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# Redesigning, Redefining Work

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## Abstract

The demands of today's workplace—long hours, constant availability, self-sacrificial dedication—do not match the needs of today's workforce, where workers struggle to reconcile competing caregiving and workplace demands. This mismatch has negative consequences for gender equality and workers' health. Here, the authors put forth a call to action: to *redesign* work to better meet the needs of today's workforce and to *redefine* successful work. The authors propose two avenues for future research to achieve these goals: research that (a) builds a more rigorous business case for work redesign/redefinition and (b) exposes the underlying gender and class dynamics of current work arrangements.

## Keywords

flexibility, work–family, gender, work redesign, ideal worker

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In 1930, economist John Maynard Keynes famously predicted that in 100 years, Europeans and Americans would work just 15 hr/week. The basis for his prediction: Unparalleled technological advancements were dramatically increasing productivity, which Keynes (1930) believed would translate into fewer work hours. For Americans, the opposite has happened. From 1979 to 2007, employees' average yearly work increased by 181 hr—an increase of over 10%—largely because Americans are working more weeks per year (Mishel, 2013). *Overwork* (working more than 50 hr/week) has become especially pronounced among professional workers (Cha, 2010).

Despite technological advances, workplaces demand increasing amounts of time. The *ideal worker* is expected to put work first and be perpetually available, from early adulthood straight through to retirement (Moen & Roehling, 2005; Williams, 2000). Professional and managerial jobs often require long hours, intense emotional engagement, and constant availability (Blair-Loy, 2003; Perlow, 2012). Moreover, many workplaces reward *face time*—hours in the physical workplace and visible busyness (Kelly, Ammons, Chermack, & Moen, 2010; Williams, Blair-Loy, & Berdahl, 2013).

While professionals increasingly overwork, those in low-paid hourly jobs have trouble getting enough hours of work (Jacobs & Gerson, 2004). Hourly jobs are too flexible, but not in a way that benefits workers. Many hourly workers face *just-in-time scheduling*, where schedules change often and sometimes at a moment's notice (Lambert & Waxman, 2005). Both professional and hourly work presents challenges for working caregivers. For professionals, *work-family conflict* results from long work hours and rigid career tracks. For hourly workers, it is inflexible jobs with unstable schedules that leave many workers one sick child away from being fired (Williams, 2006).

Under intense cultural pressures for *intensive mothering* (Hays, 1998), mothers spend just as many hours per week on childrearing activities today as they did in the 1960s, when considerably more mothers were home full time (Bianchi, Robinson, & Milke, 2006). While mothers still perform more childcare than fathers, married fathers' time in primary childcare tripled, between 1985 and 2008, to 7.8 hr/week (Bianchi, 2011). The growing elderly population puts additional pressure on the *sandwich generation* caring for both children and aging relatives (Aumann, Galinsky, Sakai, Brown, & Bond, 2010). As they are less able to hire help and more likely to be in single-parent households, low-income Americans have higher loads of childcare, elder care, and care for

disabled family members than more affluent Americans (Williams & Boushey, 2010).

Americans find themselves caught between these two inconsistent social ideals: the ideal worker norm, which enshrines the employee ever-available for paid work, and the norm of intensive parenting, which enshrines the parent who is ever-available for their children. As the *greedy institutions* of work and family demand increasing time, work–family conflict has grown, with men now reporting similar rates of conflict as women (Aumann, Galinsky, & Matos, 2011; Galinsky, Aumann, & Bond, 2011). Workers increasingly express a desire for fewer time and place restrictions on work (Moen, Lam, Ammons, & Kelly, 2013), but a mismatch persists between the needs of today’s labor force and the structure and expectations of today’s workplace. This mismatch has negative consequences for gender equality and workers’ health.

## Implications for Gender Equality and Health

The rise in overwork is especially problematic for gender equality. Because women, especially mothers, continue to do more housework and childcare than men (Bianchi, 2011), women are less likely to put in extremely long work hours that professional jobs increasingly demand. Cha (2010) found that 14% of professional women overwork, compared with 38% of professional men. The rise in overwork is also problematic because overwork itself is increasingly rewarded. People who work over 50 hr/week now earn a premium on the hours they work over 40 (Cha & Weeden, 2011). But prior to the mid-1990s, hours over 40 were actually compensated at a lower rate. Consequently, overworkers—more men than women—have higher earnings both because they work more hours and because their additional hours are now compensated at a higher rate.

