

Flexible Working in the Public Sector - a Case of Inflexibility: Senior Managers' Experiences

Abstract

Purpose: The public sector is often considered the vanguard in terms of the availability and promotion of flexible working arrangements (FWAs). Despite this, little is known about how senior managers in the public sector engage with FWAs. This paper addresses this gap, reporting on a number of issues, including the reality of FWAs, the existence of a flexibility stigma and whether this is gendered, and the drivers influencing the uptake of FWAs.

Design/methodology/approach: Theoretical insights of flexibility stigma from the literature and data from semi-structured interviews with senior managers in the Northern Ireland Civil Service explore the realities of FWAs at this level.

Findings: The findings indicate a decoupling between the rhetoric and reality of FWAs with few senior managers availing of such arrangements. We also identify a complex web of issues which constrain senior managers' agency in shaping a positive culture of FWAs at senior management level in the Civil Service, including an inherent resistance to flexibility, a lack of visible role models and negative perceptions around progression. Findings also indicate deeply held perceptions among senior males and females that availing of FWAs are associated with a flexibility stigma. These perceptions were confirmed by the small number of senior females with caring responsibilities who were availing of FWAs.

Practical implications: The paper provides senior managers and human resource practitioners with insights into the difficulties associated with wide-scale FWA availability and use at senior levels of the Civil Service.

Originality/value: The findings of the study offer valuable insights into the experience of senior managers in the public sector as they engage with FWAs. The study therefore contributes to the limited literature in this area.

Keywords Flexible working arrangements, Public sector, Civil Service, Flexibility stigma, Senior managers

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

The issue of work-family conflict has received considerable attention in the literature over the last two decades (Byron, 2005; Shockley et al, 2017). Describing a situation in which the demands or pressures from the work and family domains are incompatible with each other (Greenhaus and Beutell, 1985), work-family conflict has been associated with a range of negative outcomes including burnout, a lack of job satisfaction and occupational well-being (Blanch and Aluga, 2012; Dishon-Berkovits, 2014). Flexible working arrangements (FWAs) are increasingly being used by organisations as a means of enabling workers to reconcile work and family commitments (Cooper and Baird, 2015; Chung and van der Lippe, 2020). Defined “as any one of a spectrum of work structures that alters the time and/or place that work gets done on a regular basis” (Workplace Flexibility 2010, 2006, p1), FWAs enable employees to exercise control over either the timing (i.e., when) or location (i.e., where) of their work (Kelly *et al.*, 2011). With respect to flexibility over the timing of work, FWAs provide for “flexibility in the scheduling of hours worked” (e.g., flexitime, compressed hours) or “flexibility in the amount of hours worked, such as part-time work and job-shares” (Workplace Flexibility 2010, 2006, p.1). Flexibility over place of work, on the other hand, relates to the physical location of work, such as working at home or at a satellite location (Houghton *et al.*, 2018). While this type of flexibility has become more prevalent recently due to the COVID-19 pandemic, this study focuses on flexibility of timing only.

Despite an increase in the provision of FWAs in organisations, uptake by employees has been demonstrated to be problematic and simply having such arrangements in

place does not mean that employees will avail of them (Stone and Hernandez, 2013; Williams *et al.*, 2013; Williams *et al.*, 2017; Chung, 2020). Additionally, reflecting their complexity, mixed messages emanate from the literature regarding the benefits of FWAs. Thus, while some studies identify benefits to workers using FWAs (Kim and Wiggins, 2011), others find that those who avail of them are stigmatised and penalised (Williams *et al.*, 2013). Furthermore, while some studies report that the stigma surrounding FWAs predominately affects women, others identify that it affects both sexes (Rudman and Mescher, 2013). It is also claimed that the problems associated with FWAs affect lower-level workers since senior workers have more control over their work schedules (Kossek *et al.*, 2005) and that senior roles cannot be accommodated on a flexible basis (Williams *et al.*, 2013). An explanation for the inconsistencies reported is provided by Williams *et al.*, (2013) who claim that flexibility stigma differs for stratified classes of work and the triggers for and consequences of stigma differ across classes (Reskin and Padavic, 2002). Therefore, the findings of a study on a particular class may not be generalisable to the working population.

While a number of studies provide insights on the realities of FWAs and the existence of a flexibility stigma within private sector organisations (e.g., Onken-Menke *et al.*, 2018), fewer studies investigate the experiences of public sector workers at senior levels (Hall and Atkinson, 2006; McDonald *et al.*, 2008; Colley, 2010), specifically those employed in the Civil Service, a significant public sector employer¹. This is surprising as the public sector is perceived to be at the forefront of the promotion of FWAs and a better work-life balance (Kim and Wiggins, 2011). This study addresses

¹ The Civil Service is the permanent administration structure underpinning governments. It does not change when different political parties are elected to government. It is a significant employer worldwide, representing anywhere between 8% to 92% of all public sector employment (OECD, 2021, p.103).

this gap by drawing on data from 50 interviews with senior managers employed in the Northern Ireland Civil Service (NICS). In doing so, the study contributes to the literature by reporting on the realities of FWAs at senior levels in the public sector. The study has a number of aims. First, to provide insights into the realities of FWAs for senior managers in the public sector. Second, to investigate if a flexibility stigma exists in the public sector, including whether it is a gendered issue. Finally, to provide insights on the drivers influencing the uptake of FWAs at senior levels of the public sector. Insights from this research should inform human resources (HR) policymaking in respect of the design of public sector senior roles to ensure they are fit for purpose for today's workforce and that the principles of equality and fairness are not inadvertently being undermined. The remainder of the paper is structured as follows. In the next section we review the literature on FWAs and flexibility stigma, including that related to gender. We then present a discussion of the research methodology before outlining the study's findings. Finally, we draw conclusions and identify implications of the research.

