HEALTH AND EMPLOYMENT BRIEFING

November 2012

HOW FLEXIBLE WORKING PATTERNS AFFECT HEALTH

As a result of recent economic changes, more people than ever before are working part time, have temporary jobs, or have become self employed. Recent data from the Office for National Statistics (November 2012) suggests that many are underemployed, that is, they would like to work more hours than they currently do. Conversely, there is a long hours culture for many people in full time work.

Flexible working arrangements are becoming more common but the impacts of such flexibility on staff health and wellbeing are largely unknown. There is some evidence that flexibility in working patterns which gives the worker more choice or control is likely to have positive effects on health and wellbeing whereas lack of control has adverse affects. This briefing summarises recent evidence about: part time, temporary work, shift work, self employment and working long hours.

1. Part time

Summary of the benefits of part-time work:
- If an employee is sick or has an injury but is still able to do some work, part time work is beneficial and has been found to be good for health in the long run.
- Part-time work is associated with lower levels of role overload.
- Part time work has been found to lower work-to-family interference.
- Part time work may be beneficial for gradual retirement; improvement in general health status of partial retirement compared with abrupt retirement.

Summary of the negative effects of part-time work:
- Part time work has been associated with increased alcohol misuse among young adults
- Part time workers have been found to have an increased risk of depression
- Young adult part time workers have been found to have lower levels of wellbeing, lower self-esteem and life satisfaction and report more depressive symptoms
- Employees who are involuntary part time workers report more chronic disease and health related problems
• Inconsistencies and intensity in part time work schedule has been related to a greater likelihood of unhealthy behaviours, including drug use, inadequate sleep and exercise, and poor nutrition—Specific to adolescent part time workers.

2. **Temporary Work**
Temporary employment represents one of the most prominently utilised flexible working arrangements in the modern economy. Research examining the health risks of temporary employment has been limited to date.

*Summary of the effects temporary employment has on health compared to permanent employment:*
- Higher risk of having fatal and non-fatal occupational injury among temporary workers
- Job insecurity linked to poor mental health and severe depression
- Temporary employment has been associated with job dissatisfaction
- Higher prevalence of fatigue, backache, and muscular pains amongst temporary employees.
- Some evidence suggesting temporary workers have a higher mortality rate than permanent workers, particularly for alcohol and smoking related causes of death.
- High risk of sickness presenteeism – this results in staff working while ill due to a fear of job loss
- High risk of work related sickness absence as temporary employees incur high psychological demands and low control in their jobs.
- The majority of temporary workers are hired on an as-needed basis during times of excessive workload which can be strenuous and tiring; this results in a negative impact on their physical health

**Implications/suggestions**
- Higher risk of occupational injuries among temporary employees has been related to greater inexperience and lack of induction and safety training at the workplaces. Therefore, there is a need to increase temporary workers’ knowledge of workplace hazards as a way of reducing the risk of occupational injuries.

- Temporary workers receive less information about their work environment and have less control (job autonomy) over work conditions which has been associated with psychological morbidity. It is important for temporary workers to receive all the knowledge and benefits permanent workers do to feel support by employers.
3. **Shift Work**

Types of shift work vary but common examples include: evening shifts, irregular or unspecified shifts, mixed schedules, night shifts and rotating shifts. Research suggests that shift workers are more prone to physical and mental ill health compared to day workers.

*Summary of health effects of shift work:*

- Disruption of body clock (circadian rhythm)
- Increases risk of anxiety, depression and neuroticism
- Severe reduction in quality and quantity of sleep - Fatigue
- Increases risk of high blood pressure
- Increases risk of high cholesterol and diabetes
- Increases risk for cardiovascular diseases - heart attack (23%), coronary events (24%) and stroke (5%)
- Shift workers have a 48.4 per cent higher risk of incurring a work injury
- Lack of time for recovery between shift can lead to increased risks of cardiovascular diseases
- Shift workers found to have greater reliance on sedatives and/or stimulants

*Implications/ suggestions that aim to manage the effects of shift work*

- Screening programmes could help identify and treat risk factors, such as high blood pressure and cholesterol levels.
- Shift workers could be educated about what symptoms to look out for, which might indicate early heart problems.
- Avoid permanent night shifts, limiting shifts to a maximum of 12 hours and ensure workers have a minimum of two full nights' sleep between day and night shifts.

4. **Self-employment**

The number of people who are self employed has risen substantially since 2008. Research by the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development shows that, since the start of the recession, the self employed come from a much wider array of backgrounds and occupations than before. While some of these newly self-employed may stay in self employment, it is likely that most would take a job with an employer if they could find one. Being self employed brings both benefits and disadvantages.

*Summary of positive impact of being self-employed:*

- Higher life satisfaction amongst self-employed workers.
- Higher levels of job satisfaction reported by self-employed workers.

Research has identified several factors that are assumed to explain higher levels of job satisfaction and being more satisfied with life in general; acting as one’s own
boss (independent), the absence of hierarchy, control over working hours, and the effort put into the job.

Summary of adverse effects of being self-employed compared to organizational employment:

- Self-employed workers identify their job as being mentally straining
- Higher levels of work stress reported amongst self-employed
- Self-employed have been found to suffer from loss of sleep and fatigue
- Self-employed people are more likely to experience a deterioration in mental health - stress, depression, anxiety
- There is a lower level of general health amongst self-employed - they tend to smoke more, have higher levels of obesity and report more physical health problems

It has been suggested that higher levels of responsibility and pressure that are associated with self-employment increases work stress, loss of sleep, worrying and exhaustion. Additionally, the long hours self-employed workers often work have been linked to an increase in health related problems.

5. Working long hours
The UK has a tradition of working long hours compared to the rest of Europe. A growing body of evidence suggests that long working hours adversely affects the health and wellbeing of employees. Below is a summary of research aimed at understanding the effects of long working hours on employee health.

- Employees that work long hours have been found to be twice as likely to have a heart attack than other employees working shorter hours.
- People with longer working hours are more likely to be exposed to high job demands and to have less time for recreational leisure-time activities leading to a higher risk of cardiovascular disorders.
- Strong evidence suggesting that working long hours leads to poor work-life balance. Control over when an individual works is very important in the extent to which working long hours will impact on home and family life.
- Increase in fatigue - higher number of accidents at work and lower performance.
- Greater risk for experiencing depression – especially for female employees.
- Long hours associated with an unhealthy weight gain in men.
- Increase in smoking and alcohol consumption for both men and women.
- Increased risk of hypertension.
- Higher risk for diabetes.
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References:


The information contained in this briefing is not comprehensive. If you are aware of other research relevant to this topic, please let us know and we will be pleased to add it to future editions.

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