With employers’ growing expectations for overwork, many mothers are pushed out of lucrative male-dominated jobs and into lower paying, female-dominated jobs—or out of the labor market entirely (Cha, 2013). Perhaps, not surprisingly, when family demands are highest, many two-parent, heterosexual couples revert to a neo-traditional pattern, with mothers shifting to part-time work or temporarily leaving paid work while husbands work longer hours (Moen & Roehling, 2005). Highly trained professional women pay a steep price for even a brief absence from the labor force (Goldin & Katz, 2008; Rose & Hartmann, 2004).

Furthermore, mothers' workplace commitment is often viewed skeptically—a perception that leads them to be judged less desirable for hire and promotion and more deserving of lower pay (Correll, Benard, & Paik, 2007). Yet, mothers who attempt long hours are seen as bad mothers, and as more hostile, devious, and selfish than mothers who do not (Cuddy, Fiske, & Glick, 2004; Epstein, Seron, Oglensky, & Saute, 1999), leading to fewer organizational rewards (Benard & Correll, 2010).

Long hours, rigid schedules, and work–life conflict also are associated with negative health outcomes, including mental and physical health problems and lower engagement in healthy behaviors such as exercise and sleep, balanced meals, and limited alcohol and tobacco use (e.g., Allen & Armstrong, 2006). Longitudinal studies show work–family conflict and long hours predict later absences from work due to illness (Sabbath, Melchior, Goldberg, Zins, & Berkman, 2011), and risk of heart disease, depression, and anxiety, particularly for women (Virtanen, Ferrie, Singh-Manoux, Shipley, Stansfeld, et al., 2011).

## Efforts to Change Workplaces: Limited Success and Impact

Political will to reconcile the competing demands of work and family has proven limited. After 40 years of lobbying, the only national legislation passed was the 1993 Family Medical Leave Act (FMLA), which guarantees some workers 12 weeks of job-protected, unpaid leave for a new child, to care for a sick family member, or for a personal illness (29 U.S.C. 28). However, not only does the FMLA cover only 60% of the American workforce (Williams, 2010) but also noncompliance with the law is widespread (Armenia, Gerstel, & Wing, 2013).

Workplace–workforce mismatch is typically conceptualized as a *flexibility* problem and addressed chiefly through voluntary *flexible work arrangements*, including flextime, telecommuting, reduced schedules, and part-time options. The 2012 National Study of Employers, a survey of U.S. workplaces with 50 or more employees, found that 77% of employers allow modest accommodations (i.e., allowing some employees to shift their starting and stopping times) and 63% allow at least some employees to work from home occasionally (Matos & Galinsky, 2012). But fewer employers provide more substantial accommodations, such as daily shifts in starting and stopping time (39%) or regular remote work (33%). Arrangements that substantially reduce work hours have decreased in recent years; large employers have cut

back on temporary shifts to part-time schedules (41% in 2012 vs. 54% in 2005), availability of sabbaticals (29% in 2012 vs. 49% in 2005), and temporary leaves for family or personal responsibilities (52% in 2012 vs. 73% in 2005; Matos & Galinsky, 2012).

The availability of these accommodations varies; small establishments, workplaces with a largely hourly, low-wage, or nonprofessional workforce, and highly sex-segregated workplaces are less likely to provide flexible options (Davis & Kalleberg, 2006; Deitch & Huffman, 2001). Other employers impose tenure requirements for using flexible accommodations, excluding many hourly, low-wage workers who tend to have higher turnover rates (Lambert, 2009). The majority of employees value flexibility, but far fewer have it: while 87% of employees report that flexibility would be an *extremely important* or *very important* consideration in a new job, only 36% have *a lot* or *complete* control over their schedules in their current job (Tang & Wadsworth, 2010).

Even when employers officially offer flexible work accommodations, two problems limit their impact. The first is limited access. Flexible work arrangements are usually negotiated in response to an individual worker's request and at the manager's discretion (Brescoll, Glass, & Sedlovskaya, 2013; Kossek & Distelberg, 2009). Employers view these *one-off* accommodations as a fringe benefit or as a reward for deserving employees and tend to reserve them for high performers or employees who already have leverage in the labor market (Kelly & Kalev, 2006).

Second, a *flexibility stigma* often accompanies the use of these flexible work policies. Many workers hesitate to seek accommodations or take family leaves because they fear the consequences (Blair-Loy & Wharton, 2002; Epstein et al., 1999). Their concerns appear warranted. Workers who use flexible work practices or take leaves have slower wage growth (Coltrane, Miller, DeHaan, & Stewart, 2013; Glass, 2004), earn fewer promotions, have lower performance reviews (Judiesch & Lyness, 1999), and are perceived as less motivated and dedicated (Rogier & Padgett, 2004) than workers who work full time, on-site, without interruption. Experimental evidence shows that the stigmatization of flexible workers contributes to their lower rewards (e.g., Leslie, Manchester, Park, & Mehng, 2013). These penalties are larger with longer family leaves and periods of working flexibly (Glass, 2004).

