard to the way in which employees experience their use of flexitime. Seven major themes were extracted from the data, supporting the findings of previous research and offering unique contributions to existing research. The initial theme that emerged highlighted a variety of employee preferences in their particular use of flexitime. The variations in the use included rearranged working hours per day, interval work, flexi-location and compressed and extended work week – all of which are in accordance with previous literature (Dex, 2004). The use of rearranged working hours was so popular among participants in this study that it was frequently considered and referred to as a 'normal working arrangement', and participants commonly neglected to formalise or discuss this working arrangement with superiors. Reduced portfolios were unique to this study. This use of flexitime allowed employees to reduce responsibilities and, consequently, workload in order to ensure further flexibility.

Employees' use of flexitime was, however, not solely dependent on preference, since certain factors were identified by participants as influencers that, in some cases, dictated or disallowed employee use. Of the influencers identified in this study, only personal choice/style and leader/manager perceptions were supported by previous literature (Bianchi & Milke, 2010; Cooke, 2005). The most common and powerful influencers described by participants were work pressures and workload, client needs and expectations, as well as leader/manager support or lack thereof, presenting valuable and unique insights into flexitime research. Other influencers

mentioned by participants were nature and scope of work, inherent job requirements, personal choice/working style, personal commitments and responsibilities, and supportive infrastructure (e.g. childcare that is flexible to adjust to changing work schedules). Noteworthy was the frustration evident in those participants whose access and use of flexitime were obstructed or reduced by such influencing factors.

Linked to these factors were specific and general challenges employees faced. Specific individual and organisational challenges were identified by participants. Of the individual challenges, only maintenance of productivity and time management were evident in previous research (Grainger & Holt, 2005; Horwitz, Kieswetter, King, & Solai, 2000; Mageni & Slabbert, 2005). Prevalent organisational challenges included employee misuse of flexitime, inconsistent understanding/knowledge of flexitime, management of perceptions (specifically those influencing employee use), maintaining productivity/output, and ineffective communication between employees. Of these themes, only misuse of flexitime, maintenance of productivity/output, and the prevalence of perceptions are evident in literature (Cooke, 2005). Perceptions were commonly referenced by participants, and, according to participants, referred specifically to the level of position and management, visibility, and personal life and situation, none of which were evident in previous literature.

Participants further highlighted certain aspects that, if present, would greatly improve the implementation and individual use of flexitime. Examples were: critical resources, individual planning and management, job performance, professional discipline, effective communication, supportive relationships, and employee availability. Of these required aspects, only critical resources and planning were suggested in previous research (Mageni & Slabbert, 2005). It became clear that when some of the required aspects were absent, there were certain consequences, such as delays in work/deadlines, reduced productivity and performance, perceived influence on career growth, increased workload, health consequences, influence on personal life, and the development of perceptions. Of these consequences, only the development of perceptions and delays in work/deadlines were apparent in existing research (Bianchi & Milkie, 2010).

Despite these consequences, participants cited many organisational and employee benefits resulting from the use of flexitime. Although benefits such as experienced work-life balance, traffic management, productivity, and attraction and retention are well documented in the literature (Cooke, 2005; Cooke et al., 2009), many individual benefits, such as the opportunity to manage responsibilities in personal life and the opportunity to control work and psychological benefits, were unique to this study, along with unique organisational benefits, including employee concentration, loyalty, motivation and commitment.

In conclusion, this study brought to light seven central or critical themes, some supported by literature whilst others were original, unique findings – all, however, allowing for greater understanding and awareness of employee perceptions of the use of flexitime within a South African organisation.

Important limitations are evident in this research and should be mentioned. One major limitation relates to the use of one particular organisation in this study, which may imply that the themes identified and discussed in the research are organisation and policy specific. Insight into broader aspects surrounding flexitime could have been provided if a greater sample of more than one organisation was used. Caution is therefore advised in the generalisation of the research findings to other flexitime policies used or developed in other organisations. Moreover, the participants in this study did not reflect the cultural diversity and context of South Africa and consequently cannot be interpreted as such.

