

# Flexible Working in an Irish Public Sector Organisation: Still a Gender Issue

Deborah Harrington  
Health Service Executive  
Southern Region  
Cork, Ireland

Dr Margaret Linehan  
School of Business  
Cork Institute of Technology  
Cork, Ireland  
Tel: 353-21-4326542  
E-mail: [mlinehan@cit.ie](mailto:mlinehan@cit.ie)

Dr Christine Cross (Corresponding author)  
Dept. of Personnel & Employment Relations,  
Kemmy Business School,  
University of Limerick,  
National Technological Park  
Limerick, Ireland  
Tel: 353-61-202245  
E-mail: [christine.cross@ul.ie](mailto:christine.cross@ul.ie)

## **Abstract**

This paper examines the experiences of employees availing of flexible working arrangements across four different professions within an Irish public sector organisation. The paper investigates employees' experiences of flexible working and their perceptions of the impact of flexible working arrangements both on their individual career development and their organisational commitment. Fourteen in-depth face-to-face semi-structured interviews were conducted. The results of the study illustrate that flexible working policies are highly gendered with more women than men opting to reduce their working hours. This, in turn, has implications for career development strategies for both female employees and the organisation. In terms of accessing flexible working arrangements the attitude and support of the line manager is seen as critical. Despite a reduction in hours, all interviewees demonstrated a high level of commitment to clients, colleagues, and the organisation.

**Keywords:** Flexible working, Public sector, Ireland, Organisational commitment

## **1. Introduction**

Recent decades have witnessed a very significant increase in the number of women working in the paid labour force globally (ILO, 2004; ILO, 2007). A similar increase has been recorded in Ireland. In 1971, Irish women's labour force participation rate was particularly low, at just 28%; while today, the numbers of women employed in all sectors of the Irish economy have reached numbers never previously experienced, currently standing at a participation rate of almost 59% (CSO, 2006). Associated with this rise has been a shift away from the perception of the family unit as consisting of a working father, stay at home mother and extended family providing support as required. Improved access to education for women and the women's liberation movement were important factors in increasing not only the number of women entering the workplace, but also in improving their skills and qualifications.

This significant increase of female participation in the Irish labour market has been driven by several other factors. Economic factors, for example, have contributed to the demise of the traditional family structure. The high cost of

home ownership and lifestyle frequently demands a two-salary household. The changes to family structure have brought with them conflict between commitments at home and commitments to organisation and career. Societal changes including an increase in marital breakdown and an increase in single parent families have meant that more women are entering the labour force. Structural changes have also taken place in industry with the traditional male manufacturing sector experiencing a dramatic slump whilst the services sector has benefited from the Irish economic boom of the last decade. Finally, the developments in information and communication technology have assisted employees in working off-site.

Family friendly work policies and programmes have been developed at national and corporate level in Ireland in response to the growing number of women participating in the workforce, who are also attempting to balance their working lives with the traditional female role of raising children. The development of resources such as an annual National Family Friendly Workplace day in Ireland is indicative of the weight that is now being given at both political and business level to the development of family friendly work policies. Participation of the social partners has resulted in the enactment of legislation in the area of force majeure leave, parental leave, carers leave and extended maternity leave and entitlements providing workers with minimum statutory entitlements to enable them carry out their work and family responsibilities. Flexible working is seen as a positive organisational policy in allowing employees to balance their work commitments with family life or hobbies and interests.

The Irish public sector, in particular, has been at the forefront of the development of family friendly policies and providing ease of access to parental leave. It merits examining the realities of flexible working, however, from an employee perspective rather than merely quantifying the numbers of employees availing of flexible working arrangements and assuming that all such employees have positive experiences of reducing their working hours. Having an organisational policy on flexible working is viewed as a positive step towards providing employees with work-life balance. Having these policies, however, should not be construed as being an end in itself. These policies present organisations with further challenges such as ensuring equitable access, the involvement of line managers, the impact on service delivery and organisational culture. From a human resource practitioner perspective, understanding the relationship between flexible working arrangements and career development is important for the development of career management systems which are inclusive of employees who chose to reduce their working hours.

The aim of this paper is therefore to examine the experiences of employees who engage in flexible working arrangements across four different professions within one Irish public sector organisation. The paper will investigate employees' experiences of flexible working and their perceptions of the impact of flexible working arrangements on both organisational commitment and individual career development

## **2. Flexible working**

Flexible working options allow employees to balance career and lifestyle aspirations (Hogarth et al, 2001). Flexibility in working time includes a variety of arrangements for part-time work, job-sharing, flexi-time, fixed-term contracts, subcontracting and career/employment break schemes (Papalexandris and Kramar, 1997). Flexible working is the very basis of work-life balance (Felstead et al, 2002). The following working arrangements are typically classified as flexible working and may be provided by organisations on a discretionary basis—flexi-time, part-time working, compressed week, career breaks, term-time working and job-sharing. Organisations also have a statutory obligation to provide certain family friendly initiatives such as maternity leave and parental leave. Research conducted by Kodz et al (2002) identifies several difficulties experienced by staff who had opted to work reduced or different hours. These include slower career progression, lower status jobs, workload pressures, reactions of colleagues and managers. It is well recognised that family can impact negatively on work and vice versa. Flexible working arrangements may mediate those difficulties and are seen as an important feature of family friendly policies.

