

Working hours, work-life conflict and health in precarious and “permanent” employment

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Keywords

Employment. Work hours. Shift work. Working conditions. Occupational health. Workers. Family. Conflict (psychology).

Abstract

Objectives

The expansion of precarious employment in OECD countries has been widely associated with negative health and safety effects. Although many shiftworkers are precariously employed, shiftwork research has concentrated on full-time workers in continuing employment. This paper examines the impact of precarious employment on working hours, work-life conflict and health by comparing casual employees to full-time, “permanent” employees working in the same occupations and workplaces.

Methods

Thirty-nine convergent interviews were conducted in two five-star hotels. The participants included 26 full-time and 13 casual (temporary) employees. They ranged in age from 19 to 61 years and included 17 females and 22 males. Working hours ranged from zero to 73 hours per week.

Results

Marked differences emerged between the reports of casual and full-time employees about working hours, work-life conflict and health. Casuals were more likely to work highly irregular hours over which they had little control. Their daily and weekly working hours ranged from very long to very short according to organisational requirements. Long working hours, combined with low predictability and control, produced greater disruption to family and social lives and poorer work-life balance for casuals. Uncoordinated hours across multiple jobs exacerbated these problems in some cases. Health-related issues reported to arise from work-life conflict included sleep disturbance, fatigue and disrupted exercise and dietary regimes.

Conclusions

This study identified significant disadvantages of casual employment. In the same hotels, and doing largely the same jobs, casual employees had less desirable and predictable work schedules, greater work-life conflict and more associated health complaints than “permanent” workers.

Resumo

Objetivos

O crescimento do número de empregos precários em países da OECD está largamente associado a efeitos negativos à saúde e segurança. Embora muitos trabalhadores em turnos tenham empregos precários, as pesquisas sobre o trabalho em turnos

Descritores

Emprego. Jornada de trabalho. Trabalho em turnos. Condições de trabalho. Saúde ocupacional. Trabalhadores. Família. Conflito (psicologia).

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concentram-se em trabalhadores em tempo integral com emprego contínuo. Assim, este estudo visou a investigar o impacto do emprego precário sobre as horas de trabalho, conflito trabalho-vida pessoal e saúde, comparando empregados sem vínculo empregatício com empregados “permanentes” em tempo integral em ocupações e locais de trabalho idênticos.

Métodos

Foram realizadas 39 entrevistas convergentes em dois hotéis cinco estrelas. Participaram 26 empregados em tempo integral e 13 sem vínculo empregatício (temporários), com idades entre 19 e 61 anos, sendo 17 do sexo feminino e 22 do sexo masculino. As horas de trabalho variaram de 0 a 73 horas semanais.

Resultados

Verificaram-se diferenças acentuadas entre os informes de empregados em tempo integral e os sem vínculo empregatício sobre as horas de trabalho, conflito trabalho-vida pessoal e saúde. Os empregados sem vínculo empregatício tenderam a trabalhar um número de horas bastante irregular sobre as quais tinham pouco controle. Suas jornadas de trabalho diárias e semanais eram muito longas ou muito curtas de acordo com as exigências organizacionais. Longas jornadas de trabalho, combinadas a baixa previsibilidade e pouco controle, produziram maior desagregação da vida familiar e social e um pior equilíbrio entre trabalho-vida pessoal para os empregados sem vínculo empregatício. A falta de coordenação das jornadas em vários empregos contribuíram para acentuar estes problemas em alguns casos. Entre os problemas de saúde decorrentes do conflito trabalho-vida pessoal estavam distúrbios do sono, cansaço e regimes alimentar e de exercícios desestruturados.

Conclusões

O estudo identificou grandes desvantagens do emprego sem vínculo empregatício. Trabalhando nos mesmos hotéis e ocupando praticamente as mesmas funções, os empregados sem vínculo empregatício tiveram horários de trabalho mais longos ao desejado e menos previsíveis, maior conflito trabalho-vida pessoal e mais queixas relativas à saúde que os empregados “permanentes”.

INTRODUCTION

Over the past two decades, OECD countries have experienced substantial growth in various forms of precarious employment, such as casual and temporary work, labour leasing, self-employed subcontracting and home-based work.^{5,6,12} Employers and the media often claim that the “flexibility” provided by precarious employment offers workers improved work-family balance and other lifestyle benefits. The reality, however, is that little is known about the impact of precarious employment on working hours and work-life conflict and the evidence that is available is predominantly negative.

