

Skorstad, Egil J. / Ramsdal, Helge (Eds.)
**Flexible Organizations and the New Working Life –
 A European Perspective**

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Do companies really increasingly use flexible patterns and is that good or bad news for employees? These are the questions addressed by Egil J. Skorstad and Helge Ramsdal in their anthology “Flexible Organizations and the New Working Life”. Herewith, they contribute to the long-lasting discussion about the new type of organization, i.e. the ‘flexible organization’ and its impact on working life in general and working conditions in particular. Scholars around the world relate the companies’ new competitive environment to terms as globalisation and information technology in a knowledge and service society. To master this new environment, firms are advised to be dynamic and flexible as the bureaucratic organization is said to be outdated in our times⁴.

In their introduction, the editors present the effect of flexibility on working life and working conditions as not clear and controversially discussed among international scholars. Those in favour of the concept argue that it enhances varied and challenging work, empowerment and improves employability, seeing the workers as beneficiaries. Those against the model of flexible firms suspect more intensified work, less long term employment, less protection and union support, seeing the employers as beneficiaries.

Skorstad and Ramsdal see the reason for this ambiguous picture of flexible organizations in the term ‘flexibility’ for it is employed and understood in a “myriad of ways” [p. 2]. Therefore, the volume starts in chapter 2 (*Egil J. Skorstad*) with the deconstruction of the term ‘flexibility’ into four dimensions: ‘employment practices’, ‘organizational structure’, ‘culture’ and ‘network’, all being interdependent. The following contributions in this volume empirically investigate and discuss the issue of flexibility in those four dimensions for the private and public sectors in UK, Sweden, Norway, Italy and France with the help of national surveys, company- or industry case studies with qualitative interviews as well as document analysis for a country study. In the final chapter 12 (*Egil J. Skorstad* and *Helge Ramsdal*) the editors discuss the results of the contributions in regard to their previously created model of flexibility, building therewith the frame of the book.

The chapters 3 – 6 deal with the dimension ‘employment practices’ and focus on two main questions: Is there a trend towards more flexible working practices? How do they affect working conditions? All the contributions employ John Atkinson’s model of the ‘flexible firm’: splitting up the workforce in 1) a fix core of workers who are functionally flexible, ensuring quick qualitative adaptability in the company and 2) a peripheral group of workers that can easily be changed numerically depending on demand, ensuring a quantitative adaptability. Taking this model as basis, the above stated questions are answered: Some evidence for flexible working practices can be observed (chapter 3: *Michael Rose*, chapter 4: *Harriet Bradley*) but no clear trend towards an in-

⁴ See for example Schreyögg (1999).

crease of their use can be identified (chapter 5: *Brigita Eriksson* and *Jan Ch. Karlsson*). Apart from that it is shown that the reasons for more flexible practices may also be caused by gender and industry effects⁵ (chapter 6: *R. Øystein Strøm*). The effect of flexible employment practices on the workplace life was perceived negative (chapter 3) or diverse, depending on the age of the employees (chapter 4). Considering these results for the dimension ‘employment practices’, the editors conclude by wondering if either there is already sufficient flexibility, so that no further development is necessary, or if Atkinson’s model of the ‘flexible firm’ might be invalid.

Even though the editors themselves stress that employment practices is only one dimension of flexible organisations, the remaining three dimensions are only dealt with in three contributions. Chapter 7 (*Philippe R. Mossé*) investigates the ‘organizational structure’ in French and Italian hospitals, chapter 8 (*Henrietta Huzell*) explores the ‘culture’ in the Swedish Rail Industry and chapter 9 (*Stephen Ackroyd*) discusses the ‘network pattern’ of the British Manufacturing industry. The results can be summarized as follows: by implementing flexible patterns, institutional backgrounds as the respective industry and unions as well as the attitude of the workforce have a high impact on the success of such implementation and the perceived effect on working conditions.

The remaining two chapters (*Helge Ramsdal*; *Tor Claussen*) deal with the special role of the Scandinavian countries with their highly collaborative agreements between unions and employers in a globalizing world. It is shown how these institutional backgrounds can create a culture which facilitates the implementation of flexible patterns ensuring positive effects for employees and employers.

The main idea in this volume is the deconstruction of the term ‘flexibility’ into interdependent dimensions. This offers an explanation for the missing empirical evidence of the flexible organization⁶ as the change in one dimension might lead to unexpected effects in another dimension. The issue of the flexible firm cannot be narrowed to flexible working practices, as these “... may turn out to be of minor importance compared to what may be obtained through structural, cultural or network arrangement” [p. 259]. Given the importance of all the dimensions, it would have been desirable to represent them equally in this volume. However, the crucial question of the beginning of the book, if flexibility is beneficiary for the employer or the employee, is answered in the concluding chapter of the volume: The employees’ compliance can be reached either by commitment of the workers as described in the Scandinavian model or it can be enforced by threats and constraints. Networks with asymmetrical relations of power and authority in favour of one firm as well as the transfer of power from management to shareholder seem to foster the negative effects of flexible patterns for the employees; nowadays even in Scandinavian countries.

The book’s focus on Scandinavia and few other European countries is a welcomed change in the discussion about flexible organizations mainly carried out on the

⁵ Gender effect: more women entering the workforce; industry effect: development towards a service industry traditionally employing more flexible working patterns.

⁶ Next to the ambiguous evidence in this volume, see for example: (Bolin & Härenstam (2008); Morris & Farrell (2007)).

American continent. The European heterogeneity⁷ necessitates a dissociation of the American discussion especially in terms of empirical evidence since the issue has mainly been described in a conceptualized way. Skorstad and Ramsdal have edited a multidisciplinary anthology, containing of multiple methods as national surveys, case studies and document analyses in private and public firms. They have succeeded furthermore in editing a book that is well integrated for each contribution is deeply routed into the framing model of the editors. The cross-references of the single contributions and the common theoretical basis are only examples. By highlighting the special Scandinavian role and therewith a certain European perspective, the editors pay tribute to the title of their book. Summing up, this anthology can be warmly suggested to anyone, who wants to read not one more conceptual essay⁸ about 'flexible', 'intelligent', 'boundaryless', 'network', 'post-bureaucratic', 'post-modern' etc. organizations, but to read a work from a European perspective full of empirical evidence and reflecting thoughts.

References

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⁷ As shown for example in Mayrhofer et al. (2004).

⁸ See for an overview of the different approaches: Mayrhofer et al. (2002).

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