It is acknowledged that flexible working arrangements allow for the employee to better balance their commitments to both work and family. Economic, technological, social and family changes have encouraged the introduction of flexible working arrangements. (Papalexandris and Kramar, 1997). Baltes et al (1999) contends that flexible working arrangements are often introduced in response to employee demands and to promote employee morale. Their research concluded that flexibility in working arrangements has positive effects on productivity, job satisfaction and absenteeism. It has also been observed that flexible working arrangements can exert a positive impact on staff retention rates.

Research conducted by Drew et al (2003) concluded that work-life balance initiatives are highly gendered with more women than men opting for reduced working hours. O'Brien and Shemilt (2003) also reported that the use of flexible working practices is generally low among fathers. Benefits attributed to flexible working and work life

balance policies include easier service delivery (Hogarth et al, 2001) and enhanced service delivery (Lasch, 1999). Papalexandris and Kramar (1997) identify the following factors which influence the extent to which work and family have been successfully accommodated; the attitudes, expectations and priorities accorded to work and family roles by both partners, schedule compatibility and the opportunities available to spend time together as a family and time available to complete domestic tasks.

It is unclear however if family friendly initiatives provide value for money to organisations. Kodz et al (2002) advise that quantitative data relating to the cost and benefits of work-life balance initiatives are not readily available, as organisations are not systematically collecting the data needed to evaluate the costs and benefits of family friendly work arrangements. The success, or otherwise of flexible working arrangements is dependent on several factors, including line manager predisposition to the notion of flexible working, the prevailing culture within the organisation as well as the dispersion of power.

In an Irish context, a national framework for family-friendly policies was established under the Programme for Prosperity and Fairness, to focus on facilitating and supporting the unitary development of family friendly policies at the enterprise level (Fagan, 2003). Subsequently, the National Framework Committee on Family Friendly Policies was established to promote and raise awareness of family friendly working practices with the promotion of annual family friendly days. The focus has now shifted to the promotion of work-life balance days in an effort to include employees who do not have families.

### *2.1 Flexible working and career development*

The objectives of the individual traditionally were expected to conform to the objectives of the organisation, thereby creating careers which emphasised vertical progression, with each progression providing increases in status, responsibility and reward (Hall and Mirvis, 1995). MacDermid et al (2001) suggest that working women today are not necessarily conforming to the traditional male organisational career pattern, preferring to negotiate alternative work arrangements. While Pleck (1985) has contended that it is more acceptable for men to choose work over family and women to choose family over work. While the gender imbalance in flexible working exists, with more women choosing to reduce their working hours, women will find their career paths diverging significantly from the male, carrying with it significant costs in promotions, income, prestige, responsibility and authority (Fynes et al, 1996).

How family friendly work policies impact on the advancement of women's careers is uncertain at best (Schwartz, 1996). Schwartz (1996) takes the view that career advancement is important to both the employee and the organisation. In terms of the employee it serves as economic and personal achievement; for the employer it contributes to the ongoing development of the organisation and generates a return on investment. Drew (2003) acknowledges that even though flexible working arrangements improve the reconciliation of work and family commitment, concern relating to career prospects may deter employees in choosing them. Men report that utilising flexible working arrangements is not acceptable within organisations, as it is perceived as indicating a lack of career commitment, (Kodz et al 2002, Hogarth et al, 2001).

### *2.2 Flexible working and organisational commitment*

Mowday et al (1979) have defined organisational commitment as the relative strength of an individual's identification with, and involvement in, a particular organisation. Conceptually, it can be characterised by at least three factors: (a) a strong belief in and acceptance of the organisation's goals and values: (b) a willingness to exert considerable effort on behalf of the organisation: and (c) a strong desire to maintain membership in the organisation. The feeling of attachment can bind the individual to the organisation and can lead to employees wanting to stay with the organisation, attending and performing (Hau-siu Chow, 1994).

Gaertner and Nollen (1989) were amongst the first to investigate the link between employees' affective commitment and their perceptions of their organisations HRM practices. They found higher levels of psychological commitment in employees who felt they were seen as resources to be utilised by the organisation as opposed to commodities to be bought and sold (1989: 987). Their research also found that a policy of promotion from within can exert a beneficial influence on commitment levels and that commitment levels tended to be higher in employees who had been promoted within the organisation. In terms of generating commitment from employees, MacDuffie (1995) emphasised the importance of using "bundles" of HRM practices that are consistent with each other and also compatible to the organisation's culture. These practices include selective recruitment, extensive socialisation, information sharing, extensive benefits, promotion from within (Agarwala, 2003).

