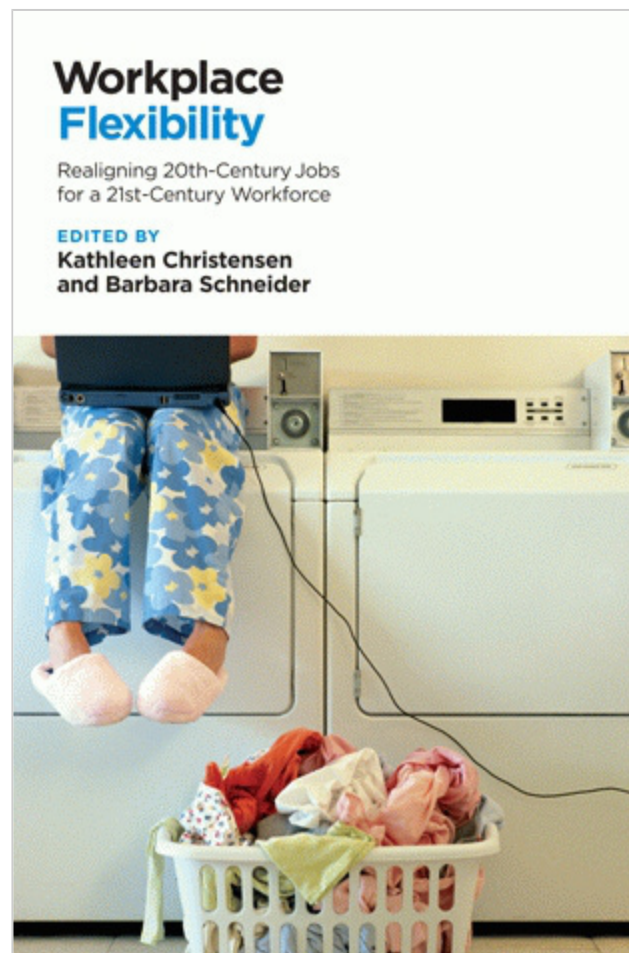


The future of flex: recommendations for improving workplace flexibility

Workplace Flexibility: Realigning 20th-Century Jobs for a 21st-Century Workforce. Edited by Kathleen Christensen and Barbara Schneider. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2010, 408 pp., \$24.95 paperback.

As the U.S. workforce has become more diverse, with more dual-earner households and single-parent, single-earner households, as well as an increased number of older couples nearing joint retirement, “today’s one-size-fits-all workplace with its rigid linear career path is outdated.” So say Kathleen Christensen and Barbara Schneider, coeditors of the volume *Workplace Flexibility, Realigning 20th-Century Jobs for a 21st-Century Workforce*. Arguing that the workplace needs to be more flexible in order to meet the needs of today’s workers, Christensen and Schneider nonetheless recognize that there is no easy solution to the problem. Still, it is an important issue that needs to be addressed if workers are to have better balance between the demands of life and those of work and if employers want to attract and maintain a capable and productive workforce. Any successful workplace flexibility program has to be a “win-win” proposition for both employees and employers.

The book comprises 16 essays written by experts in disciplines ranging from anthropology and sociology to economics and demography. The essays make the case that greater workplace flexibility will benefit today’s diverse workforce. Several describe how working parents balance their time between family demands and work responsibilities and how the former affect the parents’ careers. Voluntary workplace flexibility programs implemented by private sector employers are highlighted in a few of the essays. A number of essays look at voluntary employer and state initiatives that enhance



Margaret R. Kavanagh

kavanagh.margaret@bls.gov

Margaret R. Kavanagh is an economist in the Office of Field Operations, U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

workplace flexibility in Europe, Australia, and Japan and discuss how these policies compare and contrast with those in the United States.

Christensen notes that the book was compiled prior to the start of the Great Recession, and she recognizes that there were a number of unknowns facing working families regarding workplace flexibilities during the recession. For example, would workers who still had jobs be working more or fewer hours? Could we expect to see a change in the number of voluntary part-time employees? How would any change in the number of hours worked affect family responsibilities? Would businesses need to cut back or eliminate workplace flexibility programs?

The introductory chapter describes five categories of work situations that influence when and where work gets done and that are amenable to resolution by workplace flexibility policies: short-term time off, full-time scheduling flexibility, reduced hours for employees who need to work fewer than 40 hours per week or less than a full year, extended time off, and career exit and reentry ramps with episodic time off. In the United States, only extended time off is mandated by federal law, through the Family Medical Leave Act (FMLA).

Time and space constraints preclude a discussion of all of the essays, so I shall focus on those I found most interesting. Suffice it to say, however, that all of them had relevant and useful information to impart to interested readers.