Flexible Work Arrangements and Flexibility Stigma

Flexible working has been shown to be beneficial in terms of contributing to a better work-life balance, increased productivity, reduction in workplace stress and improved job satisfaction by addressing work and personal life conflicts (Kim and Wiggins, 2011; DeSivatte and Guadamillas, 2013; Chung 2019; Chung and van der Lippe, 2020). A body of research has investigated the drivers which impact the uptake of FWAs. Drawing on Kelly and Kalev's (2006) notion of a decoupling of policy and practice, Cooper and Baird (2015) reported a "significant implementation gap" (p.568) between flexible working policy and practice within two large Australian private sector

organisations, potentially as a result of low levels of knowledge about such policies. Flexibility stigma is a common explainer (Williams *et al.*, 2013), however, other influences are observed. Since the tone for the success of organisational policies is often set at the top, evidence suggests that organisational and managerial (or supervisory) support plays a key role in shaping access to FWAs (Colley, 2010; Kossek *et al.*, 2010; Sweet *et al.*, 2014; Sweet *et al.*, 2017). Organisation and managerial support raises awareness of the business benefits of FWAs and how such arrangements can enhance employee retention, commitment and productivity, (Anderson and Kelliher, 2009; Colley, 2010; Sharma and Yadav, 2019). It can ensure that FWAs are available to everyone at all levels, that there is awareness of the successful implementation of policy and that flexible workers should not be disadvantaged when it comes to promotion (Anderson and Kelliher, 2009).

Studies also point to the importance of how flexible working policies are implemented and the extent to which they are supported by a strategic planning process (Tomlinson and Gardiner, 2009; Sweet *et al.*, 2014; Zafari *et al.*, 2019). For example, drawing on interview data with managers in UK private and public sector organisations, Tomlinson and Gardiner (2009) reported that where the strategy on FWA takes “a traditional employee-centred personnel management approach” (p.683) that highlights benefits to employees only, then minimal organisational support is evident. In contrast, where a clear strategic business rationale for FWA policies exist, managers are more likely to actively support implementation. Therefore, a key driver in the creation of “a cultural environment that increases the permissibility to request and use FWAs” (p.117) is an appropriate strategy (Sweet *et al.*, 2014).

HR departments have also been found wanting, with a lack of flexibility in job design identified as relevant to the effective implementation of FWAs. For example, Cooper and Baird (2015) found a reluctance among supervisors to reconsider workloads when women move from full-time to reduced hours, with the result that this creates “significant workload gaps” (p.579). This subsequently results in unrealistic workloads, underperformance and the potential for reprimands. The issue of job redesign is particularly problematic with respect to senior roles due to the nature of the role. For example, while senior managers in an Irish call centre afforded themselves a certain amount of informal flexibility, they argued that their jobs could not be undertaken on a part-time or reduced hours’ basis (Murphy and Doherty, 2011). Similarly, senior managers in an Australian insurance company argued that the need to be constantly visible inhibited the use of FWAs at senior levels (Williams *et al.*, 2017). Limited scope for job redesign was also noted in a study on United States (US) industries, wherein some managers identified support for role redesign to reduce workloads, with reduced hours and pay that enabled the individual to remain on a particular career path, but only when the worker was a high performer, difficult to replace, flexible to their employers’ commitments and the arrangement was not disruptive (Kossek *et al.*, 2016). A consequence of these perceptions is that there is a lack of role models, for example, Williams *et al.*, (2017) reported that only one out of 14 senior managers interviewed availed of FWAs. Therefore, the lack of role models who avail of FWAs, particularly males employed at senior levels, is seen as problematic for their wider use in organisations (Chung and van der Lippe, 2020).

Even where no formal flexible working policy exists, managers are perceived as the ‘gatekeepers’ of FWA use (Ryan and Kossek, 2008; Sweet *et al.*, 2017) with significant

influence over whether informal FWAs are permitted (Wharton et al., 2008; Golden, 2009). Given that managers have high levels of discretion to decide who gets access to such arrangements (Kelly and Kalev, 2006), managers' attitudes to FWA have thus been argued to be as important as the existence of formal policies themselves (McNamara et al, 2012). Some studies have examined influences on managers attitudes to FWAs. For example, drawing on two surveys of US managers within a large financial activities company, Sweet et al., (2017) reported that managers' attitudes to FWAs are malleable and can be influenced over time. Specifically, managers with greater experience of supervising workers availing of FWAs "have more favourable attitudes regarding FWAs and less concern with negative consequences" (p.66). Furthermore, increasingly favourable attitudes and use of FWAs were found where managers' peers supported FWAs. Sweet et al., (2017) conclude that their findings "offer support for advocacy of FWAs on the basis of a positive spiral of affirmation that connects experience and attitudes towards FWAs" (p.50).

Implicit hostility towards flexible workers has also been uncovered by the literature. To that end, studies have identified the existence of a 'flexibility stigma' which "reflects deep cultural assumptions that work demands and deserves undivided and intensive allegiance" (Williams *et al.*, 2013, p.211). A flexibility stigma reflects a belief that managers and co-workers perceive flexible workers as less devoted to their work (Williams *et al.*, 2013), lacking in organisational commitment (Leslie *et al.*, 2012) and creating additional work for those not working flexibly (Chung, 2020). Flexible workers are thus stigmatized and more likely to face discrimination from managers or co-workers (Williams *et al.*, 2013) as they deviate from employers' 'ideal-worker' norms

of long hours and total commitment to the organisation (Acker, 1990). Consistent with this view, studies have reported that flexible workers have lower performance evaluations (Wharton *et al.*, 2008), lower wages (Glass, 2004) and fewer promotions (Cohen and Single, 2001). Furthermore, Dick (2004) reported that conflicting needs and expectations inevitably occur between meeting the demand for part-time schedules and managing operations, with the result that managers find themselves “between a ‘rock and a hard place’” (p.316).

