

Employee Preference for Flexible Work Arrangements: A Case Study of a Business

Service Unit in a Multinational Company in Thailand

การศึกษาความต้องการของพนักงานในการทำงานแบบยืดหยุ่น

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บทคัดย่อ

ด้วยการแพร่ระบาดของ COVID-19 ทั่วโลกในปี ค.ศ. 2020-2021 องค์กรต่างๆ ในประเทศไทยได้ผ่านการลือคดาวน์หลายครั้ง จากมาตรการต่างๆ ทำให้พนักงานต้องทำงานจากที่บ้าน และองค์กรต้องมีการจัดรูปแบบการทำงานใหม่ การวิจัยนี้มีวัตถุประสงค์เพื่อสำรวจความต้องการรูปแบบในการทำงานของพนักงานของหน่วยบริการธุรกิจทางเทคโนโลยี ของบริษัทข้ามชาติในประเทศไทย โดยมีพนักงานที่สำรวจทั้งหมดจำนวน 40 คน (N = 40) ผู้ตอบแบบสอบถามให้คะแนนรูปแบบการทำงานสมมุติทั้งหมด 12 รูปแบบ ซึ่งแตกต่างกันไปในเรื่องของสถานที่ทำงาน วันทำงาน และเวลาทำงาน ผ่านช่องทางออนไลน์แล้ว ประมวลผลด้วยการวิเคราะห์องค์ประกอบร่วม (Conjoint Analysis) เนื่องจากสามารถนำไปใช้ในการพยากรณ์ได้ และยังให้ผลลัพธ์ในระดับบุคคล ผลการศึกษาพบว่า พนักงานชอบรูปแบบการทำงานที่มีสถานที่ทำงานผสมระหว่างสำนักงานและที่บ้าน โดยทำงานในวันจันทร์ถึงวันศุกร์ และตั้งแต่วันที่ 9.00 น. ถึง 17.00 น. ทั้งนี้ สถานที่ทำงาน มีบทบาทสำคัญที่สุด ตามด้วย เวลาทำงาน และวันทำงาน ตามลำดับ และในตอนที่ท้ายได้นำเสนอการนำผลการศึกษาไปประยุกต์ใช้

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ABSTRACT

With the global COVID-19 pandemic of 2020-2021, organizations in Thailand went through a series of lockdowns. Many were forced to work from home and new work arrangements were implemented. This research aimed to explore work arrangement preferences of the employees in a technology business service unit of a multinational company in Thailand. Prospective employees (N=40) rated 12 hypothetical work arrangements online, varied in work location, working day, and working time. Conjoint analysis was employed as it yielded predictive preferences and results at the individual level. Findings showed that prospective employees preferred to work in mixed location between office and home, Monday to Friday, and from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. And work location played the most important role in their preference, followed by working time and working day. Practical implications were discussed.

Keywords: Flexible Work Arrangements (FWAs), Telework, Flexplace, Flextime, Conjoint Analysis

Introduction

In December 2019, the health authorities of Wuhan, China, reported a cluster of pneumonia cases, which were later identified as a novel coronavirus disease. In February 2020 the World Health Organization (WHO) begun referring to this virus as "the virus responsible for COVID-19" or "the COVID-19 virus" (World Health Organization, 2020b).

In January 2020, as the disease spread across the world, the Chinese government announced a lockdown characterised by a requirement to stay at home, banning of all mass people activities, social distancing, closures of workplaces and schools, and worldwide travel restrictions (Cohen & Kupferschmidt, 2020). In March 2020 the WHO declared COVID-19 a pandemic. (World Health Organization, 2020a)

In Thailand, the Ministry of Public Health announced the first confirmed covid-19 case in January, 2020. Thai government decreed a travel restriction and a lockdown. People were forced to stay home. This urged companies to provide facility and technology for their employees to work from home (Department of Disease Control, 2020).

The rush of working from home may have been caused by the pandemic, but in fact, the topic of workplace flexibility has been studied for decades. Research have shown the impacts of implementing flexibility can be both positive and negative. For example, flexibility can be viewed as a privilege and respect to employees (MacEachen, Polzer, & Clarke, 2008), and working from home associated with higher satisfaction and better work-life management (Fonner & Roloff, 2010). On the other hand, working from home was found to increase strain-based conflict in Asian participants – i.e., when one carried the stress from work role into family role (Masuda et al., 2011). This is in line with findings from Grant, Wallace, and Spurgeon (2013), which stated that it could also be difficult to switch off from work when boundaries between work and personal life were unclear.

This research started in September 2021, even though some restrictions had been lifted, staying at home was still encouraged in Thailand as the pandemic continued. The cooperation between employers and employees to find a flexible work arrangement would not be only beneficial during the present pandemic, but also post pandemic.

Objective

To explore work arrangement preferences of the employees in a business service unit in a multinational company in Thailand.

Scope of research

This research focused on, first, work location – being fixed location in office, work from home, or flexible mixed locations. Second, flextime – which is a combination of a) working day – being Monday to Friday or employee's choice, and b) working time – being a fixed 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. or employee's choice. Questionnaires were distributed online, and data were collected in October to November, 2021.