Recent research indicates that precarious employment is widely associated with poorer occupational health and safety (OHS) outcomes, including inferior knowledge of OHS standards and entitlements and higher levels of injury, hazard exposure, disease and psychological distress.^{1,16} More than 80 per cent of studies examined in two recent reviews^{19,20} identified negative OHS effects across several categories of precarious employment. These negative findings were not systematically affected by the context in which the study was conducted (the country, industry or

occupation), the research methods used or the OHS indices measured.

Although many precarious employees work in the evening, at night and on weekends, shiftwork research has focused heavily on full-time employees in continuing employment. Little is therefore known about the relationship between working hours and OHS in precarious employment. However, a weak labour market position and tenuous employment are likely to mean that many precarious employees have less control over their hours than more securely employed workers.^{10,12} Significantly, studies of full-time shiftworkers indicate that low control over work hours leads to greater work-life conflict and, in turn, poorer health in terms of fatigue, physical symptoms and psychological well-being.^{17,18} There is evidence indicating that work-life conflict arising from long or socially undesirable working hours, particularly in the evening or on weekends, has negative effects on health.^{4,21} However, the extent to which work-life conflict arising from undesirable working hours affects the health or safety of precarious employees has yet to be empirically demonstrated.

Precarious employees are more likely than perma-

ment employees to work extremely short or extremely long hours. For example, temporary workers may be employed only a few hours a week while the unregulated hours of self-employed subcontractors may far exceed those of full-time employees doing similar tasks. Mayhew & Quinlan¹⁴ (1999) found that home-based garment workers reported longer working hours than factory-based workers, a reflection of low earnings and task-based payment. Evidence from the USA also indicates that part-time workers, two thirds of whom are precariously employed, are more likely to hold two or more jobs.¹² Multiple jobholding may pose greater safety risks (due to travel time, task reorientation and added stress) than working longer hours in a single job. Longer hours and multiple job holding may partially explain evidence from the Second European Workforce Survey that precarious employees report greater fatigue.³

Research on the health and safety effects of precarious employment has expanded rapidly since the mid 1990s.²⁰ Few studies have been conducted in hospitality, however, even though in many countries the sector is large, growing and heavily reliant on precarious workers.²² The use of subcontractors and temporary workers is especially widespread in fast food outlets, restaurants and hotels. To date, the limited research on OHS in hospitality has focused largely on young workers in the fast food industry, although greater attention is now being directed toward hotel workers.^{7,9,11} Unfortunately, most of this research has ignored employment status. One exception was a survey of young workers in a global fast food chain in which casuals typically worked approximately 17 hours per week.¹³ While most were willing to be reasonably flexible about their working hours, there was conflict between the employers' requirements and workers' preferences in relation to early shifts. Another study found that both self-employed and employee bar workers typically worked more than 49 hours per week.¹⁵ Despite this evidence, little is known about working hours and work-life conflict in the hospitality industry.

This paper examines the impact of precarious employment on working hours, work-life conflict and health. It reports the results of thirty-nine non-directive interviews in which the respondents are full-time or casual employees performing similar tasks in two five-star hotels. The interview process systematically identifies similarities and differences between the issues reported by casual and full-time employees. The study is part of a larger project examining the impact of precarious employment on OHS in three service industries: hospitality, call centres and road transport.

METHODS

Participants

Thirty-nine employees from two five-star hotels were interviewed. They were sampled across five operational areas: the food and beverage division (e.g. bar attendant, banquet supervisor), the rooms division (e.g. guest room attendant, bell person), sales and catering (e.g. conference and catering manager, sales manager), engineering (e.g. hotel engineer) and finance (e.g. accounts receivable clerk). They included 26 full-time, continuing employees and 13 casual employees, ranging in age from 19 to 61 years. The casual employees were paid by the hour and had no set working hours or leave entitlements. Seventeen of the participants were female and 22 were male. Reported average weekly working hours ranged from 16 hours per week to 65 hours per week. Of the 13 casual employees, 8 had another job but of the 26 full-time employees, only 1 worked elsewhere. Several casual employees were undergraduate students in the hospitality management school linked to one of the hotels.

Interviews

Separate convergent interviewing processes were conducted in each hotel. Convergent interviewing⁸ is a structured process within which in-depth, non-directive interviews are conducted and interpreted. The process iterates between data collection and interpretation, enabling researchers to refine research questions and interpretations across a series of interviews. Interviewers meet initially to plan the interviews. They separately interview one respondent each and then individually summarise and interpret that interview. After reaching tentative interpretations, the interviewers meet to compare notes, test and refine interpretations and develop probe questions for later interviews. The initial interviews are almost completely non-directive, starting with broad questions that impose minimal constraints on responses and slowly moving to more specific probe questions. Later interviews begin with the same broad questions but become more focused toward the end, when probe questions are used to explore and clarify issues from previous interviews.