Organisations are advised to be aware and accommodating of the unique preferences of employee use of flexitime, as this is a reflection of an individual's working preference and style. Influencing factors that significantly reduce the use of flexitime must be identified and quickly addressed by the organisation. Communication and education of employees regarding the policy and its use are crucial and should be prioritised accordingly. This education is especially important for those employees in management and leadership positions who have the influence to either strengthen or effectively reduce employee use.

Recommendations for future WLB research include exploration into the use of flexitime among different groups, as may be dependent on life situation, home situation and need of use. Additional research could also investigate other WLB policies currently in use in South Africa, and could determine the effectiveness of these policies, i.e. the extent to which these policies actually achieve and support employee WLB.

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CHAPTER 3

CONCLUSIONS, LIMITATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In this chapter, conclusions regarding the study are given according to the general and specific objectives. The limitations of this research are discussed, followed by recommendations for the organisation and future research.

3.1 CONCLUSIONS

Given the influence of flexitime as a WLB policy and the considerable lack of existing South African research in this regard, the objective of this qualitative study was to shed light on employee perceptions regarding the implementation of flexitime in a South African organisation. From the data, seven main themes were extracted. The first two themes highlighted various ways in which participants used flexitime as well as the factors influencing their use. Three themes identified the challenges, perceptions and required aspects for the effective or successful use of flexitime; and the last two themes highlighted the consequences and organisational and employee benefits of this policy.

The initial theme *variations in the use of flexitime* highlighted how employees make use of flexitime and was related to the first research objective, being employees' use of flexitime. From the findings, it was apparent that employees made unique use of flexitime, in accordance with their working style or preference. Popular and previously researched uses of flexitime were *rearrangement of working hours per day* and *flexi-location*, giving employees the freedom to work from locations other than office premises (Dex, 2004; Lewis & Cooper, 2005; Robbins, Odendaal, & Roodt, 2004). *Rearrangement of working hours* was so common that participants viewed it as an example of a normal working arrangement. *Compressed work week*, also represented in the literature, presented a more formalised use of the policy, allowing participants to work in the required hours per week in fewer working days to allow for time/days off (Dex, 2004; Robbins et al., 2004). Some participants used flexitime in order to work in or catch up on unproductive work time, used more specifically to meet deadlines. *Reduced portfolio,* whereby

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an employee's work responsibilities and consequently required working hours are reduced as dependent on an employee's situation and preference, was not evident in the literature or common among participants. Interestingly, it was found to be used more by women, and more specifically working mothers. Participants' use was evidently impacted by some influencing factors. Examples of the stronger influencing factors were *work pressure and workload, client needs and expectations, managerial influence, and perceptions*. Of the influencers highlighted, only personal choice/style and leader/manager perceptions are supported by previous literature (Bianchi & Milkie, 2010; Cooke, 2005). Interestingly, managers with children were described by participants as more likely to support employee use of flexitime. Moreover, very few of the participants stated that they had full management support in their use of the policy.

Also apparent in the interviews was that participants were aware of the many negative perceptions surrounding their use of flexitime. A number of participants admitted that the need to manage such perceptions was in fact the reason why some participants chose not to make use of flexitime at all. These perceptions, although reflected broadly in previous literature, centre around the importance of visibility in the workplace, the perceptions regarding level of position and management, and those regarding personal life and situation (Cooke, 2005).

