

The Impact of Utilizing a Flexible Work Schedule on the Perceived Career Advancement Potential of Women

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This study examined whether a woman working a flexible schedule would be perceived as having less career advancement potential than a woman on a regular schedule. Participants reviewed a packet of materials simulating the personnel file of a female employee in an accounting firm who was seeking promotion from manager to senior manager. Results indicated that participants perceived the female employee on the flexible schedule as having less job-career dedication and less advancement motivation; there was no difference in perceived capability. Implications of these results for implementation of alternative work arrangements are discussed.

Flexible work arrangements have been in use for a number of years. One reason why many have advocated their use is because of the belief that they help employees manage better the conflict between work and family (Almer, Cohen, & Single, 2003; Cohen & Single, 2001; Hill, Hawkins, Ferris, & Weitzman, 2001; Meyer, 1997). This conflict has received much attention in both the popular press (for example, Conlin, 2000; Hammonds, Furchgott, Hamm, & Judge, 1997; Morris, 1997) and the academic literature (for example, Ernst & Ozeki, 1998; Grant-Vallone, 1998; Roman & Blum, 2001; Secret & Sprang, 2001; Senecal, Vallerand, & Guay, 2001; Wallace, 1999), particularly over the last decade. One result of this is that organizations have sought to become more "family-friendly." Because flexible work arrangements are a common component of many family-responsive human resource policies (Glass & Estes, 1997; Glass & Finley, 2002; Grover & Crooker, 1995), their popularity has increased.

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From an organizational perspective the primary impetus for being more family-friendly is to attract and retain qualified employees. However, since the passage of the Family-Medical Leave Act in 1993, there has been additional pressure to become more family-friendly on moral or ethical grounds (Cohen & Single, 2001). The basis for this argument is that organizations have an obligation to provide mechanisms to help employees balance the demands of work and the responsibilities of home so that employees, particularly women, are not forced to choose one over the other. Family-responsive human resource policies, which include not only alternative (or flexible) work arrangements but also family-leave policies and child-care or elder-care assistance, have been adopted by many organizations to help employees achieve a better balance between work and family. Of these family-responsive policies, alternative work arrangements have been the most heavily employed (Rau & Hyland, 2002).

In general, alternative work arrangements provide employees flexibility in either the timing of their work or its location (Hill et al., 2001). Flexibility in the timing of work (that is, flexible work schedules) includes flextime (flexibility in the time the workday begins and ends), compressed workweek (working a full-time schedule but doing so in fewer than five days), and a reduced workload (part-time work). Telecommuting provides flexibility in the location of work. Of those organizations responding to a Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) survey, 58 percent reported that their organizations offer flexible work schedules and 37 percent offer telecommuting. The increasing popularity of these alternative work arrangements is reflected in the fact that these numbers increased by 7 percent and 11 percent, respectively, in comparison with survey results from the previous year (SHRM Foundation, 2001). Although alternative work arrangements have been adopted in a variety of industries and professions, they have been especially popular in large public accounting firms because the demanding work schedule, especially during the busy season, has made it difficult to attract and retain qualified female accountants (Almer & Kaplan, 2002; Almer et al., 2003; Cohen & Single, 2001).

The purpose of this study is to explore the potential career consequences when women use an alternative work arrangement, specifically a flexible work schedule. We wanted to ascertain whether women who worked such a flexible schedule would be perceived to have less career advancement potential than those working a regular schedule. This is an important issue both in terms of work-life balance and the career advancement of women. If women working flexible schedules are perceived more negatively than women on regular schedules, then their career advancement may be hindered. Over the long term, this may discourage women from taking advantage of flexible work schedules and increase the level of work-family conflict they experience.