Scholars are devoting more attention to identifying where flexible arrangements are available, and when and how workers use them successfully. This research underscores the importance of universal availability of accommodations, instead of individually negotiated arrangements (Ryan & Kossek, 2008), as well as support from

supervisors and managers (Hammer, Kossek, Bodner, Anger, & Zimmerman, 2011). Powerful managers and effective team dynamics can facilitate and limit the negative consequences of flexible arrangements (Blair-Loy & Wharton, 2002; Briscoe & Kellogg, 2011).

One recent initiative, the *Results-Only Work Environment* (ROWE), originally implemented by Best Buy Co., Inc. and later taken to other organizations, allows all employees to work whenever and wherever they want as long their work gets done. Valuing results rather than face time changed the cultural definition of a successful worker by challenging the notion that long hours and constant availability signal commitment (Kelly et al., 2010). ROWE increased employees' control over their work schedule and improved work-life fit (Kelly, Moen, & Tranby, 2011), while reducing turnover for Best Buy (Moen, Kelly, & Hill, 2011). ROWE brought health benefits as well, positively affecting employees' sleep duration, energy levels, self-reported health, and exercise, while decreasing tobacco and alcohol use (Moen, Kelly, & Lam, 2013; Moen, Kelly, Tranby, & Huang, 2011).

Nonetheless, changes like ROWE have been rare, and most organizations continue to favor traditional one-off flexible work arrangements over those that affect all employees. Perhaps the most puzzling and urgent questions now facing researchers are: Why has organizational change been so limited? What kinds of research can help spur organizational change?

## **How Might Research Spur and Sustain Organizational Change?**

At least two areas of research hold promise. The first is to build a more rigorous business case that identifies new ways of inciting organizational change. The second is to delve into the class and gender dynamics that cement time norms in place, making organizations extraordinarily resistant to change. In the following, we provide a blueprint for this research agenda and describe how the five articles in this volume contribute to it.

The business case for workplace flexibility has been studied for over two decades. Research has documented that the current workplace-workforce mismatch is associated with high attrition and absenteeism (Lambert, Haley-Lock, & Henly, 2010), and health insurance costs (Disselkamp, 2009), as well as lower productivity (Disselkamp, 2009) and engagement (Swanberg & James, n.d.). Yet, the business case has had limited success in inspiring sustained social, cultural, or organizational change. Advocates (including one coauthor) have frequently

presented the business case for change only to have it dismissed with statements such as, “my business is different; flexibility would never work here.” A crucial question is why the business case has failed to persuade.

One reason may be a lack of perceived rigor. Little *causal* evidence exists about the effects of structural and cultural changes on the alleviation of work–family conflict or on firms’ bottom line. The quasi-experimental study of Best Buy’s ROWE is one exception. Researchers recently implemented a similar intervention at an information technology firm using a true field experiment and found that it increased employees’ control over their schedules, improved supervisors’ support for family and personal life, and reduced work–family conflict (Kelly et al., 2014). Other examples of experimental research include the evaluation of a telecommuting program at a large Chinese call center, which found that people worked more productively at home than in the workplace (Bloom, Liang, Roberts, & Ying, 2013), and the *Predictability, Teaming and Open Dialogue* (PTO) intervention at the Boston Consulting Group, which increased productivity and organizational commitment (Perlow, 2012). More experimental studies within workplaces would strengthen the business case.

The article by Leslie Perlow and Erin Kelly in this volume compares ROWE and PTO to identify a *work redesign* model that they contrast with the individual accommodation model, where managers allow some workers flexibility. Individual accommodations inadvertently reify standard work patterns by implicitly affirming full-time, continuous paid work as the norm. Employees granted permission to deviate from that norm often feel obligated to work more intensely and accept penalties associated with flexible work as a legitimate trade-off (Kelliher & Anderson, 2010). Work redesign models, by contrast, involve all employees. Perlow and Kelly describe how ROWE and PTO orchestrated a self-conscious, collective process of reevaluating everyday work practices, interactions, and expectations, to challenge the accepted wisdom that businesses work best when staffed by the ever-present, ever-available worker.

Christin Munsch, Cecilia Ridgeway, and Joan Williams identify another novel strategy for organizational change. They show that the flexibility stigma is in part the result of *pluralistic ignorance*, where people think others have more negative views of workers engaged in flexible schedules than they themselves hold. As a result, they tend to enforce what they perceive to be widely held norms (even if they

personally do not share them). Munsch et al. show that the flexibility stigma can be lessened by exposing pluralistic ignorance.