The interviewers develop tentative interpretations from the early interviews and gradually converge toward firmer interpretations during successive cycles of interviews. Convergence is achieved by discarding tangential information, or idiosyncratic material mentioned by single interviewees, and exploring issues mentioned by multiple interviewees. The proc-

ess concludes when issues and interpretations do not change significantly over two successive cycles of interviews. The initial interview questions used in the present study are presented in Appendix 1.

Ethics

This project was approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee of The University of New South Wales (approval number: HREC 01247) and complies with the provisions of the Helsinki Declaration of the World Medical Association.

RESULTS

The convergent interviewing process was conducted to identify issues of convergence or divergence within and between the casual and full-time groups. It was considered that convergence existed between the groups if similar issues were identified within both groups. It was considered that there was divergence if a convergent issue identified in one group did not emerge in the other group or if convergence identified in one group was contradicted by convergence in the other (e.g. if one group agreed that excessive working hours were a problem and the other group agreed that hours were not excessive). The interviews identified several convergent issues within the casual group concerning working hours, work-life conflict and health effects. Several issues of divergence between the casual and full-time groups were also identified.

Working hours

There was strong convergence amongst casual staff regarding concerns about working hours and their negative effects. Casuals reported substantially greater variation in working hours than full-time staff. For many, starting times and shift durations varied markedly from day to day, depending on a variety of organisational and environmental factors, such as conference or seminar bookings and the various seasonal, economic and social cycles that affected occupancy rates. In the food and beverage division of one hotel, two full-time employees also reported very long hours, up to 54 hours per week in one case and a maximum of over 70 in another. These employees were, respectively, a supervisor and manager.

The working hours reported by casuals ranged from zero to 73 hours per week. The shift durations reported ranged from two hours to 18 hours and start and finishing times for shifts were highly variable. Many casuals were only advised of the starting times for their shifts in advance, with finishing times being decided by a

manager or supervisor at some time during the shift. Some casuals were asked to do split shifts with little warning (for example, after they had commenced work on the shift). They could be sent home within a few hours of starting a shift and asked to return several hours later. One worker, for example, reported being required to work from 6:00 am to 9:00 am and then having to remain nearby until he was required again from 2:00 pm to 6:00 pm. To do seven hours of work, he had to invest 15 hours of his time; he left home at 4:30 am and did not arrive home again until approximately 7:30 pm. By contrast, most full-time employees reported much more regular hours, often fixed shifts of eight hours with limited overtime.

When casuals worked very long daily and weekly hours they often also worked very intensively. Many workers, casual and full-time, reported excessive work pressure. For example, an experienced maid working in the housekeeping department described constant pressure from having to clean 13 rooms in each eight-hour shift. One woman reported that she did not take a meal break, or any other break, at work for the first three months she was employed in housekeeping. Thereafter, she had taken one 30-minute break per shift. As many casuals were employed at night and in the evening, it is not surprising that fatigue was also a common complaint.

Work-life conflict

Variability and unpredictability of working hours were significant sources of work-life conflict for the casual staff. Hours were excessive in some weeks and insufficient in others. The negative effects of unpredictability were compounded by a lack of control over hours. One casual worker reported that the work schedule could "change three or four times a week". Another reported, "I don't make plans for anything. The roster will change quite immensely. Things will be added, shifts will be changed".

Despite the pressure imposed by long working hours and high work intensity, some casuals felt they could not refuse work when it was offered, for fear that refusal might jeopardise offers of work in the future, or at least that they might be offered less work and even less desirable hours. One reported, "as a casual person we [sic] can't really say no" and another observed, "it is hard to say, 'no, I can't give you a hand'". Some casuals indicated that they had worked whilst ill because of this pressure.

Casuals reported that the socially undesirable timing of their work also contributed to work-life conflict. Evening and weekend work were particularly

problematic. So, too, were split shifts, which frequently combined early morning and evening work on the same day, effectively preventing contact with family and friends at both ends of the day.

Unpredictable and fragmented hours increased commuting time, further impinging upon time available for family and other activities outside work. Both the hotels studied were in central city locations and some workers lived in distant suburbs that necessitated long commuting times. One casual reported having to commute for three hours to do two or three hours' work when shifts were split or curtailed without warning. Some casual employees reported they were only told of shift allocations one or two days before the work schedule commenced, with negative effects on their capacity to organise their family and social lives effectively. Others reported that tiredness and negative mood associated with long working hours had a negative impact on relationships at home.