Such perceptions represented just one of the many challenges associated with individual use and implementation of flexitime (Cooke, 2005). The *maintenance of productivity and performance* was, in accordance with previous literature, cited as a central challenge. Employees admitted to often using flexitime to postpone their working commitments in favour of personal responsibilities, or as a result of poor time management or laziness (Horwitz, Kieswetter, King, & Solai, 2000; Mageni & Slabbert, 2005). Interestingly, other participants admitted to working for much longer hours, even constantly, and complained about being unable to disengage from work, a challenge not previously cited in literature. This inability to disengage was described by participants as directly influencing their management and maintenance of WLB. Instead of spending time with family and friends, some participants used this time to continue working. Lack of infrastructure, especially around connectivity, was highlighted as a significant challenge and – although unrepresented in the literature – was cited as the reason why some participants were unable to work from alternative locations.

Regarding the objective of challenges with the implementation of flexitime, noteworthy challenges for implementation were seen regarding productivity, performance, availability and the perceptions of flexitime. Irrespective of the awareness of the policy within the organisation, participant responses revealed an obvious lack of knowledge and understanding regarding its use among employees. Confusion was common around who was entitled to it, who was not, and how one should apply for use. It was further apparent that very few employees had actively discussed their use of the policy with managers.

General challenges, and more specifically employee challenges, were identified within the research. According to participants, employees generally believe that women, particularly mothers, are the only rightful users of flexitime, thereby restricting the use to other employees. Misuse of the policy was seen as a major challenge among participants in senior positions, who expressed their inability to ensure that employees were working or at clients when absent from the office. Some concerns were raised around the lack of a disciplinary process for misuse/abuse of the policy. Some of these participants associated this misuse with junior employees, whom they refused access until professional maturity was proven. Availability of employees, and in some cases face-to-face availability, was commonly stated by participants as an expectation of those clients and colleagues dependent on the employee for assistance. This expectation, along with the changing demands of the environment, posed a direct challenge for employee access and use. Of the employee challenges, only maintenance of productivity and time management were evident in previous research (Grainger & Holt, 2005; Horwitz et al., 2000; Mageni & Slabbert, 2005). Moreover, of the organisational challenges identified, only the misuse of flexitime, maintenance of productivity/output, and the prevalence of perceptions are evident in literature (Cooke, 2005). It was found that some of these identified challenges were precursors to the experienced consequences as emphasised by the participants.

Of the consequences described by participants, only the development of perceptions and delay in work/deadlines were apparent in existing research (Bianchi & Milkie, 2010). *Delay of work/deadlines*, the most frequently referenced consequence, is, according to participants, accredited to employee freedom with regard to work schedules, poor planning, and in some cases

laziness. *Reduced productivity and performance* was highlighted by several participants who recalled times when colleagues did not make up for time taken off work, resulting in productivity lost. However, of those who mentioned delays in work/deadlines and lost productivity, some also warned of the potential of working too much, using flexitime to work after hours when they should be relaxing or spending quality time with friends and family. Furthermore, while some participants mentioned reduced productivity as a consequence, others experienced an *increased workload*, perhaps highlighting a shift of workload from employees using flexitime and not present in the office to those present and available for work. Complaints about increased workload were common. Participants stated that after working overtime for many days to meet deadlines, managers would see employees not currently busy and, instead of allowing time off, they would give them more work to complete. Some participants admitted to acting busy to avoid getting more work.

Notwithstanding these consequences, it was apparent that there were considerable benefits associated with the use of flexitime as a WLB policy for employees – this relating to benefits, the last specific objective of this study. Common employee benefits were the *opportunity to manage responsibilities in personal life* and to *control work.* Participants expressed experienced WLB as resulting from a new-found feeling of control and freedom to spend time at their own discretion. Participants went into great detail describing their experienced *psychological benefits,* including reduced stress and anxiety and increased overall energy, passion and overall happiness in their working environment. All of which they believed to be attributed to increased *experienced WLB*. Participants believed they were achieving more in their work and described their achieved performance incentives and bonuses as the consequence of optimisation of working time and improved productivity. Benefits, more specifically experienced work-life balance, traffic management, productivity, and attraction and retention, are well documented in the literature (Cooke, 2005; Cooke et al., 2009). However, other individual benefits such as the opportunity to manage responsibilities in personal life, opportunity to control work, and psychological benefits are some of the unique contributions of this study.

