1. US research: The effects of workplace flexibility on health behaviours

Workplace flexibility is widely believed to be beneficial to employee health and well-being, but there is a surprising lack of empirical research demonstrating this connection. Some studies have shown little or inconsistent associations between various dimensions of health and well-being and workplace flexibility, whereas others have suggested flexibility may contribute to fewer health complaints and less depression. This study by Grzywacz, Casey and Jones from the Wake University School of Medicine adds more fuel to the argument that there is a clear association between well-being (eg more sleep, more exercise and enhanced feelings of lifestyle healthiness) and workplace flexibility.

1.1 Aim

This study aims to improve understanding of the potential effect of workplace flexibility on worker lifestyle habits. There are two aspects to the research, first, it is expected that people who believe that their company provides needed flexibility will have healthier lifestyle habits such as longer sleep duration, more frequent physical activity and regular practice of stress management techniques. Second, it is expected that people who report that their level of flexibility over time has either remained constant or increased will report an increase in positive lifestyle habits.

1.2 Method

Employees participating in this study were from a large multinational pharmaceutical company which is recognised as being family-friendly and offering a variety of alternatives for employees to work flexibly, including a compressed work week, flexi-time, job-share and tele-work. Data from a Health Reimbursement Arrangement (HRA) questionnaire from 2004 and 2005 and from the company HR department was analysed for 3193 employees (1331 men and 1862 women).

Perceived flexibility was measured using a single item in the HRA questionnaire "I have the flexibility I need to meet my work, personal and family commitments". Five health behaviours were then measured: sleep, frequency of exercise, participation in health education seminars, stress management and self-rated lifestyle.

Changes in perceived flexibility was defined using items in the 2004 and 2005 HRAs which asked participants if they had enough flexibility for their personal, professional and family needs. Options for response were that flexibility had declined, remained stable or increased. Individuals were coded as to whether their lifestyle behaviour in 2005 exceeded that of 2004, ie increased sleep, more exercise, greater participation in health seminars and stress management programs and overall healthier lifestyle.

1.3 Results

Controlling for several demographic and occupational characteristics, as expected the results indicated consistent associations between perceived flexibility and healthy lifestyle habits.

i. **Sleep:** Average levels of sleep were significantly higher for those who agreed that the company provided sufficient flexibility (up an average of 20 to 28 points) in contrast to those who felt the company flexibility did not meet their needs.

ii. **Exercise:** Similarly, the average frequency of exercise was also significantly higher for those who agreed the company provided sufficient flexibility (up an average of 30 to 44 points) compared to those who did not.

iii. **Health information:** There was no evidence suggesting that greater flexibility is associated with regular attendance at health seminars.

iv. **Stress management:** The odds of practicing stress management techniques were higher for those who strongly believed they had required flexibility relative to those who disagreed.

v. **Lifestyle:** Those who agreed that they had sufficient flexibility were more likely to believe that their lifestyle was healthy.

Looking at changes in flexibility over time, there was inconsistent support for the hypothesis that workplace flexibility will contribute to enhanced lifestyle behaviours.

i. **Sleep:** People who reported constant and improved flexibility reported an increase in hours of sleep per night from 2004 to 2005 in comparison with those who perceived flexibility had declined.

ii. **Health information:** Individuals who had stable flexibility over the period were 38% more likely to increase their attendance at health education seminars and report a better self-appraised lifestyle than those whose flexibility had declined.

iii. **Exercise and stress management:** Changes in the frequency of exercise and participation in stress management initiatives did not significantly differ by changes in perceived flexibility over time.

1.4 Discussion

Overall, these results show that perceived flexibility provided by the company was associated with nearly all the health behaviours examined in this study. Moreover, a change in perceived flexibility over time was associated with three of the five outcomes indicative of positive behaviour change. These results provide preliminary support for the overarching hypothesis that flexibility in the workplace contributes to better lifestyle habits.

As with previous studies, this research finds that greater flexibility is associated with better sleep habits, more participation in stress management and healthier perceived lifestyle. In contrast with other studies, however, this research found a link between greater perceived flexibility and increased exercise. Possible reasons for this inconsistency may be due to the sample in this research being from one organisation which is known for supporting workplace flexibility, where other studies have sampled the general community.

The findings are significant because they suggest that workplace flexibility may

play an important role in initiating healthy lifestyle habits. This area of study is, however, underdeveloped and more systematic research is needed to provide more evidence for the value and potential of using flexibility in the workplace to improve well-being.

There were some limitations with this study, namely (i) the single organisation sample, (ii) the difficulty for participants in understanding the "perceived flexibility" dimension as this is a subjective understanding, and changes in perception may reflect subtle organisational changes; and (iii) stronger measures of flexibility could be used to more definitively capture the potential effect of flexibility on well-being.

It is unknown also, if the positive effects on well-being are due to the time available to workers to engage in healthy lifestyle behaviours when they work flexibly, or if the benefits are due to an organisational culture which values health and well-being generally more broadly. Either way, the research does suggest that an organisation which implements and supports flexibility, and has a culture which encourages well-being, will have employees who report more positive healthy behaviours.

1.5 Conclusion

More research in this area would be extremely beneficial, and it could explore particular types of workplace flexibility, gender differences in healthy behaviour and whether there are differences between groups who have heavier caring responsibilities and those who do not. The research does demonstrate, however, that when employees are given the opportunity to use the flexibility they need, they will participate in healthier behaviours and presumably reduce negative health-related outcomes such as sickness and stress. This may lead to organisations being able to reduce losses and increase productivity.

For more information see Grzywacz, J., Casey, P. & Jones, F. (2007) 'The effects of workplace flexibility on health behaviours: a cross-sectional and longitudinal analysis' *Journal of Occupational and Environmental Medicine* Vol 49.

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