

Flexible working: organisational liberation or individual straight jacket?

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This paper addresses the practice-derived concept of 'flexible working' in order to challenge the lack of critical thinking in much Facilities Management (FM) research and writing. Through comparison of the field of FM with literature from other management fields, it proposes that much FM 'research' is concerned with the validation of practice-based concepts, which have been derived and implemented in small sections of specific organisations with self-interest in their success and promotion. In so doing, it supports Nutt's (1998) critical reflection upon the lack of theoretical research in the FM field.

Introduction

At the British Institute of Facilities Management (BIFM) Annual Conference, held in Cambridge in September 1998, an Open Debate was held on the subject of Flexible Working. The debate was chaired by broadcaster, Martyn Lewis, and comprised a panel of 3 'experts' who were questioned by Lewis, with some input of questions from the floor. Of the panel members, 2 had backgrounds in the IT industries, whilst the third represented a charitable body which studies health and social care issues and works with the trade union movement. With a varied background to the panel, it might be expected that the debate would raise contrasting views on issues of concern to both organisations, and to the individuals within them, about the subject of new working patterns, such as are expressed in management literature from other fields (Tregaskis, 1997; Daniels, 1998). However, other than a few questions from the floor - raising issues which were not addressed by the panel - there was little attempt at critical appraisal of the subject area. The panel side stepped any critical discussion in response to a question from one of the authors; on whether flexible working might be viewed as an organisational concept which represents a new form of covert, draconian control for the employee. Rather, the panel appeared to reach a consensus view of how "there is strong evidence that demand for this kind of flexibility will increase" (Monkcom, 1998, p104), and that "it fits with the current labour market trends (working partners, flexibility, portfolio, whole life view) and is politically correct (equal opportunities, family friendly)" (Jupp, 1998, p102).

Throughout the Conference, the general approach appeared to be one which relied upon, and added weight to, a shared view amongst organisations, managers and employees, that "new ways of working are about releasing innovation and creativity" (McLennan and Cassels, 1998, p76), and that those who participate in flexible working "have a more flexible life with regard to home and can re-discover their families and social life, giving greater staff satisfaction by balancing work and personal needs" (Jupp, 1998, p103). Such a consensus view is not, however, supported by management literature from other fields, which enter into critical

debate as to whether new management practices in support of organisational flexibility might be viewed, not as empowering and liberating to the individual but, as involving "a shift from overt threat to 'moral coercion'" (Scarborough, 1998, p707). Whilst the FM field discusses the positive nature of flexible working, other studies have indicated that increased flexibility for remote working contributes to "more negative spillover for people who reported greater work-related anxiety" (Daniels, 1998).

Many in the FM field appear to be totally enthused by the concept that "technology will, at some stage in the future, allow almost anything to be done, anywhere. The only question remaining is 'What do you want to do?'" (Gray et al., 1993, p271). They welcome the challenge that they should "tear down the walls. Send your workers home." They firmly believe that "the company of the future...is not housed in some corporate castle on the hill. (It is) spread across the land, in cars and living rooms, in client's offices and hotel-like modules" (Ogilvie, 1994, p27). These concepts of flexibility are constructed around a focus on the individual who is an empowered knowledge worker, with large amounts of self-determination in regard to the setting, timing and nature of work. The writers, however, believe that there is a need for FM research to critically engage with organisational discourse on flexibility and empowerment. It may indeed present opportunities for self-determination to sections of the workforce - most likely to those who would *always* be empowered, whether working with an abacus, or with a laptop and mobile telephone! It must, however, be questioned "as to whether it (addresses) relatively low grade task-centred involvement or a more significant form of participation and shared decision-making" (Wilkinson, 1998) for those who are not members of the 'inner circle' of knowledge and power.