In addition to fresh approaches to organizational change and the business case, sustained attention is needed to the class and gender dynamics that undergird these time norms. The article by Andrea Davies and Brenda Frink presents a historical analysis of the origins of the ideology of separate spheres and the ideal worker norm in the United States, highlighting the intertwining of time norms with masculinity and class. For example, during the Great Depression, the Kellogg Company reduced its standard workday from 8 hr to 6 hr to avoid layoffs. Men who attempted to work longer hours were derogated as *work hogs*. The ideal worker was momentarily redefined in response to a national crisis—real men did not take work away from other men. Yet, by the end of World War II, the 6-hr workday was deemed *women's work*, and a new rhetoric emerged about the importance of full-time work for men.

The article by Julie Kmec, Lindsey Trimble O'Connor, and Scott Schieman builds on prior studies that explore the gender dynamics behind work–family conflict, by documenting a bias against mothers at work. Specifically, they study how perceptions of negative workplace treatment are affected by working part-time or dropping out of the labor force—in other words, working *anything but full time*. They find that mothers, but not fathers, perceive worse treatment when they work anything but full time following the birth of a child, highlighting the gendered dimension of the flexibility stigma associated with anything but full-time work.

Because mothers continue to perform more childcare than fathers, the accepted wisdom has been that work–family issues are primarily women's issues. Yet, they are men's issues, too. For men, performing as the ideal worker is a key way of enacting manliness. As one Silicon Valley engineer reported, "He's a real man; he works 90-hour weeks. He's a slacker; he works 50 hours a week" (Cooper, 2000, p. 382).

The message that the current organization of work negatively affects men, as well as women, is not always welcome. When Padavic and Ely (2013), originally engaged to address a firm's inability to retain women, found that men and women were equally dissatisfied with long work hours and had equal levels of turnover, the firm's leaders rejected the analysis on grounds that it did not focus explicitly on women. Unable or unwilling to consider the idea that long work hours were also negatively affecting men, they resisted undertaking full-scale work redesign as the

solution (Padavic & Ely, 2013). Instead, they retained their original assessment: Women's lack of advancement at the firm stemmed from their difficulty balancing work and family, while men were largely immune to such difficulties.

Less fully explored than gender are the class dynamics that underlie work devotion, and the work–family conflict it fuels. In the past, elites signaled social status by keeping short bankers' hours; today, the working rich display their extreme schedules (Cooper, 2000; Hewlett & Luce, 2006). As Blair-Loy (2003) describes, the *work devotion schema* mandates that professionals demonstrate commitment to work by making work the central focus of their lives and being unencumbered with family responsibilities. In this way, devotion to work becomes a way of enacting class status (Williams, 2010).

The case study of academic scientists at a research-intensive university by Erin Cech and Mary Blair-Loy in this volume highlights how work norms are fueled by class and gender identity, not productivity. Compared with other professionals, academic scientists have more control over when they do their work, making enactment of workplace devotion through long hours of face time especially unnecessary. Yet, Cech and Blair-Loy find that a flexibility stigma exists even in this environment: Faculty who are parents and those who use family leave were judged as less committed to their jobs. Faculty who report a flexibility stigma in their department are more likely to say they intend to leave the university, even if they are not personally affected by the stigma. This confirms that flexibility stigma is not just a *mother's problem* and is counterproductive for the university.

The importance of gender and class suggests a new take on the business case that focuses not only on high turnover among women but also on how masculine enactment of work devotion jeopardizes work quality and organizational productivity (Padavic & Ely, 2013; Perlow & Kelly, 2014; Williams, 2010). Far from helping achieve core business goals, overwork is often inconsistent with them, as dramatized by Cooper's (2000) depiction of Silicon Valley engineers pressured to work around the clock in organizations that reward poor planning, or Perlow's (1999) engineers whose workplace rewarded individual heroics rather than teamwork. In these examples, professional workers demonstrated their dedication by pulling all-nighters at work or coming in at an instant's notice, even though the crisis mentality this created undermined quality, creativity, and productivity.

If overwork is not about productivity, what *is* it about? The enactment of cherished identities plays a central role. People who have missed their favorite uncle's funeral or their daughter's softball playoffs for

work are tremendously invested in defending the logic that has given their lives shape (Lazear, 2001). To the extent that time norms are intertwined with gender, class, and other identities, even those who might benefit from organizational change may resist it.

No doubt spurring organizational change will entail *both* fresh approaches to the traditional business case *and* deeper analysis of the way current time norms are etched into gender and class-based identities. This volume identifies two divergent directions for future research with the hope that they will converge to create new, more effective tools for redesigning and redefining work.

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