Benefits of Flexible Work Schedules to Organizations

Much of the prior research on flexible work schedules has taken an organizational perspective by focusing on the impact of these schedules on outcomes that primarily benefit organizations (see, for example, Baltes, Briggs, Huff, Wright, & Neuman, 1999). In general, flexible work schedules are expected to provide such organizational benefits as increased employee job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and productivity, and decreased absenteeism and turnover. Pierce and Newstrom (1980) used the work adjustment model (Dawis, England, & Lofquist, 1968) to help explain why these positive outcomes might occur. According to this model, when there is a good match between the rewards offered by a job and the needs of an employee, then positive job attitudes will result. In the context of flexible work schedules, the enhanced flexibility provided by these schedules should make it easier for employees to balance work and family responsibilities. Because the job more effectively meets their needs, their job satisfaction should increase (Baltes et al., 1999; Pierce & Newstrom, 1980) and absenteeism and turnover should decrease (Pierce, Newstrom, Dunham, & Barber, 1989). In addition, if this balance occurs because of policies put in place by the organization, commitment to the organization should increase. Productivity is believed to increase by allowing employees to work according to their own circadian rhythms, thus more effectively, and by reducing stress (Baltes et al., 1999; Pierce & Newstrom, 1980).

A meta-analysis on the benefits to organizations of offering flexible work schedules examined the impact of both flextime schedules and compressed workweek schedules on several of these work-related criteria (Baltes et al., 1999). Based on thirty-one experimental studies that had examined either or both of these flexible schedules, the results were consistent with the previously stated expectations. Specifically, flextime schedules were found to affect positively employee productivity, job satisfaction, satisfaction with the work schedule, and employee absenteeism. Self-rated performance was found to be unaffected by the work schedule. Results for the compressed workweek schedule were positive for both satisfaction measures as well as for the measure of self-rated performance. However, the compressed workweek schedule had no impact on either absenteeism or productivity. Although Baltes et al. (1999) did not include organizational commitment as an outcome in their meta-analysis, consistent with the stated expectations, other research has found that organizational commitment is positively affected when there is a flexible work schedule (Grover & Crooker, 1995; Scandura & Lankau, 1997).

More recent research tends to confirm these findings. For example, a recent literature review on family-responsive workplace policies, including alternative work arrangements, concluded that productivity, organizational commitment, retention, and job satisfaction are all positively affected by these

policies (Glass & Finley, 2002). Almer and Kaplan (2002) found that CPAs on flexible work schedules reported higher job satisfaction and lower turnover intentions than CPAs on regular schedules. Hyland (2000) reported a positive impact of flexible work arrangements on turnover intentions but no effect on employee performance. Finally, Rau and Hyland (2002) examined the impact of flexible work arrangements on applicant attraction to an organization. They found that employees were more attracted to organizations offering flextime. However, this result was moderated by the level of role conflict experienced by the employee. Specifically, employees with a high level of role conflict were more attracted to an organization offering flextime than employees with low role conflict, whose preference was unaffected by the organization's offering flextime or not.

Overall, these results suggest that there are a number of positive outcomes for organizations that offer flexible work schedules to their employees.

Benefits of Flexible Work Schedules to Employees

As already discussed, most of the research on flexible work schedules has focused on benefits to organizations. Yet one of the main reasons why flexible work schedules have been recommended is to help *employees* reduce work-family conflict by allowing them more control over their work schedule. There has been less research on whether the expected benefits to employees actually occur. Galinsky, Bond, and Friedman (1996) found that employees feel less stressed when they have more control over their schedule, which suggests that they may also perceive less work-family conflict. Similarly, Almer and Kaplan (2002) reported that employees working a flexible arrangement experienced lower levels of stress and burnout. In addition, Meyer (1997) found that schedule flexibility is associated with decreased work-family conflict, and Hill et al. (2001) observed that perceived (rather than actual) schedule flexibility improved work-life balance. However, Secret and Sprang (2001) found that the level of work-family stress among employed parents was unaffected by type of work schedule. These findings, although not definitive, suggest overall that having an alternative work arrangement, such as a flexible work schedule, may reduce work-family conflict, as expected.