Organisational commitment may vary over the course of an employee's career (Allen and Meyer, 1993). Research suggests that age and tenure are positively associated with the development of both affective and continuance commitment (Allen and Meyer, 1993, Hackett et al, 1994). Conway (2004) proposes that HR practices aimed at increasing employee commitment should differ depending on the career stage of the employee. It must be

acknowledged however that commitment by employees is a complex matter and not easily prescribed for. There are many relationships between commitment and employee behaviour which may be mediated by situational factors such as financial need, line management attitude, career stage or organisational policy (Mathieu and Zajac, 1990, Cohen, 1991).

Greenhaus and Callanan (1994) suggest that organisations should reconsider what commitment levels they can expect from employees in light of increased pressure on employees to juggle career and family. It is important to consider organisation commitment in terms of analysing careers because commitment affects the sequence of people's work experiences. The breaking of the psychological contract, the subsequent disappointments and thwarted ambitions colour employees' experiences of work (Arnold, 1997).

### **3. Methodology**

In order to accomplish the aims of the study, one of the researchers met with the directors of this organisation and explained the purpose of the research and the desire to access staff of different occupations to participate in this research study. The directors expressed their interest in the study and their willingness to assist by approaching staff availing of flexible working and requesting that they participate in the study. All directors followed up by emailing the researchers with names and contact telephone numbers of staff who were availing of flexible working hours and had indicated their willingness to participate in the study. The researcher rang each staff member and arranged to interview them at a mutually convenient time in their place of work. An interview guide was emailed to participants prior to the interviews.

Interviews were subsequently conducted with fourteen staff members working in four main disciplines – Public Health Nursing, Administration/Management, Acute Hospital Nursing and Speech and Language Therapists. Interviewees were selected on the basis that they participated in flexible working arrangements which had been formally approved by their line managers. These flexible working arrangements were parental leave and reduced and alternative working hours. Employees varied in terms of their reasons for engaging in flexible working arrangements, number of children and length of time working in the organisation (Table 1). This variety in interviewees allowed for various trends within the sample to be uncovered. It also allowed for a broader analysis of the experiences of flexible working in different occupations.

Interviews were semi-structured and although the interview guide provided a degree of structure, the semi-structured approach allowed deviations to follow interesting lines of inquiry. Interviews covered the following five main topics: Reasons for availing of flexible working hours; Experiences in applying for flexible working hours; Benefits and drawbacks of flexible working arrangements; Flexible working arrangements and career development; Flexible working arrangements and commitment to the organisation.

#### *3.1 Case Study*

The Health Service Executive Southern Area is an Irish public sector organisation which is responsible for the provision of health and social services to the people of Cork and Kerry (two of the twenty-six counties in Ireland). Staff are employed in a wide range of occupations and professions including nurses, doctors, administrators, social workers, speech and language therapists etc. These staff are employed in a variety of settings including acute hospitals, psychiatric or community hospitals, primary care services and community services, intellectual disability services and corporate services. The Health Service Executive Southern Area is an organisation in a state of flux and transformation as a result of major structural changes in the Irish health service. This new organisation formally came into existence on 1 January 2005, when the Irish health service was transformed from twelve health board areas to one organisation, delivering services through four regions.

Flexible working practices are well embedded within the culture of the organisation. There are currently 4,709 employees availing of flexible working arrangements in the Health Service Executive Southern Area. This number represents employees who have reduced their working hours from the standard working week for their grade. The Health Service Executive Southern Area provides a wide range of flexible working arrangements to employees, both on a statutory and a non-statutory basis. Types of flexible working arrangements available to employees are: Flexible working hours (reduced and alternative working hours); Job-sharing; Parental leave; Carers leave; Term time leave and Career Breaks. These policies are disseminated to line managers and are widely available to all staff on the organisation's intranet site. There are currently 110 employees availing of term time working, 109 of which are female and only one of which is male. Available figures also indicate that there were 627 employees on a career break during 2005.

### **4. Employees' Reasons for Availing of Flexible Working Hours**

#### *4.1 Balancing work and children*

Thirteen of the fourteen participants availed of flexible working hours to enable them to balance both work and family life. The interviewees believe that flexible working arrangements are an important factor in facilitating

women's continued participation in the workplace. All of these thirteen interviewees had worked on a full-time basis prior to having children. Only three of the interviewees, however, had returned to work on a full-time basis after having children and these interviewees spoke of the difficulties of juggling both motherhood and a full-time work commitment. They recounted stressful experiences of trying to manage work and family. They also observed that when both partners pursue careers, although the rewards may be high, so too can the pressures:

*I was spending the weekends getting bottles, feeds, bibs, clothes for each day of the week organised. It was crazy. I wasn't spending time with my son at weekends because a lot of the weekend was spent getting organised for the coming week (Interviewee 1).*

The work-family conflict experienced by this interviewee forced her to leave a private sector company to join the Health Service Executive Southern Area. She admitted that the option of flexible working hours was a key factor in this decision, thereby suggesting that work-family conflict is related to job dissatisfaction, high turnover and stress. This finding supports Greenhaus and Callanan's (1994) concept of time-based conflict, which they suggested occurs when both family and work compete for the individual's time. Time-based conflict is most likely to be experienced by employees who travel, work overtime and have inflexible work schedules. Their model posited that employees who experience the most extensive work-family conflict tend to be married, have young children, large families and spouses who hold responsible jobs.

