



## Working patterns

Monday to Friday, nine to five is often considered to be the normal way of working, at least for office staff. But some manufacturing industries often need to run 24 hours a day, to maximise the use of expensive machinery. Others (manufacture of metals and chemicals, power supply etc) have to operate continuously by the very nature of the process or demand. In certain sectors like catering, peak demand occurs outside the hours when most people work. In other areas, like food processing, there may be seasonal peaks and troughs. Finally, relatively new developments like call centres, accelerated by technology, the shift from a manufacturing to a service-based economy and the spread of the '24/7 culture', mean that many people work outside what still may be thought of as the standard working week.

Techniques and schemes have been developed to manage these differing patterns of working include:

- Shiftworking
- Flexitime
- Annual hours arrangements
- Using part-time or temporary staff.
  
- In some cases, work-life balance and attracting and retaining staff may come into the equation. Elsewhere, notably in shiftworking, there are health issues.

Employers can use other methods to increase the flexibility of their workforces. They include overtime, teleworking, and other forms of flexible working methods.

## Shiftworking

Shiftworking is the oldest technique discussed here, and has been around since the industrial revolution. It can be defined as a pattern of working in which one employee replaces another, on the same job, over a set period of time.

Once mainly confined to manufacturing, transport, the police, health care and catering, it has recently spread to other services like retailing and financial services, with a consequent increase in the proportion of female shift workers and a slight overall growth in the numbers of shift workers. In terms of proportions of employees doing shift work, it is most common in transport and communications (where about one third of workers do shift work), followed by public administration, education and health, then distribution, hotels and restaurants and manufacturing. Fifteen per cent of the working population works shifts most of the time<sup>1</sup>.

### Types of shiftworking

There are several ways of organising shift work. The main types are:

- **Two-shift system early/late double day:** the most common system, normally consisting of two shifts of eight hours each: for example, 06:00 to 14:00 and 14:00 to 22:00. Shifts are usually alternated weekly or over longer intervals.
- **Three-shift working:** where the day is divided into three working periods, usually a morning shift (06:00 to 14:00), an afternoon shift (14:00 to 22:00), and a night shift (22:00 to 06:00). Usually, but not always, the pattern involves a week or more of morning shifts followed by a similar period of afternoon shifts and then a similar period of night shifts.
- **Continental shifts:** a continuous three-shift system that rotates rapidly: for example, three mornings, then two afternoons, then two nights. Usually there is a break between shift changes.
- **Split shifts:** full shifts divided into two distinct parts of the day, with a gap of several hours between them, and mainly used in industries with peak demands at different times of the day such as catering and transport.

### Premium payments

Shift working involves unsocial hours and can often be disruptive to body rhythms. Premium payments are usually made to compensate, and in general the more disruptive the shift, the greater the payment. Thus a night shift will attract a greater premium than a day shift.

## Health and safety

Shift work patterns can unbalance circadian rhythms which include sleep patterns, body temperature, alertness and metabolism ('the body clock'). Shiftworkers are more likely to develop ulcers and other stomach problems, and have higher rates of anxiety and depression. Shiftworking is also linked to a rise in heart disease risk factors, altered bowel habits, asthma, epilepsy and chronic fatigue syndrome<sup>2</sup>.

There are various ways in which employers can help to limit these detrimental impacts, for example:

- facilitating short 'power naps'
- advising employees about adjusting sleep patterns, eating habits and exposure to light
- operating short-cycle schedules, in which the number of consecutive nights is small, and otherwise limiting night shifts
- allowing employees to change shift where practicable by self-rostering, under which employees can specify the shifts they would like to work – in effect, swapping shifts with colleagues.