In addition to employee benefits, participants highlighted many organisational benefits associated with the use of flexitime. According to the findings, flexitime allows for flexibility

and adaptability of an organisation, especially for those that are client facing and deadline driven. Flexitime was found to assist with the achievement of client deadlines and overall *productivity* and performance of the organisation. In addition, flexitime was strongly referenced as an *attraction and retention* strategy. Participants cited instances where employees returned to the organisation after resignation, primarily because of the privilege of this policy, whilst other participants stated flexitime as the reason why they worked at the organisation. Flexitime was also described as a marketing tool most frequently delivered by word of mouth and especially effective with the younger generation. Several participants interpreted flexitime as an expression of organisational care and concern on the part of the organisation for their people. Heightened levels of *employee loyalty, commitment and motivation* were attributed to this interpretation, all of which greatly enhancing overall productivity. Participants described their willingness to work overtime to meet deadlines, knowing they would be rewarded. In addition to employee loyalty, commitment and motivation, participants described enhanced levels of employee concentration and energy as contributors to improved productivity, a repeatedly referenced sub-theme. Organisational benefits highlighted in the study offering unique contributions to the literature include employee concentration, loyalty, motivation and commitment.

Additionally, participants mentioned aspects that they believed were minimum requirements for the effective use and implementation of flexitime. *Required aspects for effective use of flexitime* were *critical resources* and *effective communication*, which was further seen as a necessity for successful planning and management of projects and work tasks. The need for *individual planning and management* was also consistently mentioned by participants, who provided personal examples of when they had failed to plan and of the consequences they faced as a result. This failure to plan was considered by some participants as disrespectful towards clients, colleagues and managers who would be affected. Consequently, *professional discipline* was cited as a requirement – along with the maintenance of employee *job performance* and the demonstration of maturity and responsibility – for employee access and use.

Communication was consistently referenced as a required aspect. Participants suggested the use of scheduling or planning boards as a means to notify colleagues when working different hours or from different locations. *Employee availability and visibility* was also consistently referenced

as a required aspect, especially critical for the transfer of knowledge/skills and mentorship within the organisation. Those participants with children highlighted the importance of flexible support staff at home available to accommodate the changing work schedules of the employee. The need for control and measurement of employee use of flexitime was apparent, and participants emphasised the necessary development of employee and management guidelines along with a well-defined disciplinary process to manage potential abuse of the policy. Of the requirements mentioned by participants, only critical resources and planning are suggested in previous research, therefore highlighting yet another significant contribution to literature on the use and implementation of flexitime (Mageni & Slabbert, 2005).

3.2 LIMITATIONS OF THIS RESEARCH

Although the present research revealed valuable information on the use and implementation of flexitime, it is also important to note some limitations of the study. One major limitation relates to the research field in terms of the specific organisation used in this research and the specific policy of flexitime offered by this organisation. The present research field only included one organisation, which might imply that the specific themes, including benefits, challenges, consequences and perceptions, identified in this research are organisation and policy specific. A sample including more than one organisation could have provided insight into broader aspects surrounding flexitime. Therefore, although valuable feedback was given to the specific organisation used in this research, caution should be exercised with the generalisation of the findings to flexitime policies used or developed in other organisations. Nevertheless, it is important to note that some of the themes that emerged were already found in previous studies and could serve as indication of some general findings, examples of which were aspects influencing the use of flexitime (Bianchi & Milkie, 2010; Cooke, 2005) and some individual and organisational benefits (Cooke, 2005; Cooke et al., 2009; Mayberry, 2006; Michie & Williams, 2003; Morgan, 2009; White, Hill, McGovern, Mills, & Smeaton, 2003).

Another limitation was that the participants used in this study did not accurately reflect the cultural diversity and context of South Africa, since it was not in the objective of this study to determine any possible differences between employee perceptions across employees from

various cultural groups. Results from samples that are more representative in terms of cultural or language groups in South African might yield different results.