Gender

Flexibility stigma is reported to be stronger when workers seek FWAs for family reasons, relative to other reasons such as health (Williams *et al.*, 2013). Consequently, it is claimed that FWAs play a significant role for women as they are more likely than men to shoulder family caring responsibilities (Connell, 2005; Chung and van der Horst, 2018). While a number of studies have reported on the gendered nature of the flexibility stigma, they report mixed results. For example, studies have found strong evidence of a flexibility stigma for women using FWAs to manage family responsibilities in professional or executive roles (Stone and Hernandez, 2013; Blair-Loy, 2003) and low-paid work (Dodson, 2013). Professional and executive level women also report feeling disillusioned and considered leaving work when using FWAs (Stone and Hernandez, 2013). Evidence of a flexibility stigma for men is also reported in the literature. While Coltrane *et al.*'s (2013) study found strong support for a flexibility stigma for men taking career breaks or reducing their working hours, their findings indicated that this stigma is relatively gender neutral. In contrast, Vandello *et al.*, (2013) confirmed a stronger flexibility stigma for men availing of FWA who are viewed as gender deviants. Finally, Rudman and Mescher (2013) reported that males

who requested family leave suffered a femininity stigma, resulting in organisational penalties such as a lack of promotion and other opportunities.

In other research examining flexibility stigma, Munsch (2016) used a controlled experiment and tested a variety of attitudes towards FWAs. Drawing on a sample of 656 US adults, participants viewed employees who made requests for FWA more negatively than those that did not. Interestingly, while both men and women who requested FWAs for childcare reasons were viewed more favourably than those making FWA requests for other reasons, “men who made flexplace [e.g., working from home requests for childcare reasons were perceived as more respectable, likeable, and committed than women who made the same request” (p.1585).

Further insights into flexibility stigma are provided by more recent research by Chung (2020) who argued that institutional and gender normative contexts are important drivers in influencing access to FWAs. She stated that the division of labour in the UK is such that women, when compared to men, are expected to “devote their time to childcare and household tasks” (p.525). Established divisions of labour have, however, consequences for how FWAs are viewed within organisations and impact on who is likely to suffer from flexibility stigma. Using data from the UK’s Work-Life Balance Survey, Chung (2020) demonstrated that flexibility stigma is gendered among employees, with men more likely to discriminate against flexible workers and women more likely to be the subject of such discrimination. Furthermore, she found that mothers in particular are more likely to have lower chances of promotion or experience negative career consequences as a result of availing of FWAs. Interestingly, in another study using data from 27 European countries, Chung (2019) reported no gender

differences for those accessing FWAs. However, she did report the existence of a women's work penalty in female-dominated sectors across Europe.

Methodology

This paper reports on 50 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with senior managers employed in the NICS. The public sector is an interesting area of study as it is often seen as a model employer with a culture of embracing equality values (Lewis *et al.*, 2018). Such values are supported by highly developed equality policies and practices (Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development, 2007), including monitoring equality outcomes, FWAs and family-friendly practices (Chatterji *et al.*, 2011). However, having FWA practices in place does not mean all personnel can avail of them. For example, some of Colley's (2010) respondents reported that there was "no consideration of flexible arrangements for [higher level] positions" (p.226) in a public agency context. Moreover, in their study of the Irish Civil Service, Russell *et al.* (2017) found there was limited access to FWAs at the highest grades, with only 1% of senior personnel availing of them. They also found that those at the highest grades worked long hours, with some working 12 to 14 hours a day, at weekends and in the evenings, all of which made it hard to utilize FWAs.

The interviewees were employed across a number of central government departments in the NICS, including those with responsibility for education and learning; enterprise, trade and industry; agriculture and rural development; justice; finance; infrastructure; and communities. Interviews were conducted with senior managers, both males (20) and females (30), representing some 11 separate departments/organisations which are part of the NICS. Senior managers are defined in the current study as those

employed in the Senior Civil Service² (SCS) (including Permanent Secretaries, grades 2, 3 and 5: representing 35 of our interviewees) and those in the SCS pipeline, employed at grades 6 and 7 (representing 15 of our interviewees) (Northern Ireland Assembly, 2011)³. Interviewees were identified by means of snowball sampling, making use of known contacts within the population of interest to recruit subjects together with the identification of potential interviewees from an earlier survey. Interviewees had an average of 26 years of service, reflecting the longevity of their career in the Civil Service as a result of a well-established career hierarchy providing promotion opportunities to increasing levels of senior management. Whilst it is difficult to state with precision the number of subordinates supervised by each interviewee, those employed in the SCS and at grades 6/7 represent 1% and approximately 13% respectively of the entire Civil Service⁴. At the time of interview, only three of the interviewees were availing of FWAs (two at SCS grades and one in the pipeline at grade 7): two females, one on term-time working and the other on reduced hours, and one male availing of flexible retirement. A further six interviewees had previously availed of FWAs in their careers but relinquished these when promoted to senior management.

Interviews lasted between 60 and 90 minutes, were recorded and transcribed. Institutional guidelines in terms of ethical approval, data protection, permission to

² The term 'Senior Civil Service' is uniformly used throughout OECD countries, denoting "groups of men and women [who work] in positions of great influence, ... they are also in a position to influence the organisation culture and values ... and ... have a positive effect on the performance, motivation of satisfaction of their teams" (OCED, 2016, p.84).

