Flexible working conditions and their effects on employee health and wellbeing

Joyce Kerry, Pabayo Roman, Critchley Julia A, Bambra Clare

Authors' objectives
Background: Flexible working conditions are increasingly popular in developed countries but the effects on employee health and wellbeing are largely unknown. Objectives: To evaluate the effects (benefits and harms) of flexible working interventions on the physical, mental and general health and wellbeing of employees and their families. Search methods: Our searches (July 2009) covered 12 databases including the Cochrane Public Health Group Specialised Register, CENTRAL; MEDLINE; EMBASE; CINAHL; PsycINFO; Social Science Citation Index; ASSIA; IBSS; Sociological Abstracts; and ABI/Inform. We also searched relevant websites, handsearched key journals, searched bibliographies and contacted study authors and key experts. Selection criteria: Randomised controlled trials (RCT), interrupted time series and controlled before and after studies (CBA), which examined the effects of flexible working interventions on employee health and wellbeing. We excluded studies assessing outcomes for less than six months and extracted outcomes relating to physical, mental and general health/ill health measured using a validated instrument. We also extracted secondary outcomes (including sickness absence, health service usage, behavioural changes, accidents, work-life balance, quality of life, health and wellbeing of children, family members and co-workers) if reported alongside at least one primary outcome. Data collection and analysis: Two experienced review authors conducted data extraction and quality appraisal. We undertook a narrative synthesis as there was substantial heterogeneity between studies. Main results: Ten studies fulfilled the inclusion criteria. Six CBA studies reported on interventions relating to temporal flexibility: self-scheduling of shift work (n = 4), flexitime (n = 1) and overtime (n = 1). The remaining four CBA studies evaluated a form of contractual flexibility: partial/gradual retirement (n = 2), involuntary part-time work (n = 1) and fixed-term contract (n = 1). The studies retrieved had a number of methodological limitations including short follow-up periods, risk of selection bias and reliance on largely self-reported outcome data. Four CBA studies on self-scheduling of shifts and one CBA study on gradual/partial retirement reported statistically significant improvements in either primary outcomes (including systolic blood pressure and heart rate; tiredness; mental health, sleep duration, sleep quality and alertness; self-rated health status) or secondary health outcomes (co-workers social support and sense of community) and no ill health effects were reported. Flexitime was shown not to have significant effects on self-reported physiological and psychological health outcomes. Similarly, when comparing individuals working overtime with those who did not the odds of ill health effects were not significantly higher in the intervention group at follow up. The effects of contractual flexibility on self-reported health (with the exception of gradual/partial retirement, which when controlled by employees improved health outcomes) were either equivocal or negative. No studies differentiated results by socio-economic status, although one study did compare findings by gender but found no differential effect on self-reported health outcomes. Authors’ conclusions: The findings of this review tentatively suggest that flexible working interventions that increase worker control and choice (such as self-scheduling or gradual/partial retirement) are likely to have a positive effect on health outcomes. In contrast, interventions that were motivated or dictated by organisational interests, such as fixed-term contract and involuntary part-time employment, found equivocal or negative health effects. Given the partial and methodologically limited evidence base these findings should be interpreted with caution. Moreover, there is a clear need for well-designed intervention studies to delineate the impact of flexible working conditions on health, wellbeing and health inequalities.

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