Another potential benefit to employees, especially women, of having flexible work schedules is that it may make it easier for them to progress into upper management positions. Research suggests that women face a number of barriers to advancing into upper management (Cohen & Single, 2001; Friedman & Galinsky, 1992). Because of this, many have suggested that a "glass ceiling" keeps women out of these roles (Kay & Hagan, 1995; Lyness & Thompson, 1997; Maume, 1999; Morrison & Von Glinow, 1990). One such barrier may be the difficulty of balancing work and family responsibilities (Collins, 1993). Some women who are faced with this conflict choose to forgo advancement at work so that they can devote adequate time to their families

(Conlin, 2000). If given the opportunity to have a flexible work schedule, the greater ability to balance work and family that results may make it more likely that career-oriented women will remain in their jobs, even when these jobs are demanding. This should lead to greater numbers of women advancing into upper management. Although the advancement of women is of concern in a wide array of professions, the accounting profession has been especially proactive in its use of alternative work arrangements as a way of mitigating this problem (Baldiga & Doucet, 2001; Cohen & Single, 2001; Deloitte & Touche, 1996).

We do not know, however, whether flexible work schedules have enabled more women to move into higher-level management positions. In fact, it is possible that taking advantage of a flexible schedule may have the opposite effect. According to Hammonds et al. (1997), "career derailment" is a concern of employees who are using, or considering using, a flexible work schedule. Specifically, employees fear that they will be seen as less committed to their career if they do so or that they will be less visible to those making advancement decisions because they will not be in the office during all regular business hours. Consistent with these concerns, Almer et al. (2003) found that an employee's decision to participate in an alternative work arrangement was affected by both career considerations and the perceived supportiveness of the organizational culture. Others have noted that because an alternative work arrangement tends to change the nature of the work employees do, the amount of their workload, or both, an employee's career progression is likely to be affected (Almer & Kaplan, 2000). Regardless of the reason, employees on a flexible schedule may be seen as less suitable for career advancement than employees on a regular schedule.

There is some indirect evidence that women may be negatively affected if they take advantage of a flexible work schedule. Waldfoegel (1998) found that over an eight-year period, the wages of women with children increased 8 percent less than the wages of women without children. Although this study was correlational in nature, it does suggest that adopting a flexible work schedule, which most women do in order to care for children (Almer & Kaplan, 2002), could negatively affect women. Additional indirect support for the possibility that employees on flexible schedules may have their careers derailed comes from research by Judiesch and Lyness (1999). They examined how taking a leave of absence might affect several measures of career success and found that a leave of absence (regardless of whether it was taken for family reasons or because of illness) was associated with significantly fewer promotions and smaller salary increases. This was true for both men and women. As noted previously, family leaves and flexible work schedules are both typical components of family-friendly policies. Thus, it is possible that both of these benefits will have similar negative career consequences for employees.

Only two studies were found that provide evidence of the potential career consequences of a flexible work schedule. MacDermid, Lee, Buck, and

Williams (2001) conducted semistructured interviews with seventy-eight women managers and professionals who used a reduced workload flexible schedule and assessed their own perceptions of various aspects of their career development and success. Most of the respondents felt that they had sacrificed some upward mobility in their careers, especially in the short run. In a more rigorous experimental study, Cohen and Single (2001) had Big Five accounting firm managers review a scenario describing a manager who either was or was not on a reduced-workload flexible schedule. The participants then evaluated that manager's desirability for an engagement, perceived likelihood of advancement, and perceived likelihood of turnover. The study showed that the manager was perceived more negatively on all three dependent variables when described as being on a flexible schedule than when described as being on a regular work schedule. This was true regardless of whether the manager was female or male. However, because of the confounding of the work schedule description with other aspects of the employee's work (practice development, mentoring activities, and others) it is difficult to determine whether the differences found on the dependent variables were actually due to the work schedule itself or to other aspects of the job, which also varied between experimental conditions.

These studies are a first step in understanding the career consequences of working a flexible schedule. However, more research on this subject is needed to understand better if, and how, flexible work schedules affect the career advancement of women. The research described here seeks to do this. Because of the concern already noted about the small number of women in higher-level management positions and because research indicates that women are more likely to work flexible schedules (for example, Almer & Kaplan, 2002; Cohen, 1997), the focus of this study was on perceptions of women using a flexible work schedule. Based on this reasoning, we hypothesized that women who work a flexible schedule will be perceived as having less career advancement potential than women who work a regular schedule.