Views of a flexible future

Literature on new workplace concepts in support of flexible working highlights a number of recurring driving forces for change, which commonly include both employee-centred and organisation-focused drivers. In these texts, flexible working is seen:-

- to serve "as a response to employee demands", and also, "to reduce (the) cost base" for the organisation (Monkcom, 1998, p105)
- as a means "to adjust (workplace strategies) to the continuously changing demands of workers", whilst seeking "cost reduction" for the organisation (van Wagenberg, 1998, p71)
- to promote "increases (in) employee morale", whilst "the main benefit is that it reduces operating costs" for the organisation (Management Today, 1998, p16)

In the first two examples, from the FM literature field, the possible competing nature of the demands of workers and organisation, and the contradictory nature of the terms of improvement and reduction, are given little consideration. There is perceptual comment that "employees *seem* (italics added) to have mixed feelings about innovations" (van Wagenberg, 1998, p76); but only in the latter text, from the field of Human Resource Management (HRM), is there detailed consideration of how flexible working practices may make "employees feel isolated, uncertain of their job responsibilities, (with) bad working conditions within their home and (feeling) demotivated by the company's lack of concern" (Management Today, 1998, p16). The differences in the approaches of the texts may be considered in terms of the organisations discussed within the FM studies, the nature of the people whose opinions are sought, and the degree of critical appraisal by the writers/researchers.

Whilst the results of studies of new working practices are frequently presented in generalised format, as applicable to organisations in the widest sense, many of the organisations within

which they are originated are, themselves, directly involved in, and have vested interests in, the development of new, IT-based working methods. New workspace concepts such as Digital's 'office of the future', or IBM's SMART office (Barnatt, 1995) are bound up, not just in the promise of increased flexibility for the organisation and the worker, but in a reality of "(reliance) on computing and communications technologies to bring people together" (Barnatt, 1995, p87). They represent an opportunity for application and showcasing of the technologies which the companies themselves are concerned with producing and marketing.

Within the organisation, those who participate in the forms of flexible working which receive the highest levels of exposure are, also, often likely to be those for whom a fixed workplace has least meaning, such as marketing and sales staff, for whom there is benefit in spending "36 per cent more time with customers and 20 per cent less time travelling" (Markland, 1998, p3), or those high-level consultants for whom the organisation "relies on the fact that if workers spend the majority of their working lives out with clients, then they have no need for a permanent desk" (Barnatt, 1995, p87). Even within the IT-sector organisations which promote the flexible working concept, that concept is applied to the white collar staff, rather than to those who work on the production lines and factory floors.

When perceptions of the effectiveness of flexible working are sought, in order to provide support for its wider application, opinion is often gathered from those who already hold empowered positions within the organisation. For example, a study by the University of East Anglia, which brought positive feedback on new work practices, had a sample of which "the majority...were managers and professionals, with an average age of 38, with over half holding degrees or higher degrees" (Management Today, 1998, p17), whilst a study by the Industrial Society (1998) gathered the opinion that, for 80 per cent of *managers*, the main advantage of flexible working is that "it makes business sense for the organisation". It might be considered that the enthusiasm for flexible working and the concept of employee empowerment, which derives from senior management and the highly qualified, is based, not upon altruism for their fellow workers but, upon the notion that such changes "make it much easier (and cheaper) to eliminate middle management and control the productive part or the organization through versions of self-management based upon worker empowerment, technological surveillance, and the unrelenting pressures of the market" (Scarborough, 1998, p712). Such driving forces are based, not upon the granting of 'legitimate power' (French and Raven, 1959) as commodity to the workers but, on the application of overt, moral-coercive power by management.

There are a wide variety of views of the future of flexible working practices, from which a number of driving forces may be identified. These are independent of each other, and may appear contradictory in their outcomes. In the FM field, the driving forces are, to a large extent, derived from narrative from within organisations which have implemented flexible working; frequently derived from testimony and, more importantly, interpretation from those organisations and individuals with a vested interest in successful development and implementation of the concept. In the following section, the writers will consider the possible origins and meanings of these narratives, in terms of deriving a rational - as opposed to rationalistic - view of flexible working. The approach considered is one in which organisational interpretation is viewed, not as mere commentary upon the reality of flexible working but, as *defining* reality; where "interpretation is itself a means of becoming master of something" (Nietzsche, 1968, p342)

Power, knowledge and rationality

Knowledge is power.
Francis Bacon

The arguments in support of the application of flexible working practices may be considered to be based upon the generation of knowledge by those who are at the leading edge of new ways of working, and their benign dissemination to a waiting world, which can only benefit from the sharing of the wisdom. There may, however, be either deliberate or emergent strategic advantages to be gained by those organisations which promote flexible working,. This may lead into a process of either conscious or unconscious, self-referential rationalisation of the particular benefits which are perceived to derive from the practices, in order to generate implementation responses in other organisations and settings. There is clear precedent in organisational studies for the process of rationalisation of case studies by the actors, or those closely associated with them, such that "in structural terms, with the choice of evaluation criteria and the mode in which they are applied to the individual...possibilities, the evaluations recapitulate the pre-destined result" (Flyvbjerg, 1998, pp25-26). Here, the progression of thought is not from critical analysis of data to development of rationality, but from rationalisation of actions to development of supporting 'data'.