Health effects of working hours and work-life conflict

Casual employees reported several negative effects of variable working hours and resultant work-life conflict. They included poor sleep, irregular exercise, unhealthy and irregular meals, interference with tertiary study and disrupted social and family lives. One reported "I don't have a life at all"; she was chronically tired and tended to just stay at home when not working. Another reported "I don't really have much time at the moment to do very much but it's part of the job, I guess" and noted she could not really decline work when it was offered. In relation to control over hours, one casual claimed "... it's bad here. Poor rostering, as well. And, also, ... the inflexibility of working hours ... which is not really good to staff. There's [sic] complaints every day. Hours are crazy".

A full-time employee recognised the disadvantage of casuals, noting that "casual times are unpredictable and changing ... don't have much notice - one or two days notice to organise other activities around work ... hard to find time for yourself". Some casual employees did value the opportunity to work longer hours, and earn more, when the hotel was busy.

On the other hand, many full-time employees reported that, although they sometimes worked long hours, they had a satisfactory level of control. They could organise time off for important activities and take time off in lieu when they did work overtime. One reported "My hours are constant - that's a plus for me. I know where I'm going to be at a certain times, so I can plan around it, for social life and home

life ... It's better being full-time than casual ... I've got to take Thursday and the next Thursday off. I just said to my boss, "I need these", and he said, "no worries". Most full-time employees, especially non-managers, reported good work-life balance.

DISCUSSION

The results of this study highlight important differences in work organisation and working hours between casual and full-time employees. For casual workers, the combination of high work intensity, variable and unpredictable working hours, and consequent work-life conflict, produced problems with diet, exercise and sleep. While work intensity was also an issue for many permanent workers, more stable and controllable working hours appeared to diminish work-life conflict and its subsequent negative effects.

The findings concerning working hours indicated that, in the same workplaces and doing the same jobs, casual employees had much less desirable work schedules. Casuals were exposed to unpredictable variations in both daily and weekly working hours. Most had experienced periods during which they worked very long daily and weekly hours. Casual employees reported less control over their hours, not the greater flexibility that employers often claim is a benefit of casual employment. Concerns about fatigue reported by casuals were linked to both long hours and the unpredictability of those hours. There was also stronger agreement amongst casuals that their work schedules generated work-life conflict than there was amongst full-time workers. Casuals reported greater difficulties with sleep, time for family and social relationships, diet and participation in sport, regular exercise and other recreation.

In relation to methodology and interpretation, it is important to note that some of the negative effects of precarious employment may extend to workers who are more securely employed in the same industry or workplace. The presence of precarious employees may produce pressures that diminish the working conditions of all workers, for example by increasing demands on more secure workers to absorb a greater volume of work or take on additional tasks and supervision due to reductions in the full-time workforce.² This phenomenon, if present, would reduce apparent differences between precarious and more secure workers employed in the same workplace. In the present study, for example, the presence of precarious employees may have contributed to the excessive work intensity reported by permanent employees. It is also unclear to what extent the results of a qualitative case study such as this one

can be generalised. The case study approach does, however, provide insights that would be difficult to get from quantitative methods and provides rich data from which items can be developed for questionnaire surveys. Rigorous surveys, in turn, provide a better basis for systematic assessment of the generalisability of the results. The authors are currently conducting a survey of this nature.

Subject to these methodological limitations, the present findings suggest that one form of precarious employment, casual work, can carry significant disadvantages in terms of working hours, work-life conflict and health. Casual work is also likely to present a particularly intractable challenge to the regulation of working hours. Not only does the limited organisational power wielded by many casual employees result in them having a diminished capacity to exert control over work schedules and protect themselves from the most undesirable shift allocations but, for various interrelated reasons, they are also likely to

derive limited benefit from legal regulation. Trade union membership is often low amongst casuals, limiting wider advocacy of their interests, and a combination of non-standard working hours, multiple jobs and fear of reporting illness or injury may make them less visible to OHS inspectors. In view of the disadvantages they may face in relation to working hours, work-life conflict and health, casual workers warrant more extensive attention in shiftwork research than they have attracted to date.

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APPENDIX 1

Initial Convergent Interview Questions

The following questions were used in all interviews:

1. "Does your work here affect your health and safety?"
2. "Do you think your working hours affect your health and safety?"
3. "How do you feel this job affects the balance between your work and the rest of your life?"
4. "Do you think your work-life balance affects your health and safety?"
5. "Do you feel being full-time [or casual] has benefits or disadvantages for your health and safety?"
6. "Do you feel that being full-time [or casual] affects how much health and safety training you get here at the ...[name of hotel]?"

At the end of the interview, demographic and job information was collected, including whether the interviewee had other jobs and his/her average weekly working hours in the hotel, average total weekly working hours, age, marital status and number and age of dependent children.