

The Employment Practice in Bangladesh: The Perspective of Workplace Flexibility

Mohammad Ahshanullah

School of Business and Economics, United International University, Dhaka, Bangladesh

Abstract

The purpose of this research is to seek to address the nature of workplace flexibility prevailing in Bangladesh and identified possible scope of implementation. The research involves an in-depth case study of workplace flexibility practices used in a Bangladeshi conglomerate. The research reviews the opinions' of the human resources (HR) staffs about workplace flexibility. The findings suggested that, on the whole, the HR staffs of the current case study organization have very little knowledge on workplace flexibility. This research suggested that there is still a significant amount of work to be done before implementing the flexible work practices in Bangladeshi companies.

Keywords: Flexibility, workplace flexibility, employment system and HR Staffs

1. Introduction

During the 1980s and the 1990s, new management methods and employment policies were getting popularity throughout the industrialized countries. As a result, new forms of work management pattern have been encouraged (Blyton and Turnbull (eds), 1992; Brewster *et al.*, 1997; Centre for European Human Resource Management, 1997; Kitay and Lansbury, 1994; Locke *et al.*, 1995; Mayne *et al.*, 1996; Sisson, 1989; Sparrow *et al.*, 1994; Storey, 1992; Quoted by Kramar *et al.*, 1998, p.453). These changes include new form of flexible organizational structure, new form of decision making structures and new form of employment policies (Legge, 1995; quoted by Kramar *et al.*, 1998, p.453). Afterwards, the new word flexibility has been expanding throughout the UK and other European countries in greater extend. But, it was quite difficult for the organization to become flexible. Flexibility is itself a multidimensional including various type of new concept such as agility & versatility; innovation & novelty; stability & sustainable advantages & new form of capabilities that are evolving over the time period (Mabey *et al.* 2005, p. 198). However, the combined effects of many critical factors such as rising of Japanese Model, new form enterprise culture, growing competition, market uncertainties, technological change, new government policies, and labor supply factors encouraged employers to move on flexible practices as a basis of achieving their organizational objectives (Blyton 1996; quoted by Bain and Mulvey 2002, p.2; Legge, 2005, p.177). Therefore, it is quite relevant to say that flexibility is very wide and broad in nature and itself very dynamic and adaptable rather than rigid (Guest, 1987; quoted 7 by Legge, 2005, p. 77). Besides, the world economy is revolutionary and the new form of employment is rising due to rapid advancement of modern technology and ICT (Information and Communication Technology). Moreover, with the shift of lateral networks, knowledge workers may choose to opt out of organizations, offering their skills to a collection of clients and customers and leading flexible lives between home and the workplace (Edward & Wajcman, 2005, p. 28). The emergence of portfolio workers' implies the loosening of organizational ties and the increasing individualization of people's lives (Edward & Wajcman, 2005, p.29). And employees are celebrating less stable career rather than mourned (Handy, 1996; quoted by Edwards & Wajcman, 2005, p.28). Nowadays, individuals have more choice how to live their lives and work may become secondary to them. As a result, more open and negotiated networks are getting popularity and replacing the old hierarchical jobs (Castell, 1996; quoted by Edwards & Wajcman, 2005, p.27). These changes also require some kinds of flexibility both for the interest of employee and employers. The present study is an attempt to collect the factual information about the nature of the workplace flexibility practices prevailing in companies in Bangladesh. It is obvious that such information is an essential step for implementing the workplace flexibility practices in private companies in Bangladesh.

2. Objectives of the Study

The primary objective of this paper is to analyze the current nature of the workplace flexibility and identify

the possible scope of implementation in Bangladeshi companies.

3. Limitations of the Study

As every research has some limitations, this research work was not an exception of this rule. Firstly, it is not possible to generalize the findings beyond the unit of analysis. Therefore, this research finding is thus indicative rather than conclusive. Secondly, as the research sample constituted only HR staffs of a single case study organization, statistical analysis is limited. Finally, this is a self-financed study, which confined the various scopes along with the scope of extending the study area and increasing the sample size such as multiple case study organizations.