Although the researcher did receive training and coaching regarding the interview process and techniques, the level of skill acquired by researchers remains a limitation worth mentioning. According to Terre Blanche, Durrheim and Painter (2006), explorative research requires a certain skill level in order to extract the detail and richness from participants.

3.3 RECOMMENDATIONS

Notwithstanding these limitations, the current study has important implications for organisations and future research.

3.1.1 Recommendations for the organisation

Organisations wishing to successfully implement or improve on already existing policies can learn from the information and recommendations presented in this research. Firstly, to support employee use, it is recommended that organisations be aware and accommodating of the particular variations in employee use of flexitime, understanding that the use of flexitime is unique to each individual and his/her working preference. Those employees who feel supported and encouraged in their use of the policy are more likely to make use of it, and realise its individual and organisational benefits (Bianchi & Milkie, 2010; Cooke, 2005).

Personal choice and working preference is just one of the factors influencing – in some cases significantly reducing – the use of flexitime as highlighted in the research. Such influencing factors likely to reduce employee use of flexitime should be identified by the organisation and addressed directly. Where the influence of high work pressure and workload is evident, organisations should address this wherever possible by making feasible plans to support employee use of flexitime, examples of which may include redistributing or reducing allocated workload. Where client needs and expectations are reducing employee access to and use of

flexitime, organisations should protect an employee's right to make reasonable use of flexitime, by stipulating and explaining employee use of flexitime to clients upfront.

The level of awareness and knowledge is crucial to control for any negative perceptions and misunderstandings surrounding the policy, especially where such perceptions and misunderstandings are held by those in management or leadership positions (Bianchi & Milkie, 2010; Cooke, 2005). In such cases, the organisation should actively encourage use of flexitime, especially among those in more senior positions with influence and power, whilst highlighting the significant benefits of flexitime for both the employee and the organisation. Campaigns, induction programmes and awareness days are just some examples of how awareness, understanding and effectively employee use of flexitime can be promoted throughout the organisation. Human resource practitioners are recommended to continuously advertise and promote the use of flexitime to both new and existing employees and in doing so slowly revise and update the organisational culture.

Internal infrastructure such as managerial and employee guidelines, stipulations and qualifying criteria for the use of flexitime are critical for the success of such a policy. Organisations are advised to assess employee performance and contribution on outputs, rather than perceived time worked, as a means to reduce any impact of use of flexitime on career development. To discourage potential misuse of flexitime, an associated disciplinary policy and procedure for the control and treatment of those employees misusing this benefit should be developed and implemented where appropriate with urgency. These requirements will not only control and manage the potential misuse of flexitime, but will also increase its perceived fairness as well as support from management, now with more control over employee use.

Organisations are advised to make use of various modes of communication, i.e. boards or intranet facilities to support interaction between employees and their clients and managers when using flexitime – especially with regard to working hours, working locations, progress on tasks and availability for new projects. Such a means of communication is also necessary to support and allow for further planning and scheduling of flexitime in advance. Employees can notify colleagues when they will be working out of office, alternate working hours, etc. so that

deadlines, meetings, projects, and, where necessary, 'stand in' employees can be coordinated accordingly.

3.1.2 Recommendations for future research

With the valuable information gained in this study, it is recommended that research continues with regard to the use of flexitime in South Africa. Further investigation is recommended with regard to the use of flexitime among different gender and cultural or language groups in South Africa (Dancaster, 2006). Such investigations could explore and compare the possible differences with regard to the preference of use among such groups and how they might make use of flexitime differently, as dependent on their particular life situation and home situation or their needs.