³ Grade 2, 3, 5, 6 and 7 are alternatively referred to as Director General (grade 2), Director (grade 3), Director/Assistant (grade 5), Deputy Director (grade 6), Policy Manager (grade 7). Equivalent private sector positions for permanent secretary/grades 2 to 7, would include Chief Executive/Managing Director, Director, Assistant Director, Manager (Civil Servants – Grades & Roles, http://www.civilservant.org.uk/information-grades_and_roles.html; Hughes and Wilson, 2005).

⁴ Source: <https://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/explainers/grade-structures-civil-service>

record and transcribe were followed. Analysis was undertaken as a two-stage process: consistent with Crabtree and Miller (1999), a set of a priori (pre-empirical) codes were derived based on the research questions which reflected the extant literature. A detailed thematic analysis was then conducted in line with Braun and Clarke's (2006) six phase process, which involved the researchers familiarizing themselves with the data, generating initial codes, and searching, reviewing and defining themes. Two researchers worked independently on generating and agreeing themes from the interview data, thus addressing reliability (intercoder agreement) (Creswell and Poth, 2018). Consistent with Braun and Clarke (2006), validity was assessed by considering whether the themes accurately reflected "the meanings evident in the data set as a whole" (p.91). The data analysis was supported by NVivo.

Results and discussion

The analysis of interview data identified a number of key themes relevant to FWAs at senior levels of the Civil Service: the rhetoric and reality of FWAs; flexibility stigma perceptions of those availing of FWAs; and explanations for a lack of uptake of FWAs.

The rhetoric and reality of FWAs at senior levels

Without exception, all of the departments/organisations where interviewees are employed had a range of official FWA policies in place, providing flexibility in the timing and number of hours worked for all staff, irrespective of their position. Despite this, interviewees consistently suggested a decoupling between the rhetoric and reality of FWAs at a senior level. This decoupling was evident from the data as only three of the interviewees were availing of FWAs (two women and one man). In addition, most of the interviewees suggested an environment in which senior managers found it

extremely difficult to avail of FWAs, despite their 'apparent' availability at all levels: "*Notwithstanding all the flexible working alternatives that exist, ... it's very difficult for staff to get access to those at senior levels*" (male); "*Not at senior level*" (male), and "*the higher up you go the less common it [flexible working] is*" (male). Females expressed similar views: "*... job-share, part-time, reduced hours ... absolutely none [at senior levels] are availing of it*" (female) with one woman even suggesting that FWAs are not applicable to senior levels "*...FWAs don't apply at Senior Civil Service levels*". This may help to explain why only three of the interviewees availed of FWAs.

Of the two SCS interviewees currently availing of FWAs, the male, indicated that his flexible retirement arrangement was rare: "*I would be the only grade ... in the Civil Service who is partially retired*". The other interviewee, a female employed at grade 5 (SCS) and currently availing of a term-time FWA, commented that she didn't "*think at grade 3 level the service is ready for it [flexible working] yet*". This view was confirmed by the other female interviewee availing of a FWA. She commented that she had "*to be flexible*", that in the past when an issue arose she relied on family support from her husband, who as a result of working from home, was able to "*fill in those emergency kind of unforeseen gaps*". The low numbers of senior managers availing of FWAs is potentially indicative of a lack of guidance around flexible working practices within the Civil Service, including that provided by the HR function: "*[senior managers] aren't getting a lot of guidance [from HR] on what's acceptable, what isn't, they aren't getting a lot of guidance on what works*" (male). Reflecting a lack of guidance and involvement, a few interviewees indicated that the HR function needs to do more in this regard: "*There is a need to look at more flexible working in terms of accommodation ... and HR policies*" (male).

While FWAs are largely absent at the senior levels of the NICS, there was widespread recognition that informal flexibility occurred at this level and is deemed necessary for both sexes. To that end, more of the interviewees, both males and females, stated that they availed of informal FWAs: “...*there’s an informal flexibility*” (male); and “*the potential is there to balance that [family commitments] in a more informal way than having a need for formal working arrangements*” (female). When compared to formal FWAs, informal arrangements are operationalised on an ad hoc basis: “*that’s all ad hoc arrangements*” (male). However, such an approach to flexibility was not necessarily supported by the HR function: “*my head of HR said she didn’t like the fact it [flexible working] was informal, she wanted a formal arrangement*” (male) and has potentially implications for ensuring equity of opportunity for all senior managers.

Flexibility stigma perceptions of those availing of FWAs

Consistent with flexibility stigma, an additional theme emerging from interviews was that of negative perceptions of senior managers who avail of FWAs. A common perception was that senior managers who use FWAs are not as committed to the organisation: for example: “*there’s a ... perception that people who want to job-share ... because they’ve got commitments that they, ... may be counting their hours ... they’re not giving their all to the organization*” (female). This interviewee further indicated that senior managers reinforce negative perceptions around FWAs at senior levels: “*There’s a difficulty there sometimes ... some senior managers ... whether they be male or female, may be giving that kind of negative feedback ... not directly but in terms of their attitude [to FWAs]*”.

Irrespective of gender, interviewees supported the general view of a stigma related to the use of FWAs at senior levels, with senior managers identifying that FWAs were more difficult to manage, *“I think at times I get frustrated [with FWAs] because this does create management difficulties”* (male); unworkable, *“Job sharing at Senior Civil Service level, I don't see how you could make that work”* (male); required those availing of FWAs to have team work skills, *“job share is more difficult ... you have to get two people who complement each other”* (female); and were ineffective and costly to the organisation, *“It's less efficient so if we accept that practice [flexible working], we accept that it's going to cost us more and be less efficient”* (male). Indeed, a female senior manager, indicated that senior workers in her organization were hostile to FWAs: *“It is definitely the case that [senior management] don't like this nonsense of part-time working ... they just think it is a flipping nuisance. They would do away with it probably, ...because it is inconvenient”*.