4. Research Methods

Firstly, the research agreement was reached with the participating organization to choose human resource (HR) division as a unit of analysis within the company to allow for the depth study. While this had limited the generalizability of findings, it allowed for considerable depth of analysis by allowing both qualitative and quantitative research methods to be employed. Both categorical scales (both nominal and ordinal data) and continuous scales (cardinal data) were used. In addition, Likert scale has also been used to quantify the ordinal data as it is considered as an appropriate method of measuring attitudes and opinions survey (Easterby-Smith, 2008, p. 230). And different sources of secondary data had been noted for developing theoretical framework and validating the research objectives as well.

5. Literature Review

The nature of flexibility and its implications for practitioners & policy makers in a particular area have been considered as hot and serious topic in the past and the present days. The term flexibility is getting critical for employers, trade unions, governments, and for researchers in work and organization studies. However, it became very difficult term to define in a single word. So, the term flexibility has been defined by many authors in different ways for different purposes. According to Guest (1987; quoted by Legge, 2005, p.175), three components such as organizational design, job design and employment attitude & motivation are all similar to the meaning of flexibility. Other authors also mentioned that multi-skilling is the one of ways of developing job design flexibility in the workplace (Atkinson and Meager, 1986; quoted by Legge, 2005, p.175). Business process reengineering, decentralizing, teamwork, and involvement are also associated part of flexibility in the modern organization (Grint, 1994, p.181; quoted by Legge, 2005, p.176). In the academic and the public disclosure, it has been defined as the labor market flexibility referring to employer choice or the labor entrepreneur indicating employee freedom of choice (Voß and Pongratz, 1998; quoted by Croucher and Mills, 2006, p.2). In other words, it also assists organizations, employees and consumers by providing competitive advantages, improving working conditions and delivering high quality & differentiated products respectively (Dyer, 1998, p.223). In addition, several previous theories are also related to the term flexibility. For Marxist, the crisis of Fordism has brought new concept flexibility. Others defined it as a new industrial divide to transform both production and market system to flexible specialization. In addition, the rise of Post-Fordism also brings new concept flexibility into reality (Gilbert et al., 1991, p.2). A number of writers defined flexibility as “neo-Marxian” (Clegg, 1990; quoted by Tregaskis et al. 1998, p.61) or “Neo-Fordist” (Wood, 1989; quoted by Tregaskis et al. 1998, p.63) concerning with flexible production (Tregaskis et al., 1998, p.63). Operational management area is also related to the concept of flexibility in some extend (Tregaskis et al., 1998, p.63). So, flexibility itself covers very wide theoretical and practical area of an organization. Finally another important area of literature defines flexibility as an employment flexibility as “Managerialist” (Bagguley, 1991, P. 164) or “Neo-Managerialist” (Clegg, 1990, P. 210). In the early part of the term of flexibility, economic and social progress are all worked together and the changes were mostly gone through the process of negotiations, regulations and the welfare arrangement. However, the labor market become rigid and the results brought massive change in the labor market in the developed countries. The issue of labor security became quite recognized agenda and the term labor aristocracy became common in the early period. As a result, the whole approach was fully submerged with the sentimental populism and that produced the defensive mechanism in the labor market. However, there were always problems with the agenda of labor security and then it might be depended and passive if the other factors are not favorable. These are happening when all the necessary ingredients are restricted. In addition, the forms of capitalism and the state socialism are also related to security as well as the sources of rigidity. Many factors such as macro-economic instability, mode of libertarianism, supply-side economics, globalization, privatization, market regulation, technological revolution, the fiscal crisis, mass unemployment and feminizations are also linked to the

regulations and some of these were properly analyzed and some them were also remained a matter of debate.