Furthermore, although a vast amount of research exists with regard to flexitime as a WLB policy, (Mayberry, 2006), little is known about the implementation and use of other WLB policies in South African organisations (Dancaster, 2006). Future studies could be done to explore other WLB policies currently in use in other South African organisations. Related to this, research should focus specifically on the effectiveness of such WLB policies. Although valuable information was obtained regarding the implementation of flexitime as one WLB policy in South Africa, much work still needs to be done with regard to the measurement of the effectiveness of WLB policies and specifically the effectiveness of flexitime as a WLB policy.

From the results in this study, minimum requirements were proposed for the effective implementation of flexitime. Future studies could use this information and develop intervention studies for organisations for the implementation of their flexitime policies.

A quantitative study could also be undertaken based on the findings in this study, investigating the prevalence of the themes identified in this study within a larger organisation, thus allowing for a broader reflection or view of employee perceptions regarding flexitime throughout an organisation. Quantitative studies, specifically regarding work-life balance and well-being-related outcomes that were found in this study, are recommended.

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APPENDIX

Informed Consent Form

Certificate of Consent

Extraction of Transcription

Work Protocol for Co-Coder

Example of Observation Notes

Role of the Intermediator

INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Consent form for those willing to participate in research titled: **Work-life balance policies: The use of flexitime in a South African organisation.**

Introduction:

The principle researcher is Caroline Downes, master's student in Industrial Psychology at the North-West University. The focus of the research is on flexitime, which is not very common in South African organisations, nor very well researched.

This consent form serves as an invitation to participate in this research. Should you have questions or concerns, please feel free to contact Caroline Downes directly.

Purpose of the Research:

Flexitime is a relatively new concept in the South African workplace and not much research has been done investigating employee experiences of it. This research places focus on the benefits and challenges as experienced by the employee, so that policies may be re-evaluated and altered if and where necessary.

Type of Research Intervention:

This research will involve your participation in an individual semi-structured interview that will take approximately one hour.

Participant Selection:

You have been invited to take part in this research due to your exposure and employee access to flexitime. This will contribute much to the understanding and knowledge of employee use and perceptions thereof.

Voluntary Participation:

Your participation in this research is entirely voluntary. It is your choice whether or not to participate. This choice will have no bearing or impact on your job or on any work-related evaluations or reports. You may change your mind later and stop participating, even if you agreed earlier.

Procedures:

You will be asked to participate in an interview with Caroline Downes. This interview will take place in a comfortable room located at your offices. If you prefer not to answer a particular

question during the interview, you may say so and the interview will move on to the next question. No one else will be present at the interview.

The entire interview will be tape-recorded. However, no one will be identified by name on the tape. The tapes will be kept in a safe, off the premises. The information recorded is confidential and no one else (except Eileen Koekemoer) will have access to the information documented during your interview. The tapes will be destroyed after analysis of data is complete.

Risks:
In general, no personal information is sought. There is a risk that you may share some personal or confidential information by chance, or that you may feel uncomfortable talking about some of the topics. However, we do not wish for this to happen. You do not have to answer any question, or take part in the interview if you feel the questions are too personal or if talking about them makes you uncomfortable.

Reimbursements:
You will not be provided any incentive to participate in the research.

Confidentiality:
Information about research participants will not be shared with anyone outside of the research team. Information collected will remain private. Any information about you will have a number as opposed to a name. Only the researchers will know what your number is and this will not be shared or given to anyone.

Sharing the Results:
Nothing shared in the research will be attributed to you by name. The knowledge attained by the research will be shared with you and your organisation before it is made available to the public. Each participant will receive a summary of the results and there will also be a presentation at your organisation, which will be announced later. Following this, the information will be published so that those interested may learn from the research.

Right to Refuse or Withdraw:
You do not have to take part in this research if you do not wish to do so, and choosing to participate will not affect your job or job-related evaluations in any way. You may stop participating in the interview at any time that you wish. You will also be given an opportunity at the end of the interview to review your discussion/remarks, and you may request to modify or remove portions of those if you do not agree with my notes or if you believe that I did not understand you correctly.