The findings from the current study reveal that three employees who returned to work on a full-time basis, after having children, were not working for the Health Service Executive Southern Area, at the time of having their children, but were employed by private sector organisations. Two of these employees went on to have more children, while employed by the Health Service Executive, and subsequently returned from maternity leave on flexible working arrangements:

*The more you are at home, the more the children want you to be at home, and worse, the more I want to be at home. There was never an issue regarding flexible working arrangements before I joined the Health Service Executive. When I worked in the private sector I just had to work standard hours and that was the way it was (Interviewee 2).*

All of the eleven employees who had worked for the Health Service Executive prior to having children returned from maternity leave on flexible working hours. One interviewee commented that this practice was very much the norm within the organisation:

*I don't think I know any colleague with young children who isn't on some sort of reduced working hours. You just have to cut down your hours. It is impossible to manage otherwise (Interviewee 13).*

Interviewees revealed that although they wished to continue in employment, they did not want to a situation where they could not fully commit to their work or to their role as mothers to their satisfaction. The pressure of the dual roles of employee and mother resulted in one of interviewee's deciding that a career break was the best alternative:

*I found before I took the leave of absence that I wasn't doing either job properly, I wasn't at home properly or I wasn't at work properly. In the day unit where I worked, I might have to ring home at 6pm and say I won't be home until 8pm because I might be waiting on an ambulance to transfer a patient to another hospital and that wasn't suitable because the child minder might not always be willing to stay on (Interviewee 12).*

In summary, the findings illustrate that balancing work with caring for children is the primary reason why interviewees reduced their working hours.

#### 4.2 Work-life balance

The interviewees admitted that by availing of flexible working arrangements they are attempting to achieve work-life balance. It is clear, therefore, that flexible working and work-life balance are in inextricably linked with caring for family and children. Only one of the fourteen interviewees who availed of flexible working hours to improve her work-life balance did so without childcare being her main motive. Having previously worked as an acute hospital nurse in a non-health service executive hospital at managerial level, she experienced dissatisfaction not only with the long working hours, but was also troubled by a poor working relationship with her manager. She chose to change career direction and return to university for a year to train as a public health nurse and subsequently took up employment with the Health Service Executive:

*I needed a change. I really didn't like what I was doing. I made the move from acute nursing to public health nursing and as soon as I could. I reduced working hours; I have a better lifestyle now, no question about it. I used to be very stressed when I worked in the hospital (Interviewee 4).*

This suggests that a stressful experience triggered a re-evaluation of both career and personal life and fostered a determination to find greater equilibrium between the two. Career decision making, therefore, is more than simply

deciding what type of occupation to choose. As illustrated, it includes the decision to re-train in order to achieve a greater balance between work and personal life, thereby highlighting that work–life balance decisions can be seen as a factor in career decision-making.

#### 4.3 Facilitating childcare arrangements

Childcare considerations emerged as a key issue in the decision to reduce working hours for six of the interviewees. These interviewees reduced their working hours to facilitate their childcare arrangements. One interviewee further reduced her working hours from four to three days because once her second child was born; her childcare provider was unwilling to take two children on a four day basis:

*I got pregnant again and my child minder wouldn't take my daughter as well as my son so I had to put her in a crèche. The crèche either took kids five or three days but not four. My childminder would take her for three days but four was too much for her. So I decided that three days was the ideal for everybody. It suited me to spend more time with the kids (Interviewee 1).*

It can be suggested, therefore, the women devote more time to their role as mothers than men do to their role as fathers. Women are continually adapting their organisational lives to suit the needs of their families, whilst their male counterparts are not subject to the same pressure.

### 5. Employees' Experiences of Accessing Flexible Working Arrangements

#### 5.1 Line manager support

There is a strong culture of flexible working within the Health Service Executive Southern Area. All interviewees demonstrated a strong awareness of the various organisational policies on flexible working time, parental leave and term time working etc. Line managers, intranet and colleagues were identified as the main sources of information on these policies.

All fourteen interviewees reported varied and different experiences of gaining access to flexible working arrangements. The findings suggest that managerial support is a key factor to accessing flexible working arrangements. The response that an employee receives to a request for alternative work arrangements may depend on the manager's personal beliefs and past experiences with balancing work and family. One interviewee observed that her line manager was unfamiliar with the range of flexible working options available to employees of the Health Service Executive:

*I don't think my line manager understood the different working arrangement that were available in the organisation. The department was made up of men and younger women without children so I think maybe he hadn't come across these types of requests before. It made the application process confusing for both himself and myself. Additionally, there is a lack of transparency in the application of flexible policies, for example, some employees work through their lunch and finish at 4.00p.m., but, that practice is not allowed in my section. (Interviewee 2).*

These sentiments echo the previous findings of Bish et al. (2004) who suggested that a lack of procedural justice can influence organisational members' perceptions of justice within the organisation. Despite the fact that an overall policy on flexible working exists, it is interpreted and implemented differently, by different managers in different departments. Konovsky and Cropanzano (1991) also reported that perceived fairness of human resource policies is positively linked to organisational commitment so it is important that the implementation of the policy on flexible working is standardised across the organisation.