Even though, as it has been argued, there appears to be no universal relationship between flexibility , deregulation and labor market performance, analysis of systems of labor market regulation may still help to understand what drives labor market performance (Rubery and Grimshaw, 2003). However, instead of asking whether deregulation aids performance and need to reformulate the question and ask: how do different mixes of regulatory policies impact on a range of indicators of labor market performance? This question emphasizes instead the country-specific nature of labor market regulation and the way different combinations of legislation, collective bargaining and employer decisions impact on the workings of the labor market. For example, the British trade union history has traditionally been located between the competing interests of class and market, due to its militant defense of the economic interests of union members and its suspicion of societal instruments of reform in favor of free collective bargaining (Rubery, and Grimshaw, 2003). On the other hand, Germany is located between the pressures of society and market since the notion of a social market economy has been a stable reference point. For German unions, the emphasis is on the need to balance the workings of the market and state intervention in a way that delivers profits to employers; establishes the right of workers to dignity and well-being at work; and extends state benefits across the population (Hyman, 2001). Therefore, country differences in the role of trade unions are complicated by the different structures of employers' associations and by the role of the state in a country's industrial relations system.

The employment system and labor relations of few countries have been reviewed here to understand the possible scope of workplace flexibility in different countries. The UK employment relationship system is basically pluralist-type and also based upon legislation to ensure the interests of both parties in the labor market especially the work's right and needs. In addition, the UK employment system is also based on one national organization, the Trades Union Congress (TUC). Moreover, during the late 1990 and early 2000s, debates on union renewal have focused on social partnership and on the other hand, on opportunities to expand membership among marginalized workers in part-time and temporary jobs (Heery, 1999). Nevertheless, while union backing of a new legislation in areas pay and working time represents a shift towards a 'society' model of union activity, the notion of 'partnership' in Britain remain a much watered down version of the notion of 'social partnership' in many other European countries (Hyman, 2001; Marchington et al., 2001). On the other hand, the German employment system is based on social partnership. In addition, the demarcation and relations are very clear in German employment system and it faces less complicated collective bargaining difficulties. However, the rise and presence of globalization and persistent high levels of unemployment which force unions into concession bargaining with employers and the other , the resilience of existing statutory and cooperative structures which provides for a degree of stability social and economic upheavals (Hoffmann, 2000). The France employment system is usually patronized by strong Government role and low level of trade union membership. Several factors promote the strong presence of government role and low union membership such as the political strategies of unions, the strong rivalry between unions and active anti-union practices by employers. In Italian employment system, the individual employment relationship is governed extensive legislation and also follows the voluntarist tradition, like the UK with no legislation governing collective bargaining, strikes or consultation (Hyman, 1992; quoted by Rubery and Grimshaw, 2003). However, the organization of employer associations is relatively fragmented; associations enjoy little control over their member firms (Treu et al., 1993); as a result, their role in coordinating industrial relations is low.

In the US, the system of industrial relations is distinguished by the absence of a national employer association with member firms from more than one sector and by the business oriented approach of the trade union movement based on the efforts of local unions to advance the economic interests of their members (Freeman, 1994; Hyman, 2001). On the other hand, private sector unions are also powerful actor in the US labor market. However, American unions may have missed an important opportunity to influence the way government shapes labor market regulation. In Japan, unions and employers are a different kettle of fish (Freeman, 1994). Most unions are organized within individual companies, not by occupation or sector. It is also worth to mention that union activities are coordinated by industry federation which in turn, is members of national confederations is the largest, following a merger of four confederations in 1989. In addition to the above employment system and relationships, there are four mixes of dimensions in the labor market regulation such as works councils, wage setting, employment protection and working time regulation (Rubery and Grimshaw, 2003). These regulations vary country to country. And these components

of labor market regulation are not defined and enforced solely through state legislation. For example, the state intervention in the labor market is very strong in France than in the UK. Therefore, there is a significant difference of roles played by employers and unions in processes of regulation. And these all issues may also affect the possible implementation of workplace flexibility in the society or country or in an organization.