Who to Contact:
If you have any questions or queries, you may ask them now or later. Please feel free to contact Caroline Downes at the following e-mail address: cdownes123@gmail.com.

CERTIFICATE OF CONSENT

I have read the foregoing information, or it has been read to me. I have had the opportunity to ask questions about it and any questions I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction.

I consent voluntarily to be a participant in this study.

Signature of Participant

_____

Date

_____

Day/ Month/ Year

For the Researcher:

I have ensured that the participant accurately understands the information required for informed consent. I confirm that the participant was given the opportunity to ask questions about the research and all the questions asked were answered correctly and to the best of my ability.

I confirm that the individual has not been coerced into giving consent, and that the consent has been given freely and voluntarily.

Signature of Researcher

_____

Date

_____

EXTRACTION OF TRANSCRIPTION

All interviews were transcribed verbatim from the tapes recorded during the interviews. The following is an extraction from one of the transcriptions of an interview conducted.

Researcher: In your organisation you are offered and have access to a flexitime policy. Please explain whether you make use of this policy or not.

Interviewee: Yes, I do

Researcher: OK

Interviewee: Um, I mean I don't have kids or anything like that so I don't use it you know I know working differently is a very set programme. If you want to work nine to three and two hours at home, you need to actually apply for it, so I don't work in such a structured way, but I generally come in at nine and I work until six you know and most evenings as well so it is very much you know and if I need to go to the doctor then I just go when I want and work in the hours. You know if I have a meeting in the afternoon at twelve until two then I am not going to come back to the office afterwards. I will work from home. I find it less disruptive. So in our team it is very accepted, um it is very accepted, like everyone kind of does it. You have quite a few people that have got kids that work say even like eight to two thirty and have a few hours at home or nine until three or nine until four, so there are whole lot of different time arrangements.

Researcher: OK, so you find in your department people are using it quite a lot

Interviewee: Ja, and I mean like sometimes there are people like me who work in Pretoria and then will go like three before traffic is too much, because usually if we go now we are just going to spend two hours in traffic. So I use it a lot, but for the kids mainly I think.
But also sometimes you just need peace and quiet and at the office there are sometimes too many interruptions and then you need to finish reports, which makes it difficult to concentrate. So you work from home. It's a lot quieter and you actually get things done.

Researcher: You get more done?

Interviewee: Because here it's one of those benefits, um you need to be in an office a lot you do need to have that balance, but also you can't like work at home to get things done because you need to be visible. I think it is very much an attitude perception thing as well, so what I always say to people is work if you need to do something that's fine, but bear in mind the perception that you may be creating. It is not like everyone is watching you and going 'oh that persons not here' but if five times out of ten they come and look for you to do something and you are not here, you create the perception that you are not at work so you need to balance that out. So each person needs to take responsibility, to make sure that the work they are allocated is done that's the most important and that they are around and they are available um if they are constantly not available working from home people are going to get irritated. Um. And the management will get irritated or clients, whatever it is. Of course you have to be available on your cellphone, um you know at least within an hour you must reply or call back. So I think it does work well. I think it is that balance zone sometimes people just take it a little bit too far.

Researcher: How do they take it too far?

Interviewee: Well I think they just sometimes say 'OK well I can just work those hours in later at home' and then you never get them online or you send an e-mail and you don't get e-mails back. But you can see a trend like you can see when people aren't working or the work is not getting done. I mean that is what we are judged on and that is what we judge our junior staff on. If the work is not getting done, then you know that they are not working, so they can't say 'Oh I worked for six hours at home'. If the work is not there, then there is no proof. So it needs to be balanced and I think it needs to be managed constantly and I think it is also a personality thing.

Researcher: Personality?