The findings from the current study strongly support the view that line managers have a distinct responsibility for human resource management in practice:

*I went to my boss while I was on maternity leave and asked for flexible working arrangements. I suggested working three flexible days and taking one day parental leave. He said 'sounds good to me', and gave me the application form. It really was as easy as that (Interviewee 1).*

*I found applying for flexible working hours very easy, the line manager was very clued in (Interviewee 10).*

The interviewees who were longest employed made comparisons in terms of accessing flexible working now and when they first joined the organisation:

*When I started in the 1980s the organisation was very inflexible, and it was much harder to gain access to reduced hours (Interviewee 12).*

The organisation has subsequently altered its policy on flexible working arrangements in line with societal, legislative and labour market changes. The shortage of skilled and experienced workers has also necessitated a shift in policy and line manager attitudes to flexible working arrangements. The findings further indicate that in

terms of approving job-sharing arrangements line managers prefer to be approached by both employees who are applying for job-sharing, rather than having to look for a job-sharing partner for an employee:

*In relation to applying for job-sharing, it was made easy for my line manager because my partner and I went to her with everything arranged. If I had gone on my own without a partner then things would have been more difficult as she would have had to go looking for someone to partner me, which might not have happened (Interviewee 4).*

*I have found from my own experience and from talking to colleagues that managers prefer if you apply for job-sharing as a couple. Otherwise it's a headache for managers because it falls to them to try and find someone to be the other half of the job-sharer (Interviewee 14).*

Line managers, therefore, are faced with difficulties in balancing the demands of employees with the demands of the service. A cause for concern, however, is that different line managers appear to interpret and implement the policy of flexible working in different ways. They face considerable pressure from employees to grant access to flexible working as this benefit is now seen as an entitlement. The findings indicate that employees have relational psychological contracts with the organisation and the expectations for the provision of flexible working hours on the part of the organisation are now central to that contract.

### 5.2 Bargaining power of employees in negotiating flexible working arrangements

A shortage of skilled employees in the labour market, particularly in the professions of nursing and speech and language therapy has resulted in employees having significant bargaining power when negotiating their preferred working hours. This suggests that some employees may wield significant power when it comes to the provision of flexible working arrangements by their organisation. Power plays a significant role in negotiating flexible working arrangements. When one interviewee was faced with not being transferred to her desired work location with working hours suitable to her family life, she threatened to leave:

*I couldn't get approval for the hours I wanted in the ward I wanted. I consulted with another colleague who said threaten to leave, tell them that you will take a year of absence. So I did, and I got what I wanted (Interviewee 11).*

This suggests that organisations stand to lose valuable human resources if they fail to help their employees resolve difficulties in achieving balance between work and family responsibilities. Some interviewees revealed that they had engaged in negotiations with their managers to arrive at a mutually acceptable arrangement:

*My child-minder didn't want to mind three children so I when I came back from maternity leave after having my third child I did a deal with my boss. I wanted three days; he wanted four so we agreed on three and a half (Interviewee 5).*

This suggests that managers who are faced with a shortage of staff are often forced to provide employees with working hours that are more suitable to the terms of the employees rather than the terms of the organisation:

*When I came back from a career break three years ago the organisation would have liked me to do more than one day but that's all I was willing to commit to and they accepted that (Interviewee 12).*

It is clear that employees have considerable bargaining power when it comes to accessing flexible working, but this power is largely dependent on the profession or service in which the employee works. Staff shortages in areas such as speech and language therapy, and acute nursing means that managers may have to deal with losing staff members if their requests for flexible working are not accommodated.

## 6. Perceived Benefits of Flexible Work Arrangements

All of the interviewees strongly supported the availability of flexible working arrangements and perceived it as a valuable benefit to employees within the Health Service Executive. The interviewees believed that flexible working arrangements, rather than financial remuneration, attract potential employees

*The job I applied for was advertised as a 35-hour week; that alone attracted me because I was used to working at least a 39-hour week in the private sector. The salary was less than I was earning but the salary scale would mean in the longer term my earnings would increase. But the main factor for me was getting parental leave the way I wanted and getting access to flexible working hours. My priorities had changed once I had children and I valued time with them more than money (Interviewee 1).*

*I took a 25% pay cut to come to the organisation, which was fine because I knew it meant a 25% reduction in time commitment. I knew that it was going to be 9am-5pm, and there were more opportunities in terms of flexibility – 32 days holidays versus 20 so from a balance perspective it made a lot of sense. With my previous employer, if you finished at 5pm most people would say 'are you on a half day today?' (Interviewee 5).*

Some interviewees commented that without a flexible working policy, they could not have returned to work:

*If I didn't have my current working arrangements I probably would have had to give up work altogether (Interviewee 13).*