Expected benefits

To assist team leaders and HR professionals in determining the most appropriate work arrangement for their teams.

Literature

The pandemic has caused more studies on flexible work arrangements (FWAs) for employees who had commuting to work before the COVID-pandemic (Guyot & Sawhill, 2020). In the context of workplace, flexible is defined as discretion in determining the timing, place, and location at which role requirements are met (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985; Greenhaus & Powell, 2006). And according to Lambert, Marler, and Gueutal (2008), FWAs are “employer provided benefits that permit employees some level of control over when and where they work outside of the standard workday.” While the types of FWAs include combinations related to where to work (flexplace), when to work (flextime), and how to work (Chen & Fulmer, 2018; Hill et al., 2008), in more details, workplace flexibility comes in many forms – compressed workweek, flextime, job sharing, telework, and even part-time work. It can also be viewed as part of non-financial compensation (Mondy, 2008). For permanent full-time white-collar knowledgeable workers, the FWAs generally involve where and when to work, i.e., telework and flextime (see Hill, Erickson, Holmes, & Ferris (2010) for example).

Telework

The term telework is used interchangeably with telecommuting and remote working. When an organization offers flexplace (flexible work location), it generally involves telework. And if it is done from home, the term “work from home” is also commonly used. Whether it be telework, telecommuting, remote working, flexplace, or work from home, they all concern with the location to perform one’s work. Work locations could be a traditional office, a virtual office, or a home office (Hill, Ferris, & Mårtinson, 2003). During the lockdowns, employees who generally worked in a traditional office were forced to work from home. Work From Home (WFH) refers to paid work away from the office, which requires employers to make available the necessary information, communication, and collaboration technologies (Felstead & Henseke, 2017; Wilks & Billsberry, 2007). Although telework is generally one of the most considering work arrangements because it can result in increased employee productivity (Nakrošienė, Bučiūnienė, & Goštautaitė, 2019),

researches showed mixed outcomes from telework on work and personal family-life (Hill, Ferris, & Mårtinson, 2003).

Flextime

Flextime concerns with “discretion over the days and hours when employees work (Thompson, Payne, & Taylor, 2014). Generally, organizations mandate fixed days and time for employees to perform their work, ie. Monday to Friday from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. In flexible organizations, autonomy is given to employees to set the days and the time to perform their own work. This is often perceived as beneficial to employees as control over their work time can help them balancing their work and non-work demand (Nijp, Beckers, Geurts, Tucker, & Kompier, 2012).

Methodology

Conjoint analysis is a survey-based statistical technique widely used in marketing research (Hair, Anderson, Tatham, & Black, 1998). It measures consumers’ preferences and predicts their buying decisions (Backhaus, Hillig, & Wilken, 2007). In conjoint method, choices are presented in full-profile (with multi-attributes) which are more realistic because it replicates consumers making choices in the real world. Participants, then, state their preferences to each set of full-profile stimuli (e.g., products, services, and ideas). Results from conjoint analysis yield participants’ preferences toward each attribute and the weight (how important) of each attribute to their decision making.

Because of the ability to measure one’s preference from full-profile stimuli, not only conjoint analysis can be used in any research areas where choices consist of multi-attributes, but the analysis from conjoint also offers results at the individual level (i.e., each participant’s preference). This is because the estimation of an individual’s preference is related to completion of choice tasks, not the sample size (Hair, Black, Babin, & Anderson, 2010). As a result, conjoint method can facilitate a small number of participants as little as 1 (Orme, 2010).

Establishing attributes and levels in conjoint tasks

The present study focused on exploring work arrangement preferences of the permanent full-time employees in a business service unit. Therefore, the appropriate attributes of the study are work location and flextime (working day and working time). With a concern over the practicality of the work arrangements, levels are derived from interviewing two managers in the team. Table 1 shows a summary of attributes and levels for the study.

Table 1: Attributes and levels

		Level		
		1	2	3
Attribute	1. Work location	At office	Working from home (WFH)	Mixed (at office, WFH)
	2. Working day	Monday – Friday	Variable, employee's choice	
	3. Working time	09:00 - 17:00	Variable, employee's choice	

Next step, using orthogonal design, eight combinations and four holdout combinations were created (the holdouts were used as a tool for reliability testing for conjoint instrument).

Research instrument

The questionnaire consisted of 2 parts: first, general information of participants (gender, age, work function, employment duration with the company), and second, the conjoint tasks. In the conjoint tasks, participants were asked to indicate their preferences on a 10-point rating scale (with 1 being least preferred and 10 being most preferred) for each combination (see Figure 1).

Pattern #1

Work Location: At office
Working Day: Monday – Friday
Working Time: 9:00 – 17:00

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Least preferred ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ Most preferred

Figure 1: Sample of the online questionnaire

For instrument testing, pretesting of questionnaires are done through members from another team in the same company (with similar type of work). Results from pretesting showed that the questionnaire was understandable and easy to answer. Pilot testing are also done with members from another team as well.