For the few senior managers availing of FWAs at the time of interviewing (three), mixed results were reported. While the senior male manager availing of flexible retirement reported no stigma, the SCS female interviewee availing of term time working reported a flexibility stigma: *“as a part-time worker in the SCS you feel a little bit uncomfortable ... I perceive that people think, she's not [got] the same commitment because she's not there all the time, and you think people are reacting or judging in a particular way because you have to leave at 5 o'clock to pick the kids up, because you have to leave that meeting early, because you can't commit to some things because of it ... You definitely do [feel guilty] ... You feel uncomfortable about how others see you, I suppose and judge you. ... it's unusual to be a part-time worker. So you are different from the norm. If it was a more common thing I don't think you would feel as self-*

conscious about it'. Within the SCS pipeline, additional evidence of flexibility stigma for females with caring responsibilities was referred to by a grade 5 male interviewee who indicated that two of his reports (at grade 7 level) felt guilty about reducing their hours: *"two females, both are on flexible regimes ... [for one] I dropped her hours further, but she is feeling guilty for doing that and I'm trying to support her in not feeling guilty about it"*. In contrast to the above negative experiences, the second female interviewee referred to earlier, who was availing of a FWA, did not report a flexibility stigma due to caring responsibilities. This interviewee, employed in the SCS pipeline (grade 7), talked about her experience in the context of a very supportive organisation with a female leader who understood the *"pressures of trying to hold down a job and look after children while keeping your career moving in the right direction"*.

Explanations for the lack of uptake of FWAs

A number of reasons were proposed by interviewees to explain the lack of uptake of FWAs by senior managers, despite the rhetoric that they are available to 'all'. These included perceptions around the culture and nature of senior managers' jobs in the NICS, a lack of role models availing of FWAs, little or no formal approach to job redesign and negative perceptions around progression.

A number of interviewees identified a culture of inherent resistance to flexibility: *"at the senior levels I think there is an innate resistance to flexible working ... the default position of most senior staff is, we couldn't do that, rather than an attitude of how can we make this work?"* (male). This thinking appeared to emanate from a generally held expectation among interviewees that senior posts were full-time positions. Supporting this, job advertisements for senior managerial positions typically emphasised that the

role is 'full-time': "*there's a perception that you do need to work full-time [at more senior levels]*" (female). Males also concurred with this view: "*I'm afraid that post could never be part-time*". Only one interviewee referred to a senior management job (at grade 5) being advertised on a part-time basis. However, this was "*about five years ago*" (female).

The sheer 'busyness' of senior positions reported by interviewees further reinforced the perception that senior positions can only be considered in a full-time context: "*If you are working at the manager level you are expected to do more hours and be more of a presence*" (female); and "*... Senior Civil Service posts are far too busy, we couldn't possibly allow it to be a part-time post*" (male). Indeed, it was felt that even a full-time post had insufficient hours to meet the needs of the role. For example, a male commented that senior civil servants are "*putting in more hours than they are contracted to put in ... at the senior levels people are working all the hours that God sends*" (male) and that FWAs were just not compatible with "*the expectations on you [at senior levels] because of the work pressures*" (male).

A lack of visible role models was also frequently mentioned as an explanation for the low uptake of FWAs at senior levels of the NICS: "*At the more senior level I'm not aware of anybody of either gender having a formal FWA*" (female) and "*if there's no one at the top of an organisation doing some of this flexible working stuff, then why would you expect to think anyone is serious about it*" (male). Among the interviewees, there was only one example provided of a supportive role model, namely that related to the female in the SCS pipeline currently availing of reduced hours. In this case, the interviewee was supported by a female role model, who having "*been a mother*"

herself had an understanding *“that there are skills that she wants to keep within the organisation rather than make life so difficult that there are choices that means you have to leave an organisation or to make a choice between children and family”*.

An additional explanation for the lack of uptake of FWAs at senior levels was difficulties related to their implementation and a lack of job redesign, resulting in little or no equivalent reduction in workload. When asked if active job redesign takes place to facilitate FWAs at senior levels, a female replied: *“Absolutely not ... There doesn't seem to be anybody who is looking much broader... how you could help people”*, while another commented that job redesign *“doesn't exist”* (female). Despite this, there was widespread recognition among senior managers that more could be done to address job redesign: *“I don't think that the Civil Service has given any serious examination to job redesign ... We haven't done a lot of that ... we have a long way to go”* (male); *“I think we need to give a bit of thought to job redesign”* (female); and *“... we aren't doing enough about job redesign from the top down ... I think that we could do a lot more and a lot better”* (male) and *“those are the kind of issues [job redesign] you would expect the HR people to address”* (female).

The issue of job redesign was raised by a number of interviewees in the context of different types of FWAs. For example, *“how do I get over the fundamental difficulty of having the responsibility for a job which is the size of X and yet when I do it in 28 hours [reduced hours], I'm putting less in but I've still got the same size of job”* (female). In addition, a female senior manager, whilst positive about job-sharing, identified difficulties with its practical implementation: *“Flexible working would work if it was job-share where you could split it [the job]. I would like to be down to a four-day week, but*

I'm sitting struggling thinking how am I going to make this. Because I have to come up with the solution". Moreover, another male senior worker commented: "... *job-sharing is one of the hardest arrangements to manage in terms of reduced hours, because usually you're relying on two people agreeing an arrangement that has to sustain over a period of time*". Other views supported the difficulty around job sharing: "*it's left to that individual seeking a job share partner*" (male) and *if you get two people who gel it can be brilliant ... provided they have a defined job remit*" (female). The haphazard approach to job redesign identified in the context of job sharing was clearly problematic and highlighted a lack of engagement between senior managers and the HR function regarding the redesign of full-time roles to job-share roles that affected two or more workers. Rather, the onus appeared to be on the senior manager(s) to find a solution that will work. Some interviewees also questioned the benefits of FWAs as there was no formal monitoring of their effectiveness in the NICS: "*Nobody is monitoring how effectively these [FWAs] are being implemented, there's a tick box thing to say we have a [flexible working] policy*" (female). This reinforced the overall sense of a lack of formal strategic policy to ensure FWAs were working properly.