The first essay, “The Long Reach of the Job: Employment and Time for Family Life,” authored by Suzanne M. Bianchi and Vanessa R. Wight, examines how married mothers and fathers in a two-parent family with children under the age of 18 divided their time between work, childcare, household chores, and leisure activities. The parents were asked about the stresses they face when trying to balance all of these responsibilities. The Current Population Survey and the American Time Use Survey (each conducted by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics), as well as the National Survey of Parents (funded by the Sloan foundation), were the data sources for this essay. The results confirmed what we already know: (1) With only so many hours in a day, time devoted to one activity means less time for another activity. (2) Men who work long hours are hesitant to reduce their hours because they fear that their earnings and future career opportunities will be compromised. (3) Working mothers feel that they are multitasking a good portion of the day, especially with regard to balancing family responsibilities. (4) Working mothers get less sleep and have fewer hours of leisure than stay-at home mothers. (5) A couple’s personal time suffers when both spouses are working outside the home.

As a government employee, I was especially interested in the essay “Workplace Flexibility for Federal Civilian Employees,” by editor Christensen herself, Matthew Weinshenker, and Blake Sisk. The federal government has been promoting certain types of workplace flexibilities since the early 1970s, and this essay looks at them. According to the authors, the Bureau of Indian Affairs became the first agency to implement flextime, back in 1972. The Social Security Administration followed with a similar flextime pilot program. Today, most federal workers have at least some control over their work schedule; options such as compressed workweeks, flexible start and stop times, and teleworking (also known as flexiplace) are common. Nonetheless, Christensen, Weinshenker, and Sisk argue that the federal government is behind the private sector when it comes to offering more permanent part-time work and other forms of flexibility, such as phased retirement. For example, the United States is the only industrialized nation without a federal law that provides for universal paid sick days, parental leave, or paid vacations in the private sector. Although the FMLA was the first federal law that granted certain employees up to 12 weeks of job-protected leave to care for family members or themselves, the fact that

the leave is unpaid prevents most working families from requesting leave under the act because taking unpaid leave would result in undue financial hardship.

Increasing workplace flexibility is an issue not just in the United States: other countries are facing similar challenges. Janet C. Gornick's essay, "Limiting Working Time and Supporting Flexibility for Employees," examines government workplace flexibility policies that were in effect in 2002 in six European Union (EU) countries: Belgium, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Sweden, and the United Kingdom. The policies in these countries limit the number of weekly and annual hours worked and offer more flexible work options (with flexibility defined by the worker). Gornick discusses the difference between the standard workweek in the six countries and that in the United States. It is common knowledge that the standard workweek for Americans is longer than it is in most EU countries. Also, U.S. workers earn less vacation time than our European counterparts do. Another difference is that part-time workers in the six EU countries are entitled to pay and benefits on a prorated basis with the rates of full-time workers whereas part-time U.S. workers often receive low wages and little or no benefits. Gornick questions why work–family policies in the United States are so different from those in these six countries. She offers several reasons, including the so-called mommy wars (public debates about potential detrimental consequences of maternal employment), the idea that the "American political culture valorizes hard work and devalues leisure," and the fact that, unlike several of the EU countries, the United States hasn't had to deal with declining fertility rates.

In "Flexible Employment and the Introduction of Work–Life Balance Programs in Japan," Machiko Osawa notes that Japan is facing two demographic phenomena: a shrinking population (due to declining fertility rates) and an aging society. Together, these phenomena have resulted in a labor shortage. To address the problem, government officials have stressed reversing women's declining labor force participation as a way of overcoming the shortage. However, the employment structure in Japan makes it difficult for women with children or with eldercare responsibilities to work full time. If they do work, it is often in a nonstandard work arrangement with reduced job security, low pay, and poor or no benefits. Businesses use these nonstandard work arrangements as a way to compensate for the high labor costs associated with regular, more senior workers. But this practice has a twofold effect: not only are working women penalized because they are unable to commit to full-time work, but once a working mother has left the workforce to raise a child, she is "effectively excluded from good jobs thereafter." If women are to balance work and family responsibilities, it becomes necessary to implement more flexible work arrangements. Observing that Japanese corporations had failed to provide flexibility for full-time workers, the government pushed to create a more flexible workplace. The government's efforts included legal, education, and financial incentives.

The final essay, penned by editors Christensen and Schneider, reiterates the idea that both employees and employers will benefit from a more flexible workplace. Employees who have flexible work options are able to respond more positively to the demands of work, education, and family. Implemented properly, flexible workplace policies will attract highly competent workers and will produce a motivated, dedicated workforce. Christensen and Schneider conclude by stating that it is necessary for scholars, policymakers, and business leaders to work together to solve the problem of balancing work and family responsibilities that so many workers face today.

Overall, this book is well organized and interesting to read. The essays are well researched and informative. A few of them are a bit dense with numbers, and one in particular would be difficult to understand without some statistics background. The book is aimed mostly at research-oriented readers, although a business owner or a human resources practitioner who is looking for examples of workplace flexibility programs would find some of the chapters useful. Would I recommend the book to someone interested in workplace flexibility initiatives? Indeed I would, because it lays a good foundation for where we were in the early 2000s and what has changed since then.