The history of the trade union movement in Bangladesh is linked with the development of a modern industrial society after liberation of the country in 1971. Thereafter, the Government of Bangladesh nationalized the major industries and services including banks and insurance companies. It is interesting to note that after liberation, the government-affiliated trade unions always dominated the trade union scene. Industrial Relations Ordinance, 1969 deals with trade unions in Bangladesh. However, the labor unions in Bangladesh are generally highly politicized and unions are very strongest in state-owned enterprises (Uddin et al., 2007). On the other hand, the private sector of Bangladesh is moving very fast and also creating productive employment opportunities in the economy. However, the private sector is not interested about the labor union and they always discourage the movement of trade union. The existing labor rights and labor laws are not strong that can support the union movement in private sector. From the viewpoint of HRM practices in Bangladesh, organizational structures, strategies and company policies are gearing more towards the integrating the needs of the organization (Chowdhury and Rahman, 2007). Therefore, this is the right time to understand the new forms of management practice 'flexibility' in private sector of Bangladesh to meet the needs and demand of both parties. It is also important to note that current trends in Bangladeshi labor market also indicate the scope of workplace flexibility (LFS, 2010). Therefore, the notion of employment systems and other relevant issues quiet clearly related to the implementation of workplace flexibility in any society, it might be applicable to the labor market of Bangladesh.

6. The Case Study Organization

The table-1 and table-2 show the profile of the organization and survey respondents respectively.

Table 1. Company in the Case Study Survey

	Number of Employees	Number of HR staffs	Sector
Workforce	3000>	-	-
HR Staffs	35>	-	-
Sector			Conglomerate*

The table-3 provides only summary of the means indicators of respondents' responses on the scope of workplace flexibility. The mean value of respondents indicates that all respondents were strongly agreed that the labor legislation is the critical requirement for implementing workplace flexibility in Bangladesh. The same table shows that respondents are strongly disagreed and replied that the rise of women participation might not be the cause of rising workplace flexibility in Bangladesh.

The mean value of 2.71 indicated that respondents did not find any link between the women presence in the labor market and rise of workplace flexibility. Most of the respondents also indicated that the implementation workplace flexibility requires support from the both sides of employees and employers. The overall mean value of 3.98 indicated that all the respondents were almost agreed about the opinion questions related to the implementation of workplace flexibility.

Table 2. Survey Respondents

Particular	%
Gender	
Male	80.00
Female	20.00
Age	
Under 35	80.00
Over 35	20.00
Service/ Year of experience	
0-2 Years	60.00
03 -05 Years	22.90
06-08 Years	11.40
Above 09 Years	05.70
Job/Responsibilities	
Decisional/ Managerial	17.20
Both Managerial and Clerical	31.40
Only Clerical and Miscellaneous	51.40

Table 3. Means for Indicator of respondents' opinions/views

Factors (Min= 1 Max= 5)	Mean Ranked
Legal or Legislative requirement	5.00
Employee's and Employers' role	4.80
New HR practices	4.80
Workplace Flexibility and Commitment	3.91
Role of HR Staffs' Knowledge	3.89
Scope of Workplace Flexibility	3.83
Training and Development	3.60
Work-Life Balance	3.60
Practices of Workplace Flexibility	3.54
Women Participation	2.71
Note: Mean all Items: 3.98	

7. Results and Discussions

The Chi-Square test has been conducted on the basis of the respondents' opinion on workplace flexibility and several statements have been examined to find the association between or among the variables. The very strong significant association found between respondents' opinions about the scope of workplace flexibility and the level of HR staff's knowledge on workplace flexibility. The Chi-Square test in the table-4

shows that these two views are strongly associated ($p=.000$) at 1% level of significant.

Table 4. Chi-Square Tests on Workplace Flexibility Practices

Particulars	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	70.000(a)	6	.000
Likelihood Ratio	72.549	6	.000
Linear-by-Linear Association	31.474	1	.000
N of Valid Cases	35		

The table-5 shows that nearly half of respondents (17 out of 35) were agreed that HR staff's knowledge is the vital for the implementation of flexible work scheme in local companies in Bangladesh.