Method

We conducted an experiment using hypothetical scenarios. This experimental approach is common in the human resource management literature and has been used to examine such issues as disciplinary decisions (Liden et al., 1999), applicant responses to rejection letters (Ployhart, Ryan, & Bennett, 1999), and evaluations of sex discrimination claims (Elkins & Phillips, 1999). Scenarios have also been used in studies dealing with work-family conflict (for example, Greenhaus & Powell, 2003) and studies examining the decision to allow an employee to use an alternative work schedule (for example, Barham, Gottlieb, & Kelloway, 1998; Powell & Mainiero, 1999). With this research method, the independent variable (in this case, type of work schedule) can be systematically varied in the scenario while other factors remain constant, resulting in a high level of

internal validity. Research based on this methodology complements field and survey research (for example, Almer & Kaplan, 2002; MacDermid et al., 2001) in advancing knowledge about the impact of alternative work arrangements. In the following paragraphs, we describe the participants, procedures, experimental materials, and dependent variables used in this study.

Participants. A convenience sample of MBA students at a small, private midwestern university participated in this study. MBA students were judged to be a suitable sample for this research. Most of those in the sample (over 90 percent) were currently employed full-time or had prior full-time work experience. A substantial number also had supervisory experience (see later section). Based on their work and supervisory experience, we believed they would be capable of assessing factors that would likely affect an employee's career advancement potential, as they were asked to do in this study. Although the sample was somewhat young compared with managers in the population, because many of them had supervisory experience and because they were from many different organizations operating in a variety of different industries, we believed that they were likely to be reasonably representative of the managers in the business world who make advancement decisions. Thus, their responses in this situation should be realistic and typical of how the population of managers in general would respond.

The sampling frame was all MBA classes offered at the university. As already noted, classes were not selected randomly from this sampling frame but rather on a convenience basis. Specifically, in order to facilitate data collection, only classes in which instructors were willing to allocate class time to the research were used. The classes from which the sample was drawn were classes required of all MBA students rather than elective or major classes. Thus, although the sample is a nonrandom sample, there is no reason to suspect any systematic difference between students enrolled in classes that were used for the research and the others.

Participants were recruited by visiting MBA classes and requesting their participation in the research. All students in each class agreed. Participation was voluntary and participants were not given extra credit for doing so. In total, there were 111 participants, 60 male and 41 female (10 subjects did not identify their gender). Due to missing data on some variables, the usable sample size was 107. This sample size was deemed adequate because it would approximate the ten-to-one subject-to-variable ratio recommended when doing regression or factor analysis (Nunnally, 1978).

The average age of participants was thirty-one. Ninety percent were currently employed and worked, on average, between forty and fifty hours per week. Seventy-four percent had supervisory experience, with the average number of employees supervised being eleven. Fifty-eight percent were married and 30 percent had children.

Procedure. Data were collected during a regular class session. Participants were given a packet of materials (described in the following section) and a brief

description of the study, which they were told was concerned with “the factors managers consider when making promotion decisions.” Participants were randomly assigned to one of two experimental conditions—regular work schedule ($n = 54$) or flexible work schedule ($n = 53$)—based on the packet of materials they received. They were asked to review these materials carefully and then complete a questionnaire on their perceptions of the employee described in the materials. They were asked to respond to the questionnaire as if they were the target employee’s manager and were assessing that person’s suitability for promotion. Subjects were assured anonymity and confidentiality of their responses.

Experimental Materials. Two sets of experimental materials (personnel files) were created. Manipulation of the work schedule (regular schedule or flexible schedule) was accomplished through these materials. Each packet contained a resume for the employee, the most recent year-end performance review, a benefit options checklist, and two letters. The materials suggested that the employee, who was always depicted as a woman, worked for an accounting firm and was currently at the manager level but was seeking promotion to senior manager. The performance review form used was modeled on samples taken from two different accounting firms to ensure realism. Based on the information about the employee contained in the performance evaluation, the woman appeared to be an average to somewhat above-average employee. For example, the average rating the employee received across the twenty-one rating categories was 2 (on a 5-point scale, with 1 being the highest). For two of the dimensions, the rating indicated that the employee had a “developmental need” in that area (a rating of 4). Finally, the employee was described as having achieved two of three specific goals set for the previous year. The performance evaluation form was created in this way to prevent the woman from being seen as such an outstanding candidate that everyone would find her suitable for promotion or so far below average that no one would do so. The resume and performance evaluation form were the same in both sets of materials.