Practice-generated discussion and literature on change frequently analyses at a superficial level, treats observation of behaviours and opinions as data, and dwells upon the positive outcomes of projects,. There is a lack of critical discussion on the mismatch of beliefs, perceptions and constructed realities which pervade the complex, multi-faceted systems, which writers attempt to reduce to a single, rational model. In this literature, much credence is given to the importance of *Information Technology* (IT). The writers would argue, however, that it is in the transformation of information to *knowledge* that real power and influence is found. Analysis of the FM literature on flexible working indicates little or no discussion on the nature and location of knowledge and power, and on their influence upon change processes..

In analysing the nature and impact of power on the development and implementation of new ways of working, we must look at the different ways of conceiving power which can impact on the roles and relations of the actors involved. Most practice and practitioner writing on organisational change is derived from a systems theory perspective, in that power is conceived as destructive, constraining and dysfunctional. There are, however, alternative theoretical constructs on power which can be brought to bear on an analysis of the implementation of flexible working practices.

Mechanic (1962) argues that people have power to the extent that they control access to information others desire, people who can get things done, and instrumentalities; the things that people want. Power is characterised as relational, in that one person has power over another, to the extent that they both perceive that the relationship between them is characterised by one of the bases of power; legitimate power, reward and coercive power, referent power, and expert power (French and Raven, 1959). This relational understanding of power has been developed further in the postmodern rejection of systems theory. This argues that the idea of social institutions and interactions as systems is a metaphor imposed by the observer, not a matter of fact in the interactions themselves. In order to make sense of perceptual phenomena, labels are attributed to things (ranging from physical objects to expert opinions, expressed in jargon) and, in so doing, we are giving the thing identity and classifying it. This entails placing it in a relative structure, or hierarchy, in which things have

relative value and levels of importance (Beech, 1998). This process is considered inevitable, given that information is never 'raw', that our perceptions are partial and selective (Hanson, 1981), and that we are more likely to perceive and remember phenomena which fit with, or contradict, our current cognitive frameworks.

In relation to flexible working, the perception presented in the literature is generally that of the 'expert', and the implementation is through the application of an 'expert systems' (Beech and Cairns, 1998) model of power/knowledge/communications. That is to say, the solutions to problems are perceived in the domain of the expert, where knowledge resides, and are implemented in the domain of the user, who is the provider of data, but who lacks either knowledge or power. The organisation and its members mould themselves to suit the expert input, and the expert approach will be that of "asking occupants for their input, acknowledging that input, managing it according to the resources and opportunities available, and then using that input and letting people know it has been used" (Vischer, 1996, p203). The users will not be involved in the actual use of their inputs and, in the worst case scenario, generic concepts may be preconceived as appropriate solutions to organisational problems, without any input of user data, let alone any knowledge or power input by them.

Such demonstrations of rationalised - as opposed to rational - thinking may be viewed as being indicative of a post-Baconian view of the power/knowledge relationship, in that power is not seen to be derived from knowledge, but that "power *defines* (italics in original) what counts as knowledge and rationality, and ultimately, ... what counts as reality" (Flyvbjerg, 1998, p27). Where knowledge is seen as defining power within the domain of implementation of flexible working, the seemingly conflicting demands of organisational cost reduction and worker empowerment might be interpreted as the organisation having moved to a Foucauldian extreme; beyond control of the body to control of 'the whole person' (Foucault, 1980). That is to say that the organisation has replaced the overt, Taylorist control of work processes designed to suit human, physical capability with covert attempts at re-defining the human, psychological state, to suit the needs of the organisation. The approach is one in which the organisation distributes pseudo-power - over timing and location of work - to the workforce, but by retention of the power to define - and change - the knowledge base which controls design and management of the workplace and work processes at the macro-level, it retains all *real* power within the organisation/employee relationship.