As a consequence of the above issues, interviewees firmly believed that progression to more senior managerial levels was not possible for those availing of FWAs: "*It would not be considered the norm as you go up through the grades for people to work part-time*" (male) and "*If you were on reduced hours working, you would be under a lot of pressure to move up to full-time in order to get promotion ... if you say that you can only accept a promotion which is part-time then your chances of actually getting a post are negligible*" (female). Moreover, a female availing of a FWA at the SCS level suggested that such arrangements were now more difficult to obtain: "*It is much more*

difficult to get part-time working at my grade now [grade 5]. I know a lot of people, mainly women, that have been turned down. There is a view, I don't agree with it, that this grade ... needs to be full-time". This interviewee pointed to a direct link between lack of promotion and flexibility stigma due to perceptions that senior workers should have the characteristics of an 'ideal' worker.

Some interviewees also explicitly stated that colleagues had not been promoted as a result of availing of FWAs: for example, "... a grade 5 [was] overlooked for promotion because she worked four days a week" (female) while another stated "I do know ones that have been told you can't have that promotion unless you work full-time" (female). Finally, a comment from the female availing of a FWA in the SCS underlined real concerns about progressing to more senior levels but having to relinquish flexibility to do so: "... I would have misgivings. If I were successful [in a recent promotion round], I would obviously be asking the question, I would like to continue this work pattern. I suspect that once I ask that question, if I was on a [successful] list I would move to the bottom of the list, or I just wouldn't get placed at all". This interviewee clearly felt disadvantaged because of her FWA and considered that she would be further disadvantaged in the promotion round at the time of interviewing if she raised this as an issue.

Conclusions and Implications

The current study makes a contribution to the literature in two important ways. First, we make a theoretical contribution to the flexibility stigma literature by emphasising the central role that senior managers play in culture and the uptake of FWAs by senior managers in organisations (Figure 1). Our model predicts that when attitudes to FWAs

in managerial positions are hostile, path dependent practices continue and a positive culture and an uptake of FWAs is unlikely to arise. However, when attitudes to FWAs are supportive, strategies, policies and practices will be implemented which will over time increase the uptake of FWAs and support a more positive organisational culture so that flexible working becomes more permissive.

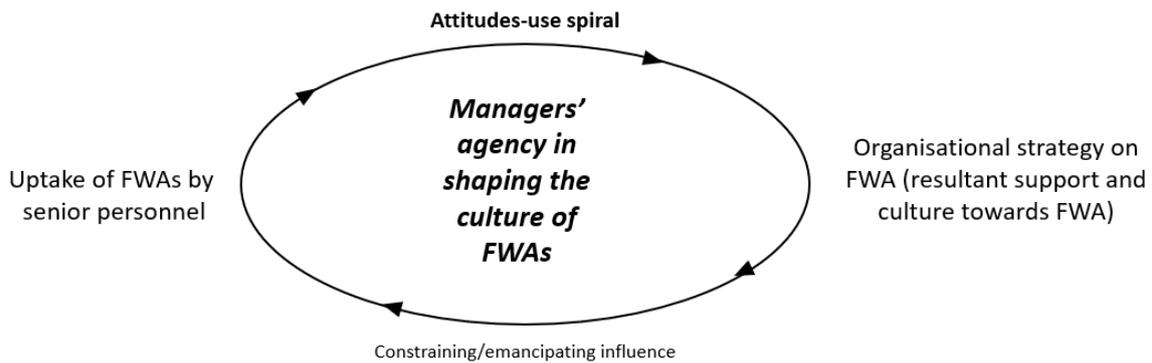


Figure 1: Managers' Agency in Shaping the Culture of FWAs

Second, the study contributes to the limited literature which has explored FWAs in a public sector context, specifically the Civil Service. This setting has an established hierarchy of progression where managers have longevity in terms of their career. The findings provide an overwhelming picture of one in which formal FWAs are largely absent at senior levels, consistent with that reported by earlier studies (Brainine, 2003; Hall and Atkinson, 2006; Russell *et al.*, 2017). While there was widespread recognition of the need for informal flexibility (supporting Hall and Atkinson's (2006) findings), the decoupling between formal policy and practice found in the current study supports earlier research conducted in the private sector that there is an FWA implementation gap (Kelly and Kalev, 2006; Williams *et al.*, 2013; Cooper and Baird, 2015).

The low numbers availing of FWAs and the decoupling between policy and practice evidenced is, we argue, reflective of a complex web of issues which impact on senior managers' agency in shaping the culture of FWAs in the Civil Service (see Figure 2).