Table 5. Scope of workplace flexibility and HR staffs' knowledge

Particulars	Frequency	Percentage	Cumulative Percentage
Neutral	11	31.4	31.4
Agree	17	48.6	80.0
Strongly Agree	7	20.0	100.0
Total	35	100.0	

However, one third respondents (11 out of 35) were neither agreed nor disagreed due to their lack of knowledge about the workplace flexibility. Furthermore, 20 percent respondents confirmed and strongly agreed that previous knowledge on workplace flexibility is the vital requirement for implementing the workplace flexibility.

The Table-6 shows that a high proportion of respondents (49%) indicated that the scope of flexible work scheme is very high in Bangladeshi companies. Whereas, nine respondents (26%) stated they neither agreed nor disagreed with this statement and commented that they had no idea about the nature of workplace flexibility as well as its scope in private companies in Bangladesh. In addition, twenty percent respondents (7 out of 35) were strongly agreed that the scope and area of workplace flexibility is very high in local private companies in Bangladesh. They also mentioned that there are several areas where the notion of workplace flexibility can be implemented.

Table 6. Scope of workplace flexibility in prevailing in Bangladesh

Particulars	Frequency	Percentage	Cumulative Percentage
Disagree	2	5.7	5.7
Neutral	9	25.7	31.4
Agree	17	48.6	80.0
Strongly Agree	7	20.0	100.0
Total	35	100.0	

The table-7 shows that twenty eight respondents (80%) indicated they are strongly agreed that the notion of workplace flexible practice is very new HR practice in Bangladesh, particularly in local private companies.

Table 7. New form of employment practice in Bangladeshi companies

Particulars	Frequency	Percentage	Cumulative Percentage
Agree	7	20.0	20.0
Strongly Agree	28	80.0	100.0
Total	35	100.0	

The table-8 shows the respondents opinions about the different options of applying flexible work practice in their organization. However, with regards to this statement, most respondents (63%), were neither agreed nor disagreed with this statement as they do not know the different option of workplace flexibility. However, 20% indicated they did agree that the firm is using few options of workplace flexible practice and 17% indicated they did strongly agree with this statement.

Table 8. Options of workplace flexibility in Bangladeshi companies

Particulars	Frequency	Percentage	Cumulative Percentage
Neutral	22	62.9	62.9
Agree	7	20.0	82.9
Strongly Agree	6	17.1	100.0
Total	35	100.0	

Table-9 shows that a very high percentage of respondents (80%) were strongly agreed that both the employees and employees have vital role to implement the workplace flexibility scheme in Bangladeshi local private companies.

Table 9. Role of the employers and employees in flexible work practices

Particulars	Frequency	Percentage	Cumulative Percentage
Agree	7	20.0	20.0
Strongly Agree	28	80.0	100.0
Total	35	100.0	

In addition, seven respondents (20%) were also agreed with the statement and commented that the support from the both employee's and employers' side are very vital for the successful implementation of workplace flexibility in Bangladeshi local private companies. With regards to the respondents' view on the importance of training and development for the HR staffs before implementing the workplace flexibility, it has found from the table-10 that more than half of respondents (57%) were neither agreed nor disagreed with the statement.

Table 10. Legal requirement and workplace flexibility practices

Particulars	Frequency	Percentage	Cumulative Percentage
Strongly Agree	35	100.0	100.0

They also commented that they do not know how the training and development can help organization to implement the workplace flexibility. However, nine respondents (26%) were agreed and six respondents (17%) were strongly disagreed with the statement. From the table-11, a high percentage of respondents (83%) were neither agreed nor disagreed with the statement and commented that they are not aware of the

relationship between the commitment levels of employees and the notion of workplace flexibility. They also stated that they did not know how the notion of employee participation, job involvement, and job redesign help companies to ensure the workplace flexibility. However, 17% respondents (6 out of 35) were strongly agreed that the commitment levels of employees can be enhanced by implementing workplace flexibility via job redesign or also work team.

During the interview, they also stated that workplace flexibility can be one way of increasing the level of commitment of employees.