The work schedule manipulation was accomplished through the two letters included in the file and the benefits checklist. In the regular work schedule condition, the two letters were a form letter about a change in the employee’s insurance policy and a copy of her response to this letter. In the flexible schedule condition, one letter was from the employee to her supervisor requesting a flexible work schedule. The reasons given for requesting the change were the birth of a child and helping an ill parent. The second letter was the response from her supervisor granting her request and describing the nature of the flexible work schedule. Another aspect of the manipulation occurred on the employee benefits checklist. The benefits included on the checklist were identified by consulting with a manager working in human resources. Each sheet included the benefits offered by the company with checkmarks next to those that the employee used. One of the benefit options was a flexible work schedule. In

the regular work schedule condition this was not checked. In the flexible work schedule condition, there was a checkmark indicating that the employee was on a flexible work schedule; the details of her schedule were also described. In particular, the information indicated that the employee was working a reduced schedule of four days per week (that is, a 20 percent reduction in workload). A reduced workload schedule was chosen because this type of schedule is available in approximately 79 percent of public accounting firms and because adoption of this type of schedule by women has been increasing (Baldiga & Doucet, 2001). This type of schedule was also used in both of the previous studies on the career consequences of flexible work schedules (Cohen & Single, 2001; MacDermid et al., 2001). After the materials were developed, they were reviewed by two MBA students comparable to those who would be participating in the study.

Dependent Variables. Twelve attributes that are likely to be seen as relevant in assessing an employee's career advancement potential were measured on the questionnaire. These attributes were based on some of the concerns about flexible work schedules that have been identified in the literature (for example, Almer et al., 2003, Cohen & Single, 2001; Hammonds et al., 1997) as well as our judgment about the possible consequences of using a flexible work schedule. We selected employee attributes that we believed might be negatively affected by the adoption of a flexible work schedule, including motivation, ambitiousness, leadership ability, commitment, inner drive, dependability, and competence. These items were all measured on five-point scales with the endpoints labeled "very poor" and "very good."

Results

The study's results are described in the following paragraphs.

Factor Analysis. Because we did not have a priori hypotheses about the dimensional structure underlying the variables measured on the questionnaire, we began by doing an exploratory factor analysis on these variables using a varimax rotation (Nunnally, 1978). Only factors with an eigenvalue greater than 1.0 were retained. The resulting factor analysis produced three factors, which, combined, accounted for 60 percent of the variance in the items. Based on the individual items that loaded on each factor, a factor label was developed for each factor. The first factor, labeled job-career dedication, captures the extent to which the target employee is perceived as being committed to her job and suitable for advancement to a higher position. The second factor, labeled advancement motivation, captures the extent to which the employee is perceived as being ambitious and as having a desire to advance. The final factor, labeled capability, captures perceptions of the employee's ability and competence.

Table 1 shows the items that made up each factor, the factor loading for each item, and the factor label. It also presents the number of responses, the mean, and the standard deviation for each item. One item (confidence) did not load

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics and Factor Loadings for Questionnaire Items

<i>Item</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Factor Loading</i>
Factor 1: Job-Career Dedication				
1. Commitment	111	4.21	.76	.607
2. Dependability	111	4.19	.67	.632
3. Suitability for promotion	110	3.89	.68	.791
4. Energy level	111	4.12	.66	.725
5. Advancement potential	111	4.00	.70	.804
Factor 2: Advancement Motivation				
6. Motivation	110	4.39	.68	.782
7. Inner drive	110	4.35	.73	.842
8. Leadership ability	111	3.77	.72	.569
9. Ambitiousness	111	3.80	.72	.553
Factor 3: Capability				
10. Intelligence	111	4.32	.59	.803
11. Competence	111	4.27	.56	.772
Valid N (listwise)	107			

Note: Factor loadings are based on a varimax rotation.