Without a flexible working policy the organisation may have suffered from even greater staff and skill shortages than are currently being experienced. The interviewees also believed that flexible working arrangements exert positive effects on productivity, job satisfaction and absenteeism. They commented on their increase focus on their work and their more limited time than those working full-time. None of the interviewees, however, reported that this presented difficulties for them or resulted in ill feeling towards colleagues or the organisation:

*I've found that I work a lot harder. I work a lot more in the evenings, I'm often here until 7pm (my finish time is 5pm), especially on the day that I am handing over to my partner. I really don't mind. I just feel that when I finish them I'm off for four to five days again. I'm a happier employee. I don't resent doing those extra hours and I'm more enthusiastic (Interviewee 4).*

The interviewees also believed that flexible working arrangements contribute to lower rates of absenteeism and employee turnover. None of the interviewees indicated an intention to leave the organisation and highlighted flexible working, generous annual leave entitlements and job security as the main reasons for staying with the Health Service Executive. They also suggested that enhanced service delivery can be attributed as a benefit of flexible working. Two interviewees observed that being a parent and still being able to continue to practice as a speech and language therapist enhanced their practice:

*I think that before I had children that I was perhaps unrealistic in what I expected parents to accomplish with their children. I probably expected too much in terms of the work that they should be doing with the children at home. Now I understand what is involved in working and raising a family. I think that makes me a better practitioner (Interviewee 7).*

*I think that ultimately I provide a better service to my patients because I am a happier employee. If I was working hours that didn't suit me I think that would have a negative effect on my work (Interviewee 13).*

## **7. Perceived Drawbacks of Flexible Working Arrangements**

Unsurprisingly, given that the study is based on employees' experiences, fewer difficulties than benefits were highlighted. The findings, however, indicate that participants considered that difficulties did arise from flexible working arrangements. Public health nursing interviewees, for example, commented that they sometimes missed following up on the outcome of a case:

*I don't get to follow through on patients. When I come back in the following Friday I might ask my colleagues what happened to a particular patient and they may have forgotten because it was a week ago. It would probably be nicer for the patient if I was there two days in a row rather than facing another strange face (Interviewee 12).*

One of the interviewees who worked in speech and language therapy revealed that because of the shortage of therapists she worried about the impact her reduction of working hours would have on service delivery and commented that she felt guilty apply for flexible working hours. The interviewees also highlighted workload pressure as a disadvantage to flexible working. Some employees believed that they work 'five days work in four'.

Information sharing was also highlighted by job-sharers as a perceived problem, but one which can be overcome by writing hand-over notes and by briefing each other over the telephone:

*Next Tuesday when I handover I will spend a lot of time writing up notes for my partner. It's the most efficient way though to handover. I find that if I want something and there is nothing written there can be an information gap, whereas if I was working full time I would know (Interviewee 6).*

Additionally, some interviewees commented that colleagues treated them differently once they had reduced their working hours:

*There is vast difference when I worked three-days a week compared to four. I was no longer a full-time employee who happened to be out one day a week. The feeling I got was that I was never there. The comments from my colleagues were - 'are you in tomorrow?', 'what days are you on again?' (Interviewee 1).*

This suggests that in the longer term, flexible working arrangements may be damaging to team development.

## **8. Impact of Flexible Working Arrangements on Career Development**

In terms of career development the Health Service Executive Southern Area has a long history of promotion from within. Interviewees did not believe that women who availed of flexible work arrangements may have to sacrifice career advancement. Over half of the interviewees worked in either supervisory or management positions within the organisation. The remaining interviewees were at basic or entry level positions within the organisation.

Interviewees were not concerned that availing of flexible working hours may damage their careers within the organisation. For example, Speech and Language Therapy Managers had progressed through the hierarchy, whilst on flexible working hours. It must be acknowledged, however, that employees had different career expectations and therefore differed in terms of their levels of career centrality. Seven of the interviewees revealed that they had no interest in further developing their careers because they wanted to enjoy their children and believed that to progress upward they would have to increase their working hours, which they were unwilling to do:

*I am enjoying time with my son, I have absolutely no intention of doing anything that would interfere with that time, including going for promotion (Interviewee 11).*

Other interviewees spoke of reducing their working hours even further to enhance their family life:

*I'm not really thinking about progressing at this stage. I'm considering term-time working and if that was approved it would make it much harder to go for promotion because I might not get that opportunity in another department (Interviewee 2).*

*I have no intention of going for promotion until my kids are grown up. I want to enjoy them. Reducing my hours further is what I want. (Interviewee 11)*

The findings support Ginzberg's (1984) conclusion that the male model of career progression and choice does not fit the female prototype, as many women experience frequent shifts between home and work. The findings also indicate a high level of career 'plateauing' among interviewees, which might be detrimental to the provision of skilled staff in the future. Interviewees referred to their careers as being 'parked' for the next few years until their children are established at school. It is important for these interviewees to have reached senior positions in the organisation and be content to work at that level until such time they decide to 'drive on' again. These are conscious decisions to 'plateau' until the time is right for further career advancement.