Towards meaningful research in FM

Those who promote the concept of technologically-enabled, flexible working with enthusiasm may be correct in believing that the key values of the approach are applicable both to the organisations which support them, and to the users who are at the receiving end of the knowledge/power processes involved in implementation. If the concept is to be validated, however, there is a need for independent and meaningful research. Whilst van Wagenberg states (1998, p71) that "environmental design and facility management research methods can be used to evaluate pilot projects in alternative office concepts", there is perhaps limited evidence of rigorous and independent application of the former, and even less evidence of the existence of the latter.

In presenting 'theoretical' discourse on FM and new workplace concepts, it is not sufficient to deal superficially with the issue of "corporate culture and workstyles" (Markland, 1998, p5of7) in a few lines, when it might be viewed that "under the guise of giving more autonomy to the individual than in organizations governed by bureaucratic rules, corporate culture

threatens to promote a new, hypermodern neo-authoritarianism which, potentially, is more insidious and sinister than its bureaucratic predecessor" (Willmott, 1993, p541).

The current lack of critical thinking and analysis in FM discourse could have serious consequences in any form of research, whether in leading to inadequate consideration of the truly relevant factors for measurement in any empirical study, or in setting incorrect parameters for any phenomenological or subjective analysis. If a scenario planning approach to study of the future of flexible working were to be adopted, the researcher might decide upon an approach to any, or all, of the panel from the BIFM debate cited above, as being suitable 'remarkable people' with whom to engage. The thrust of the writers' argument, however, is that most current debate within the realm of FM is too narrow in focus, and too much governed by the power which defines the scope and boundaries of the knowledge.

If FM research is to develop beyond its current scope, it must draw upon the experience of research from mature fields, such as critical social science, and HRM theory, both in terms of the approaches adopted, and in relation to the existing body of knowledge derived from a non-practice-based power domain.

Conclusions

Those who promote with enthusiasm the concept of technologically-enabled flexible working may conclude that "the virtual organization train left the station a long time ago", and may ask if others will "be fast enough to catch it? Or will the distance become greater and greater between those who are already on the train and those who are left behind?" (Voss, 1996, p16). We would do well, however, to check very carefully whether or not the train is leading us to a worthwhile destination, or into an intellectual and social desert; devoid of resources for relational sustenance, intellectual direction, and mental stimulation. One thing is certain, however, from our studies of current thinking and future possibility. That is that "man's future with smart machines will involve new variations on the old theme of master and slave. We will control our machine-intelligent superiors. We will live with them, create with them, adapt with them, maybe even reproduce with them. We will hold the strings while they hold ours. Both masters and both slaves. The question will be to what degree" (Kosko, 1994, p285).

If the field of Facilities Management is to complete the transition from reactive technical and operational support function to proactive management discipline; as in the transformation of the Personnel function to true Human Resource Management; there is a desperate need for the development of a higher level of critical thinking. There is a need for both theoretical and real - as opposed to pseudo - empirical research into areas of interest, in relation to both the physical and the non-physical domains of FM. It is with particular regard to the latter domain that the writers perceive a real gap between the development of a rationality of theoretical knowledge, and the rationalisation of current forms of practice into power as knowledge. Nutt may be correct in stating (1998, p30) that "few (FM) practitioners have direct experience of research and its methods, and very few of the research community have any real experience of FM practice". If so, such gaps mitigate against both the development of an intellectual framework for the FM knowledge base, beyond that defined by the practice power base, and, also, the application of such theoretical knowledge in analysis of the problems of practice.

This paper does not present any research, nor does it seek to deny that any of the concepts of flexible working may be truly valid and applicable. What it seeks to do is to stimulate

conflict and controversy over the manner of our analysis of what exists, and the way in which we generalise from it in order to drive development of theory. The authors believe that creative conflict arises from critical appraisal of alternative and opposing ideologies, that much of what drives FM at the present is only opinion, and that it is impossible to engage critically with opinion in order to derive theory. Those who promote the conversations, and allocate space on the conference platforms, which are intended to drive the development of FM as a professional and intellectual discipline, should bear in mind that "from a Nietzschean and Foucauldian point of view, suppressing conflict is suppressing freedom (and),....social and political thinking that ignores or marginalizes conflict is potentially oppressive, too" (Flyvbjerg, 1998, p6).

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