Table 2. Means, Standard Deviations, and Intercorrelations Between Dependent Variables

	<i>Overall</i>		<i>Regular Schedule</i>		<i>Flexible Schedule</i>		1	2	3
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>			
1. Job-career dedication	4.1	.52	4.2	.51	4.0	.53	(.82)		
2. Advancement motivation	4.1	.53	4.2	.49	3.9	.55	.56*	(.75)	
3. Capability	4.3	.48	4.3	.48	4.2	.48	.45*	.31*	(.58)

Note: The numbers on the diagonal are the coefficient alpha reliabilities for the scales.

* $p < .01$.

cleanly on any of the factors and was therefore eliminated. The three scales created based on the results of the factor analysis became the dependent variables used in the analysis. Coefficient alphas were computed for these scales. These are presented in Table 2, along with the overall means, group means, standard deviations, and correlations between the three dependent variables.

Preliminary Analyses. We did not expect the respondents' demographic characteristics to have an impact on their perceptions of the target employee. However, because most individuals who adopt flexible schedules are women (Cohen & Single, 2001), and because most women adopt these schedules in order to care for their children, we wanted to see if there were any differences on the dependent variables due to these demographic characteristics. Multivariate *t* tests comparing male and female respondents and respondents with

and without children were computed for each dependent variable. Overall, these variables did not affect ratings on the dependent variables. Specifically, the multivariate t test revealed no differences between male and female respondents on the dependent variables, Hotellings $T(3, 93) = .02, p = .59$. The multivariate t test comparing respondents with and without children also did not reach conventional levels of significance, Hotellings $T(3, 93) = .08, p = .07$. However, it is interesting to note that the univariate test revealed that there was a significant difference between these two groups on advancement motivation, $F(1, 95) = 7.62, p = .007$. Specifically, respondents with children rated the employee more favorably than respondents without children. Based on these results, we did not include either of these variables in the analysis when testing our hypothesis.

Hypothesis Testing. It was hypothesized that a woman working a flexible schedule would be seen as having less career advancement potential (assessed by her job and career dedication, her advancement motivation, and her capability) than a woman on a regular work schedule. Due to the intercorrelation between the dependent variables (see Table 2), this hypothesis was tested with multivariate analysis of variance using work schedule (regular or flexible) as the independent variable and job-career dedication, advancement motivation, and capability as the dependent variables. This hypothesis was supported for the first two dependent variables but not for the third. Results from the multivariate F test indicated a significant overall difference between the two selection method groups across all three dependent variables, multivariate $F(3, 103) = 2.61, p = .05$. Univariate F 's were significant for job-career dedication, $F(1, 105) = 4.77, p = .03$, and advancement motivation, $F(1, 105) = 7.18, p = .009$, but not significant for capability, $F(1, 105) = .90, p = .35$. Examination of the means for the two conditions revealed that, as hypothesized, the woman on the flexible schedule was viewed less favorably. There was no difference in her perceived capability between the two conditions.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine the potential career consequences for women who adopt flexible work schedules. It was hypothesized that those on flexible work schedules would be viewed as having lower career advancement potential than those on regular schedules. The results of this study provide support for this hypothesis. Overall, the female employee depicted in this study received fairly high scores regardless of her work schedule. This is not surprising because the materials were created so that she was a somewhat above-average employee. However, even though the actual performance of this employee was identical in the two scheduling conditions, her job and career dedication and her advancement motivation were rated significantly lower in the flexible schedule condition than in the regular schedule condition.

This finding is consistent with prior research by Cohen and Single (2001), who found that CPAs working flexible schedules were perceived as less desirable for an engagement, less likely to be promoted, and more likely to leave the firm. All of these outcomes suggest that employees on flexible work schedules may experience negative career consequences. Similarly, employees who are perceived to have less dedication to their job and career and less desire to advance, as found in this study, are likely to be seen as having lower career advancement potential.

Several concerns may cause these more negative judgments about employees on flexible work schedules, particularly the reduced workload schedule used in this study. Any promotion to a higher management level, such as from manager to senior manager as in this study, puts additional demands on the employee. These demands may come in several forms: a greater need to be available in the workplace for meetings or other day-to-day work issues that arise, particularly emergency situations requiring immediate attention; a greater expectation that the individual be willing and available to engage in citizenship behaviors that go beyond the formal requirements of the job; and a belief that a manager in the higher position will need to have a stronger physical presence in the workplace. If the employee is seen as being less available to meet these demands (regardless if the unavailability results from being absent from work or from an unwillingness to meet these demands due to family obligations), he or she is likely to be seen as less suitable for promotion. In addition, the perception by others that the employee has made work and career a less central part of his or her life (because he or she chose to adopt a flexible work schedule) may lead managers to question whether the employee has the commitment to job and career they believe necessary to succeed in a higher management position. Whatever the reason, the results of this study suggest that employee concerns about career derailment (Hammonds et al., 1997) if they opt for a flexible work schedule may be justified.