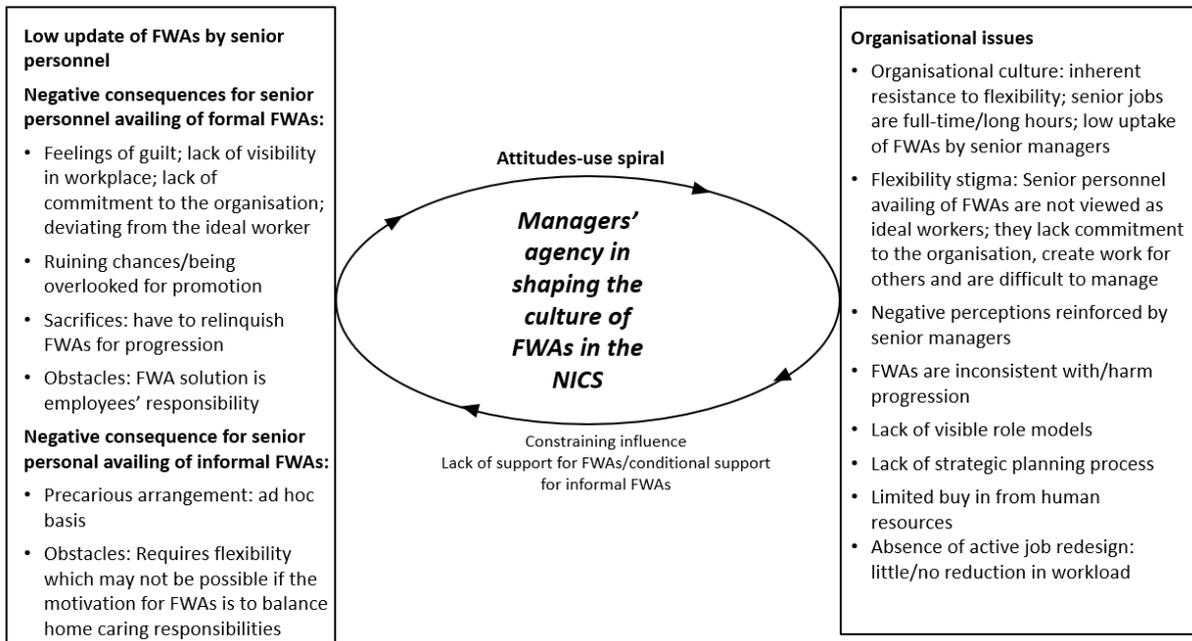


Figure 2: Managers' Agency in Shaping the Culture of FWAs in the NICS

Senior managers appeared to have little agency in supporting their peers. Consequently, there is some evidence of a flexibility stigma which is particularly notable for females with caring responsibilities, consistent with earlier studies (Stone and Hernandez, 2013; Williams *et al.*, 2013). Specifically, the two females who were availing of FWAs experienced feelings of guilt for not being available on a full-time basis. They perceived that others felt that they were less committed to the organisation and as a result did not feel part of the 'team'. This is consistent with the findings reported by McDonald *et al.*, (2008) regarding a lack of visibility in the workplace. Those availing of FWAs also experienced negative perceptions of their chances of

further promotion within the Civil Service career hierarchy, with some indicating that they 'fear' having to relinquish FWAs should progression occur.

Additionally, reflecting a lack of strategic planning and support from both senior management and the HR function, managers wishing to avail of a FWA are themselves responsible for finding solutions that work, making it extremely difficult to implement flexible working in practice. This acts as an obstacle and serves to devalue employee worth as HR resources are available for other typical roles. This practice serves to reinforce a culture of a flexibility stigma within an organisation. It also confirms a tick box approach to FWAs, whereby an organisation discloses that it provides FWAs, but there is decoupling from reality as there has not been buy-in from those in a position to influence culture and no resources are allocated to its implementation. This finding has implications for policymakers and employers, irrespective of organisation type. It suggests that, to successfully implement FWAs, employers need to allocate resources when introducing FWAs to their organisation. It also suggests that HR departments need training on support and attitude towards FWAs and on how to redesign roles.

While managerial support for formal FWAs was limited, informal support was more widespread in facilitating informal flexibility, albeit on an ad hoc basis. However, given that senior managers are the 'gatekeepers' of FWA use (Ryan and Kossek, 2008; Sweet et al., 2017) with significant influence over whether informal FWAs are permitted, coupled with a lack of involvement from the HR function, this highlights the potentially problematic nature of ensuring equitable access at the informal level. This finding has implications for policymakers when designing regulation on gender equality

and employers when designing and implementing FWA policies. Given that women are more likely than men to seek FWAs, lack of support for FWAs may actually be a form of gender discrimination. This study highlights awareness of this unintended consequence.

The findings of the current study further suggest that managers' agency is constrained by a number of organisational or structural issues which negatively impact on the ability of the Civil Service to achieve wide-scale FWA availability and use at senior levels (Sweet et al., 2014). Interviewees appeared complicit in the creation of a culture of inherent resistance to flexibility, with deeply held views that senior jobs are only feasible on a full-time basis due to the busyness of such positions (Russell *et al.*, 2017). Managers, both males and females, also had overwhelmingly negative perceptions that availing of FWAs are associated with a flexibility stigma at senior levels. In contrast, however, to previous studies (Chung, 2020), the current study did not find any evidence that men discriminated against flexible workers or that women were more likely to be discriminated against. However, this finding may reflect the fact that only three out of 50 interviewees were availing of a FWA. It was noted though that a number of women had given up their FWAs when they became senior managers, hence consistent with the findings of Williams et al. (2017) there are few role models. This finding suggests a self-fulfilling prophecy that results in path-dependent practices. A key implication of this finding for organisations and policymakers is that change will not arise unless there is an external intervention, such as regulation.

Senior managers also perceived that their peers availing of flexibility demonstrated a lack of organisational commitment and represented a departure from the 'ideal' worker who deviated from what is considered a 'normal' career path (Acker, 1990; Murphy and Doherty, 2011; Stone and Hernandez, 2013; Williams *et al.*, 2013; Munsch, 2016; Chung, 2019, 2020; Chung and van der Lippe, 2020). Worryingly, the current study found that senior managers were complicit in reinforcing negative perceptions of FWAs, which suggests the existence of a negative 'attitude-use spiral' (Sweet *et al.*, 2017, p.52). Perceptions that progression while availing of FWAs were likely to negatively impact or harm one's chances of promotion added further to the negative spiral, as did a lack of senior managers acting as visible role models of FWA use and an absence of active job redesign policies. The existence of a negative spiral between FWA and attitudes found in the current study is in contrast to the "proposition commonly advanced within the work-family field that the merits of FWA use become self-evident to managers once FWAs are given a chance to succeed" (Sweet *et al.*, 2017, p.52).