Other interviewees also believed that they had 'parked' their careers while their children were young, but none of the interviewees saw any significant barrier to their careers 'taking off' at a later date. Some interviewees believed that they would have to increase their hours to accelerate their careers in the future. Others, however, observed colleagues who had successfully progressed in their careers while enjoying reduced working hours. Although on the surface interviewees do not consider that they are sacrificing career advancement, there is constant referral to 'plateauing' and dealing with career issues when children have grown. This finding suggests that a gender imbalance regarding flexible working exists, with far more women choosing to reduce their working hours than their male colleagues. These women also find their career paths diverging significantly from the careers of their male counterparts. Interestingly, interviewees did not consider that they were losing out in terms of promotions, income, prestige, responsibility and authority. They benchmarked themselves against female colleagues whom they used as role models, to illustrate the careers of women who are or had been partaking in flexible working arrangements and were successful in their careers. They did not benchmark against male employees in terms of career development.

None of the interviewees spoke of the 'traditional' career with long term goal setting and clearly defined career objectives. Instead, what emerged was a belief that they would re-negotiate their career goals as time went on, particularly when their children had grown older. This suggests that rather than being age-related, phases of women's career development may be more tied to the family life cycle. Interestingly, interviewees who had worked in the private sector reported that their colleagues in industry perceived that a move to the public sector and reduced working hours would 'strike a death knell' to their careers.

When asked about the career management systems within the organisation, three of the interviewees referred to the lack of adequate support for employee career planning. The organisation, due to its size and the grading structure, has a very large internal labour market which is defined by job ladders, providing employees with promotional opportunities with centralised pay systems. Employees, however, are not provided with guidance and support in how to capitalise on these opportunities:

*Anybody new who came in assumed that I was the secretary because I was working three days a week. Three days a week is not perceived as a career (Interviewee 1).*

Overall, the findings suggest that the male model of career preparation and choice does not fit the female prototype, because many women interrupt furthering their education and career, for marriage and child-rearing and experience frequent shifts between home and work. The findings support Gilligan's (1982) model of female career development where women's careers have to incorporate caring for others as their careers progress.

## **9. Flexible Working Arrangements and Organisational Commitment**

Varied responses were elicited from interviewees when questioned about their commitment towards the organisation and whether they perceived their commitment levels to have been affected by their participation in flexible working

arrangements. Some interviewees commented that their time commitment to the organisation was more defined. Interviewees who employed child-minders said that they had to operate to a strict timetable in terms of collecting their children and hence working longer hours was no longer an option for them:

*I'm quite clear now that I have to leave at 5pm, whereas before I would have stayed on and crammed in more. I'm clear that this is my time when I am here and I don't come in early or bring work home with me anymore because I physically can't do it (Interviewee 7).*

Working long hours, however, has not been highlighted as a feature of organisational citizenship behaviour and importantly some interviewees also revealed high levels of organisational citizenship, by changing their working hours to facilitate meetings and training. Many interviewees work beyond their official finishing time and make themselves available to staff and management on their day off:

*My boss will ring me at 8pm or on weekends, but I have no problem with that. To me, that's part of the deal. It's give and take; it is two-way flexibility. Often he cannot talk to me at all between 9am and 5pm because he is in meetings and I understand that (Interviewee 5).*

This suggests that flexible working plays an important part in generating organisational commitment and also forms part of a relational psychological contract, where two way flexibility is part of the deal. Some interviewees suggested that their colleagues believed that because they had reduced their hours, this in turn meant reduced commitment to their job. Interestingly, three interviewees reported that this perception was not as prevalent when they worked four days per week, but when they reduced to three days a week colleagues viewed them as 'hardly in the workplace at all'.

A central finding in relation to organisational commitment is that interviewees engaged directly in service provision, such as speech and language therapy and nursing spoke more strongly of their commitment to their professions, colleagues and clients than to the organisation. The contribution of their line manager is also highlighted for generating commitment:

*I do feel loyal but that feeling is present within the department and fostered by the manager. I believe that the line manager and the organisation are good to me so I will pay that back (Interviewee 7).*

The majority of interviewees believed that they are 'good citizens' of the organisation. All of the interviewees revealed their willingness to flex their working hours to suit the organisation if a crisis arose or to cover for a colleague. Six of the interviewees reported staying back late to write up notes for their job-sharing partner, staying with a patient who was awaiting a hospital bed or transfer by ambulance to another hospital, or taking work related calls when scheduled on a day off. These behaviours of going 'above and beyond duty' and one's job description are indicative of high levels of organisational citizenship behaviour as posited by Meyer and Allen (1997). Other organisational benefits resulting from flexible working hours include improved morale, commitment and higher productivity. Overall, the findings suggest that flexible working arrangements are important for the creation and maintenance of continuing commitment to the organisation, clients, and colleagues.

## 10. Limitations of the Study

It was not the initial intention to focus this study on women's experiences solely. It would have been desirable to have a male viewpoint represented within the study. Despite trying several occupations within the Health Service Executive Southern Area, however, a man availing of flexible working arrangements in any form, could not be found. We believe that the contribution from male interviewees would have added to the richness of the study. Perhaps this limitation is indicative of the embeddedness of traditional gender roles within Irish society. In exploring employees' perceptions of the impact of flexible working arrangements on career development, it must be acknowledged that interviewees will differ in terms of personality and in particular in levels of ambition and career centrality. Some interviewees will value career more than others, so may hold stronger views on the relationship between career development and flexible working.