It is interesting to note that although managers may have these kinds of concerns about workers who use flexible schedules, research suggests that they may be unfounded. Specifically, research indicates that employees have fewer unnecessary absences when they work flexible schedules than when they work a regular schedule (for example, Baltes et al., 1999; Dalton & Mesch, 1990; McGuire & Liro, 1987) and that their work performance (Baltes et al., 1999) and organizational commitment are higher (Grover & Crooker, 1995). That work performance has been found to be better with a flexible schedule suggests that, in fact, employees may be more committed to their jobs when they adopt a flexible schedule, as found by Scandura and Lankau (1997).

In this study, we found that perceptions of employee capability were unaffected by the use of a flexible work schedule. This suggests that if working a flexible schedule negatively affects women's career advancement potential it is because they are perceived as having less job and career dedication and less desire to advance, and not as lacking in ability. On the one hand, this is good

news for women seeking to advance because it suggests that they are likely to be perceived as having the ability to succeed in higher-level jobs. On the other hand, the bad news is that perceptions of employee motivation and career dedication are much more subjective than perceptions of employee performance and thus are probably more subject to error as well as more difficult to change.

Limitations of the Study

Overall, the results of this study suggest that working a flexible schedule may have negative career consequences for the employee in question. However, this conclusion must be interpreted with some caution because this study had several limitations. First, the research may not generalize to the actual experience of working on a flexible work schedule or to actual promotion decisions because of the experimental methodology employed. Those making the career advancement assessment had a fairly limited amount of information about the target employee and had never actually interacted with her. Actual promotion decisions—where the individual making the decision has a greater amount of information about the employee being considered for the promotion—might be influenced less by the work schedule and thus could differ from the decisions made here.

Another limitation is that study participants may have had a difficult time envisioning how the adoption of a flexible schedule by an employee could affect the functioning of the department or the employee's suitability for advancement. This may have made their responses less generalizable. However, several factors may, at least partially, mitigate this concern. First, 74 percent of our sample had supervisory experience and thus are likely to have made, or been involved in making, advancement decisions. Also, although they may not have supervised employees working on flexible schedules, 58 percent of our participants reported that their organization offered flexible schedules and 39 percent were actually working a flexible schedule at the time of their participation in the study. Thus, they are likely to have had some familiarity with, and knowledge about, such schedules. Furthermore, we found no differences in responses based on whether respondents had supervisory experience or were currently on a flexible work schedule.

Finally, although the mean differences between the conditions were somewhat small, the eta-square was .043 for job-career dedication and .064 for advancement motivation, indicating that 4 percent and 6 percent of the variance, respectively, was explained.

Implications and Opportunities for Future Research

Despite these limitations, the study's results have several implications. Alternative work arrangements, including flexible work schedules, are meant to help employees better balance work and family responsibilities and to encourage

women to stay in the workforce. Organizations need to examine whether their policies may be having the reverse effect. Human resource managers can be particularly helpful both in assessing any negative impact in their organizations and in managing their implementation to reduce the potential for employees to be negatively affected. For example, they might educate managers on the benefits of these schedules and train them in strategies to implement these schedules effectively in their departments, including how to deal with any problems they produce. If managers understand that alternative work arrangements can enhance employee job satisfaction and performance and reduce absenteeism and turnover (Baltes et al., 1999; Glass & Finley, 2002), they may be more receptive to using them and more willing to take on the additional work associated with managing them (such as keeping track of employee schedules to ensure that all work is completed and there is adequate employee coverage at all times; dealing with the potential difficulties these schedules create for coworkers and any resulting conflict between employees; and so on). This kind of training and education may also reduce the potential for managers to perceive employees on these schedules negatively and may make them more willing to approve flexible schedules for their employees. Because research indicates that employees are less likely to choose to participate in an alternative work arrangement if they see the organizational culture as unsupportive (Almer et al., 2003), human resource managers can also provide top management with information about the benefits of such arrangements so that top managers support their adoption by the organization and their actual use among employees (for example, by rewarding managers who implement alternative work arrangements).