Table 11. Women participation and workplace flexibility

Particulars	Frequency	Percentage	Cumulative Percentage
Disagree	15	42.9	42.9
Neutral	15	42.9	85.7
Agree	5	14.3	100.0
Total	35	100.0	

From the last section of the interview-based questionnaire, it has been found that respondents also stated comments related to the implementation of workplace flexibility in the context of Bangladesh. Some of the comments from the different respondents are presented together to achieve thematic linkages of the research objectives.

The head of group HR of participating firm agreed that HR staffs' knowledge on workplace flexibility can play key role for the implementation of the workplace flexibility, but also believed that an effective HR policy on workplace flexibility would also require:

'I think the top level commitment must be ensured and the mind set of HR staffs as well as other employees can play vital role to implement the workplace flexibility and therefore, it brings a transition of attitudes of employees towards new forms of management practices.'

In addition, the same respondent also replied that workplace flexibility also requires some sort of adjustment:

'There should be a new form of structures that need to be in place before talking about the new working practices. As a result, HR staffs and their understanding on workplace flexibility can be played vital role for implementing the workplace flexibility in practice'

Besides, one of the comments has been made by the HR manager that is quite clearly related to the employment system:

'The successful implementation of flexible work system will be heavily dependent on the mutual trust of both parties. And the collaborative cultures and work environment can also play the vital role in this regards. Therefore, the role of HR staffs' knowledge on flexible work practice is the critical success factor'

One of the HR executives mentioned that other issues related to the organizational system should also be considered:

'Owners in private companies as yet do not trust in allowing decision making to the employees. And the workers and managers are not yet feel morally responsible to own the flexibility. Therefore, the HR staffs must be made a driving force and must be knowledge and personality base'

8. Summary and Conclusion

The survey results suggest that Human Resources (HR) staffs have little knowledge on workplace flexibility and its practices. They also agreed that it is also necessary to consider few preconditions before implementing the workplace flexible practices in Bangladeshi companies. In addition, it appears that the majority of HR staffs felt that they are not aware of the notion of workplace flexibility at all. The respondents who have more than five years work experiences have knowledge on flexible work practices. The most commonly forms of workplace flexibility prevailing in local companies in Bangladesh are contractual type of work, part-time, and temporaries type of work. The research findings show that a very

few HR executives and HR assistants only aware of few workplace flexibility practices such as career break, purchased leave, part-year employment and flexible working year. The research findings show that 17% respondents mentioned that there is high scope of flexible work practices in Bangladeshi companies. In addition, the secondary data shows that there is high scope of implementing flexible labor practices in the informal sector of Bangladesh.

The labor force survey (2010) indicated that 78% labors were employed in informal sector and only 14% female labors were employed in formal sector. Few respondents (14%) were agreed that women participation in the labor market could play vital role for implementing workplace flexibility in Bangladesh.

The respondents also mentioned that the implementation of workplace flexibility depends on various HR practices such as job redesign, work team, participation and job involvement. The findings show that the employees' commitment level can be increased via workplace flexibility.

The Chi-Square results show that the HR staffs knowledge on workplace flexibility can play vital role for implementing the workplace flexibility. Basically, most of the respondents mentioned that they have not heard about the notion of workplace flexibility, therefore it becomes difficult for them to apply flexible work practices in their company. However, few respondents mentioned that the corporate policy can also play vital role for the implementation.

Although interesting information has emerged from this case study, there are some areas where further research could be carried out. Further insight could be gained by exploring more attitudinal information from HR staffs on some areas such as managerial and employees' perceptions on workplace flexibility and the reasons why respondents felt workplace flexibility are necessary. As the study was confined within in HR division, therefore the survey did not represent the female and male ratio of the whole organization. Further details could be obtained to see if there is any relationship between the rise of women participation and scope of workplace flexibility in Bangladeshi companies. It would be useful to conduct similar investigations to this case study into a number of companies working in different areas in Bangladesh, which could then be compared to discover common understanding, themes and issues related to workplace flexibility occurring across different industries. Although researchers will need to be aware of the limitations of comparing differently structured organizations and industries, it would provide a useful insight.

9. References

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