The organisation is a large public sector organisation which offers a range of attractive benefits such as job security, good pension entitlements and generous annual leave. It may be difficult to isolate one factor such as flexible working arrangements as being the key factor in engendering organisational commitment. Additionally, because the Health Service Executive Southern Area is a public sector organisation with a large number of employees availing of flexible working arrangements, it may not be possible to generalise across other sectors of the economy.

## 11. Discussion and Conclusion

The organisation provides employees with a range of attractive flexible working arrangements, many beyond the statutory minimum. There is a distinct lack of synergy, however, between flexible working arrangements and career management activities in the organisation. What is problematic here is that the organisation is failing to

engage in any measurable way in career management, resulting in a one 'sided approach' to career development. Employees may take responsibility for their own career planning and use flexible working as a means to do this, but the organisation is failing to provide systematic career management activities which in turn may make it more difficult for women to progress their careers while availing of flexible working arrangements.

The Health Service Executive Southern Area does not have a strategic career management system. The organisation is lagging behind other Irish public sector organisations, such as the civil service and local authorities, in that a performance management system has yet to be introduced. Such a system would include the operation of personal development plans and agreed objectives for employees. Importantly, both line and senior managers would need to become involved in career management activities, a practice which appears to be severely lacking within the organisation. Without such a system, the organisation is in danger of not having sufficient skilled staff to meet future requirements. Although flexible working arrangements are beneficial to employees and employer, the high level of career 'plateauing' is a cause for concern. The majority of employees who took part in this study are allowing their careers to plateau. Some revealed low levels of career centrality and were content to remain at their current level and used flexible working as a means of alleviating work-family conflict. For those employees however, that saw their careers progressing when their children were older, the lack of a career management system within the organisation means that reviving their careers cannot be planned for.

Overall, the findings reveal that the provision of flexible working arrangements is something of 'a golden handcuff' benefit to employees, meaning that it is a highly valued benefit which ties employees to the organisation. None of the employees indicated that they intend leaving the organisation at any stage in the future. Flexible working arrangements are highly valued by all employees who avail of them. They are considered to be a non-financial benefit which strongly ties employees to the organisation, particularly as they are less available in the private sector. Flexible working arrangements are also critical in mediating the difficulties experienced by women within the organisation who wish to pursue both a career and a family life. Without flexible working arrangements, many female employees would be unable to progress their careers and the organisation would lose valued and skilled employees, which ultimately would impact negatively on the provision of services to clients and patients. Critically, the findings illustrate that there is a strong culture of employees moving to flexible working after returning from maternity leave. Of significant importance is the finding that flexible working has become an unspoken 'condition' of interviewees' returning to work after having children.

Interestingly, the majority of participants demonstrated a high level of commitment to the clients within their service. Previous literature in the area of organisational commitment has explored commitment to the organisation and colleagues but has not uncovered the strong levels of commitment between front line employees and their patients and clients. The provision of flexible working arrangements and the notion of two-way flexibility is a key factor in generating this attitude among employees.

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Table 1. Career profiles of interviewees

No	Discipline	Grade	Working Arrangements	Time with the HSE	No. of children	Reasons for reducing working hours
1.	Finance	Grade 8 Manager	3 Day Week	3.5 years	3	Child/Family
2.	Information Technology	Grade 7 Manager	4 Day Week + blocks of parental leave	3.5 years	3	Child/Family
3.	Community Services	Grade 5- Supervisor/ Administration	5 Day week -30 hour week	11 years	2	Child/Family
4.	Public Health Nursing	Public Health Nurse – South Lee	2 Days week one, 3 days week 2 – Job –sharer	3 years	0	Work/Life Balance
5.	Finance	Grade 8 Manager	4 Day week	3 years	3	Child/Family
6.	Public Health Nursing	Public Health Nurse – West Cork	2 Days week one, 3 days week 2 – Job –sharer	9 years	4	Child/Family
7.	Speech and Language Therapy	Senior Speech and Language Therapist	4 Day Week	8 years	2	Child/Family
8.	Speech and Language Therapy	Speech and Language Therapy Manager	3.5 day week	18 years	2	Child/Family
9.	Speech and Language Therapy	Speech and Language Therapy Manager	4 day week	24 years	3	Child/Family
10.	Speech and Language Therapy	Senior Speech and Language Therapist	3.5 day week	21 years	3	Child/Family
11.	Acute Hospital Nursing	Staff Nurse	2 days per week (12 hour shifts)	7 years	1	Child/Family
12.	Acute Hospital Nursing	Staff Nurse	1 Day per week	24 years	3	Child/Family
13.	Acute Hospital Nursing	Clinical Nurse Manager	Night shift	12 years	2	Child/Family
14.	Public Health Nursing	Public Health Nurse – West Cork	2 days week one, 3 days week 2 – Job –sharer	5 years	2	Child/Family