Participants and data collection

The present study focused on a business unit team, which consisted of forty members. All forty members participated in the survey (N=40) and data were collected via online questionnaires.

Analysis of the results

Forty valid questionnaires were returned. Table 2 shows the results of the first part of the questionnaire.

Table 2: General Information

Part 1 General Information		Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Female	15	37.50
	Male	25	62.50
Age	Less than 21 years	0	0.00
	21 - 30 years old	18	45.00
	31- 40 years old	13	32.50
	41 - 60 years old	9	22.50
	More than 61 years old	0	0.00
Work Function	Engineer	23	57.50
	Network	4	10.00
	Project Manager	9	22.50
	Administrator	4	10.00
Tenure	less than 1 year	0	0.00
	1 - 3 years	2	5.00
	3 - 5 years	14	35.00
	5 - 7 years	14	35.00
	7 - 9 years	9	22.50
	more than 9 years	1	2.50

Most of the participants are male, aged 21-40 years old. Most of them are engineers and have a job tenure of 3-7 years.

Table 3 shows preference score (“part-worth utility” or “utility score”). Overall results indicate that, for work location, participants prefer to work in mixed locations (both at office and from home), followed by in office and work from home. For working day, participants prefer a fixed Monday to Friday over a choice of their own. And for working time, they prefer a fixed 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. over choosing the working time themselves. An ideal arrangement for the team is to allow them to work in mixed locations (in office and home), Monday to Friday, and within a fixed 9 a.m. to 5 p.m.

Table 3: Relative Importance and Part-Worth Utility

Attribute	Level	Part-Worth Utility
Work location	At office	0.33
	Work from home (WFH)	-0.99
	Mixed (At office and WFH)	0.65
Working Day	Monday – Friday	0.05
	Variable by employee’s choice	-0.05
Working Time	9:00 am- 5:00 pm	0.06
	Variable by employee’s choice	-0.06
Constant		7.32

Not all attributes are equally important to the participants. Table 4 shows how important each of the attributes is to participants’ total preference.

Table 4: Relative Importance

Attribute	Relative Importance
Work Location	77.67
Working Day	10.30
Working Time	12.03

Work location, by far, plays the most important role in participants' preference, weighing 77.67% of the total preference. This is followed by working time and working day, with 12.03% and 10.30% accordingly.

Discussion

An ideal arrangement for the team was working in mixed locations (in office and home), Monday to Friday, and within a fixed 9 a.m. to 5 p.m., with work location being extremely important. All three attributes yielded both expected and surprising insight into the team's preferences.

First - Work Location: The mixed locations were the most preferred as expected because it would provide employees the most flexibility. However, the least preferred of solely working from home was extremely undesirable. Perhaps, it could be explained by a cultural-orientation factor. Based on Hofstede (2011), collectivism "is the degree to which people in a society are integrated into groups." In a collectivist culture such as Thailand, belonging to a group (in-group) is important and preferred. People in collectivist culture also value cohesiveness and loyalty, and tend to have extended families (Hofstede, 2011). Hence, isolation is naturally undesirable even though family members may make it more difficult to work at home. Based on Masuda et al. (2011), attention to cultural-related issues, as mentioned, should be drawn before implementing FWAs. They explained that, in these collectivist cultures, more family-members tend to be living at home, home tend to be smaller, and people prefer strong social ties. Therefore, these cultural-related issues could explain why the participants viewed solely working from home as extremely undesirable. This is in accordance with Hill et al. (2010) which state that, in collectivist culture, working from home can be less beneficial.

Second – Flextime: The participants preferred both fixed working day and time. Based on MacEachen, Polzer, and Clarke (2008), offering flexible work hours does not mean working without extended hours. When there is no fixed time, coupled with working from home, work does not seem to end at the agreed hours. This can be especially applied to this particular business service team. While, on the surface, flextime seems to be beneficial, servicing clients can be an ongoing

obligation. Therefore, it might be more beneficial to them if the company mandates a fixed schedule for them to follow. Perhaps, in cases like this, the stricter the fixed schedule, the better.

Implications and recommendations

For the team, the ideal work arrangement can be implemented. Based on the findings, introducing some variations of levels should be acceptable, with one exception – solely working from home is NOT recommended.

Furthermore, it may be wise to take factors such as cultural orientation and nature of work into account when considering work arrangement. Treating flexibility as a one-size-fits-all might not always be viewed as positive. When tasks involve servicing clients, attention to the nature of work and organizational culture should be paid before designing a new work arrangement. On the other hand, the more obvious benefit to the employees is to offer flexplace where both office and home can be optimized. The mixed of working locations give everybody a choice and, when done right, results from the present study shows that flexplace can be extremely appreciated.

Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

Due to a small number of participants, results may not be generalized. Also, with the unexpected results of preferred fixed working day and time, future research can help shed light on this issue by comparing preferences from those in frontline client-service functions and those in other business functions. It may also be beneficial to understand how other factors (such as company culture, supervisor styles, or individual differences) might have impacts on FWA preferences.

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