Human resource managers can also help make implementation of company-sponsored alternative work arrangements more fair by ensuring that they are equally available to employees throughout the organization. Research suggests that managers' willingness to approve alternative work arrangements depends on both characteristics of the employee (for example, gender, whether the employee is caring for a child or older relative) and characteristics of his or her job (Barham et al., 1998; Powell & Mainiero, 1999). One way to address these potential disparities would be for human resource managers to assume responsibility for the evaluation of all requests to move to an alternative work arrangement. Although this solution is not without its costs, it would ensure greater consistency in the availability of alternative work arrangements (Powell & Mainiero, 1999).

This study focused on how perceptions of women might be influenced by their working a flexible schedule. Yet the Family-Medical Leave Act makes family leave available to men as well as to women. One consequence is that there may be more men requesting both flexible work schedules and family leave. Future research should examine whether men who take advantage of family-friendly policies also experience negative career consequences. Some research (for example, Cohen & Single, 2001; Judiesch & Lyness, 1999) suggests that men may be equally disadvantaged. Men may even experience a stronger

negative backlash because, historically, staying home and taking care of the family has been viewed as a woman's responsibility. Men who seek to share more fully in these responsibilities by opting for a flexible work schedule may be perceived as less stereotypically male and thus less suitable for advancement (Heilman, Block, Martell, & Simon, 1989). Results consistent with this possibility were found by Cordeiro and Wayne (2001). In contrast, however, if men opt for a flexible work schedule primarily to enhance their productivity at work rather than for family reasons, they may not be perceived negatively, as found by Sharpe, Hermsen, and Billings (2002). Research is needed to understand better how, if at all, gender affects perceptions of employees who have alternative work arrangements.

Future research might also examine whether the position for which the employee is being considered affects the manager's judgment of that employee's advancement potential. This study used a middle management position. It is possible that results would be stronger for a higher-level position. In particular, women on flexible work schedules who are seeking a promotion to upper management (for example, partner in an accounting firm) might be more negatively affected by work schedule than those seeking a lower-level promotion. This is because the higher-level position may be perceived to require more availability during and after regular work hours and a greater degree of commitment to the career, the very characteristics that may have accounted for the negative impact of the flexible work schedule observed in this study.

In this study, the reason given for adopting the flexible work schedule was both having a child and caring for an ill parent. It is possible, however, that different reasons for adopting a flexible schedule might have different impacts on perceptions of employee career advancement potential. For example, doing it to care for an ill parent may be less likely to result in negative perceptions of desire to advance and job-career dedication than caring for a child because the latter is a more significant and a longer-term commitment. Consistent with this possibility, Barham et al. (1998) found differences in a manager's willingness to approve a request for a flexible schedule depending on whether the reason was to care for a child or to care for an older relative. Future research should examine how, if at all, the reason for the flexible work schedule influences perceptions of the employee. It is also possible that different types of flexible work schedules (flextime, compressed workweek, reduced workload), as well as telecommuting, could have different effects on perceptions of employees. Because some of these alternative work arrangements are more disruptive to the normal course of work, managers may perceive them more negatively (Powell & Mainiero, 1999), and thus they may lead to more negative career consequences for the employee. Little prior research has distinguished between, or adequately identified, the type of alternative work arrangement the employee is using or requesting, so we do not know if the different arrangements have similar or different effects. Future research should examine this issue as well.

Finally, this study found that managers perceive a female employee using a flexible work schedule as having less career advancement potential. Although this suggests that these women may be less likely to receive *actual* promotions, it does not demonstrate it conclusively. Future research is needed to examine this issue. Specifically, research should focus on the actual (rather than potential) career consequences of adopting alternative work arrangements (both flexible work schedules and telecommuting) to see the extent to which the less favorable perceptions observed in this study translate into less favorable career outcomes.

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