While there was some recognition among senior managers in the current study of their role in supporting FWAs (e.g., greater involvement in job redesign), we found little in the way of evidence pointing to the agency of senior managers in shaping the culture of FWAs. Rather, the majority of interviewees appeared to accept the current FWA 'reality' and the inevitability of the 'status quo' in this regard. Further, evidence from the current study pointed to the existence of a traditional employee-centred management approach to FWAs which is perceived to benefit employees only (Tomlinson and Gardiner, 2009). Reflecting this, we found no evidence that a strategic approach, championed by either senior management or the HR function, is in place to support

the achievement of wide-scale availability and use of FWAs at senior levels (Sweet *et al.*, 2014). The lack of agency among senior managers in positively shaping the culture of FWAs was, we argue, heavily influenced by the low numbers availing of FWAs and thereby acting as positive role models. The complex web of issues reported, including negative perceptions of FWAs and the potentially harmful impact on promotion opportunities, served to further reinforce the low numbers who use “use workplace flexibility at their peril” (Williams *et al.*, 2013 p.210). The ‘status quo’ observed within the current study may, however, also have been reflective of a general resistance to change and an unwillingness to learn new ways of doing things, both of which have been recognised as characteristic of the Civil Service and problematic in facilitating meaningful change (Baxendale, 2014). As a result of our findings, we argue that wide-scale FWA use at senior levels in the Civil Service is viewed as not permissible (Sweet *et al.*, 2014).

The findings of the current study have implications for any organisation that aims to attract and retain senior employees. It would seem from the experiences of the three senior managers who were availing of FWAs that, due to the hostile culture towards FWAs at senior level, FWAs could be likened to a double-edged sword. FWAs did enable interviewees to better balance working and their other commitments, which resulted in them continuing in a senior role. However, availing of FWAs had a negative impact on their basic psychological needs, in particular, their sense of belonging in the role (i.e., being an ideal worker (Acker, 1990)) and in the organisation (i.e., believed that they were viewed as being less committed than others (Williams *et al.*, 2013)). Lack of fulfilment of this need is likely to cause unhappiness, which has negative consequence for productivity and may even lead to withdrawal from their role.

Therefore, creating a culture that supports FWAs is important for all employers, who wish to attract and retain the best people for senior positions.

The experiences reported in the current study strongly suggest that if FWAs at senior levels are to gain greater acceptance, senior managers' attitudes need to change. The finding that managers' attitudes to FWAs are malleable over time, with more positive attitudes developed in response to greater experience of supervising peers availing of FWAs, provides some encouragement in this regard (Sweet et al., 2017). However, in an extension to the prior literature, the findings of this study suggest that resistance to change is strong and is reinforced by the actions of individuals who despite supporting FWAs, have sacrificed their arrangement to become senior managers. These individuals conformed to the 'ideal worker' stereotype and organisational norms. The reasoning behind this acceptance is something that requires investigation in future studies.

To promote change, senior managers need to be cognisant that favourable attitudes regarding the positive consequences of FWAs can be achieved when their peers support FWAs. The positive attitude-use spiral observed by Sweet *et al.*, (2017) is thus critical to achieving wide-scale FWA availability and use at senior levels in the public sector. However, where attempts to positively influence attitudes to FWAs remain elusive, senior managers need to acknowledge the complex issues that constrain their agency in shaping a positive flexible working culture. It is hoped that the issues identified as constraining agency in the current research go some way to informing "the types of policies and programs that might convince managers to be stronger advocates for, and supporters of, FWAs" (Sweet *et al.*, 2017, p.52).

The findings of the current study also have implications for the HR function, not only within the Civil Service, but more broadly in organisations where a positive attitude-use spiral to FWAs is not observed. The findings confirm a culture in which senior positions are best suited to an 'ideal worker'. This culture is out-dated in today's society, particularly in the context of COVID-19 and its implications for work schemas. While engrained workplace norms are difficult to change, the COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in a seismic shock to work practices, thereby providing a unique opportunity for the HR function to contribute to shaping a positive culture in respect of FWAs. The HR function needs to recognise that the existence of formal FWA policies in themselves are not enough. They need to be actively engaged in providing systematic solutions that are supported by senior managers, including redesigning senior roles to suit job-share or part-time roles that fairly allocate workload and responsibility, and in doing so emphasise the benefits of FWAs to senior management. The default resistance to change reported in the current study should be challenged. If FWAs are to gain greater acceptance at senior levels, a radical shift in mindsets is needed to move away from a '*can't do*' culture to one which exemplifies '*how can we promote FWAs for all?*'. It is imperative that talent is not lost in organisations where established hierarchical career progressions opportunities exist. Thus, standard practice should be that the design of senior roles is flexible, with one option for full-time applicants and another for part-time or job-share applicants. The HR function, as a strategic partner, has a key role to play in ensuring that FWAs are available at senior managerial levels. To do this, they need to work closely with senior managers to ensure that FWAs become a reality.

While the current study has provided important insights into the realities of FWAs and the issues constraining senior managers' agency in shaping the culture of flexible working in the public sector, it has limitations. The study focussed on the NICS only, therefore the findings may not be reflective of the wider Civil Service, or of other public or private sector organisations where established hierarchical career progression opportunities exist. Accordingly, future research could investigate the factors impacting on senior managers' agency in supporting flexible working in other Civil Service contexts, and in other public sector and potentially private sector organisations to provide further insights.

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