Interviewee: They are like well you know I am not really going to take responsibility. I have got this freedom, so if someone nags me, I will do it; if they don't, I am not going to do it. So it's

important that you kind of see that this type of person needs to be under a lot of pressure, because if they are under pressure they work and if they are not under pressure they kind of slack off. So I think you have just got to look at all those aspects at once. You can't just say sure put in this um policy or initiative in place and everyone will just adhere to it and it will work brilliantly. I think you have got to constantly manage it as well. We have gone through patches where we have said 'Well you know what try and be a bit more visible in the office because we are actually getting comments from people from other departments', which has happened before. There are other departments that don't use the policy and they come and say 'Oh your staff are never here'. So you know you have got to balance it as well and you have got to be aware that you can create these perceptions too. Um. Especially if other persons in other departments aren't using it, they won't understand it you know.

Researcher: Why would they not be using it?

Interviewee: There are. I have heard of other departments that aren't in fact. I think it is the directors. So as much as we are sure anyone can use it there are certain directors that don't really want it to be used and they probably just put a lot of pressure on their staff to be in the office.

Researcher: OK. So the directors really influence the extent to which it is used?

Interviewee: Ja Ja, I definitely think so you know. I mean our main director uses it and you know he is always supportive. He says 'Do whatever you need to do as long as the work is being done'. He doesn't really care where you are doing it from you know, so the responsibility is on us to do it. You get some directs who want to see you or everyone here at eight and leave at five, and if they are not there then something is wrong, so it's not always easy. Um.

WORK PROTOCOL FOR CO-CODER

The data analysis includes the following:

- Field notes for each interview
- Transcriptions of each interview (original and translated transcriptions)
- Initial themes identified from transcriptions

Analysis protocol

During the coding process, the following is done as part of the data analysis:

- To obtain an overall picture of the context, thoroughly read interviews several times.
- Condense the actual text into meaningful units (sentences or paragraphs) that emerge from the responses of the participants regarding their experiences.
- Sort or categorise all the meaningful units into major themes.
- From the broad themes, explore and summarise similar smaller themes in order to obtain various sub-themes.

The following steps are also used during the data analysis and coding process:

- Defining the recorded units
- Defining the coding categories
- Testing the coding on a sample of text
- Assessing the accuracy of the sample coding
- Revising the coding rules
- Coding of all the text

EXAMPLE OF OBSERVATION NOTES

<u>Interview Notes</u>

Participant: 1A

Date: 3 November 2010

Place: Offices in Sandton, Johannesburg, South Africa

The following are observed during the course of the interview:

Methodology: Interview conducted in a comfortable and quiet boardroom with comfortable chairs, although the air conditioner and a vacuum cleaner could be heard. The participant signed the consent form and as evident from body language and responses throughout the interview, was open, friendly and relaxed. At times it was evident that the participant was aware of the tape recorder. Eager to participate, the participant was engaged and spoke in depth, although at times spoke on things that were not so important. The interview lasted for 34 minutes, but was interrupted briefly by a tea lady.

Personal: The researcher felt anxious about the interview especially since it was the first one. The participant helped to calm the situation by being relaxed, and soon the researcher was able to relax too. The researcher was stumbling over words at first, anxious not to lead the participant's responses and at times felt frustrated after missing opportunities and cues of the participant that should have been probed more closely. The researcher at times struggled to guide the participant to the desired information and was frustrated when the interview went off the topic.

Theoretical: Themes that stood out included the impact of the policy on productivity, client and managerial influence and the impact of flexitime on personal time. Some specific challenges that came out in the interview were around planning and younger staff using the policy incorrectly.

ROLE OF THE INTERMEDIATOR

The role of the intermediator is to assist with the identification of employees willing to participate in the research and to support the researcher in the coordination of the interview date, time and location with the participant. The intermediator also assists with the explanation of the objective of the study and the research process to participants with questions or merely interested in the research.

The inclusion criteria determined that a participant should:

(1) have access to flexitime offered by the organisation;

(2) be willing to participate in the research (be willing to give written consent) after being informed about the purpose and procedures of the research;

(3) be willing to be interviewed by the researcher;

(4) be prepared to have his or her interview tape-recorded.