## The legal position

The Working Time Regulations impose certain obligations on employers of night workers:

- The normal working hours of night workers must not exceed an average of eight hours in a 24-hour period, calculated over a 17-week reference period (but this is modifiable by agreement between employers and workers, and the restrictions do not currently apply to those working in the security industries or where there is need for continuity of service or production) .
- Employers are required to offer free health assessments to any worker who is to become a night worker, and night workers must be offered further assessments at regular intervals. Special provisions on health assessments apply to workers aged under 18 who are employed at any time between 22:00 and 06:00.

## Flexitime

Flexitime schemes split the working day into two time periods: flexible time and core time. Employees are expected to be at work in the nominated core periods, but can vary their start, finish and lunch break times. Hours are recorded over a defined period (usually a month or four weeks) and employees must balance their actual hours worked with their total contracted hours. A small number of credit or debit hours may usually be carried over into the next accounting period. Often any extra hours may be converted into leave.

Just over 10% of UK employees, about two and a half million, work flexitime. About 40% of people on flexitime work in public administration and defence. In terms of types of employees, managerial, professional and technical staff account for nearly 33%, and 22% are administrative and secretarial staff. Relatively few manual workers are on flexitime<sup>3</sup>.

### Advantages and disadvantages

Among other advantages, flexitime can:

- improve work-life balance by making it easier to accommodate domestic and work commitments
- help recruitment and retention
- make it easier to accommodate fluctuations in workload
- improve motivation and job satisfaction.

Against these, there are the costs of administering schemes (and/or the software to administer them) and flexitime can:

- mean that staff 'clock watch'
- result in staff working according to their personal preferences rather than business needs
- give problems in maintaining cover at certain times
- make it difficult to schedule meetings.

However, most of the potential difficulties can be tackled by setting clear guidelines, and most organisations operating flexitime schemes find that they are rarely abused and that their schemes work well<sup>4</sup>.

## Annual hours schemes

Under annual hours schemes, the hours employees are contracted to work are calculated over a whole year. Although such schemes vary considerably in detail, in essence they all organise employees' working time flexibly over a 12-month period with the aim of enabling employers to deal better with fluctuations in workload. Such schemes cover 4.6% of full-time employees according to the spring 2003 Labour Force Survey<sup>1</sup>, and the number appears to be growing slightly.

Annual hours are expressed as 'gross' (including annual leave and public holidays) or 'net' (excluding these elements). Employees are paid for gross hours; the net figure is the time actually worked. Thus an employee on a notional 35 hour week and with 25 days' annual leave plus 8 days' public holiday would have the following yearly contract: 52.14 weeks x 35 hours = 1,825 hours (gross) minus 25 days' (175 hours) annual leave and 8 days' (56 hours) public holiday = 1,594 hours (net).

Employees are usually paid in equal four-weekly or monthly instalments, irrespective of the actual hours worked in a given period. Moving to annual hours also provides an opportunity to go from hourly wage rates to an annual salary, a significant cultural change and managerial challenge, not least because it means that employees need to be motivated in the same way as salaried people.

### Reserve hours

The annual hours total may also include a small number of flexible or 'reserve' hours which are worked if required. Reserve hours are also known as 'banked', 'committed' or 'payback' hours. Not all annual hours schemes use reserve hours (they can be seen as complicated) but where reserve hours exist, overtime is only paid when they are exhausted. This challenges 'overtime culture': because reserve hours are built into employees' salaries, it is in their interests to work as few of them as possible.

Reserve hours can be used to:

- cover sickness and absence
- meet production shortfalls
- deal with emergencies
- carry out maintenance
- undertake training.

## Benefits of annual hours

Annual hours schemes are especially attractive to employers whose businesses have uneven demand or seasonal variations. Advantages for employers include:

- reducing or eliminating overtime
- more predictable wage costs, spread evenly throughout the year
- less reliance on temporary staff, and the expense of recruiting them
- greater opportunity to plan maintenance work.

For employees, the potential benefits are:

- a stable income, which may offset the attractions of erratic overtime earnings
- gaining time off through unused reserve hours
- improved work-life balance because revised shift patterns associated with the introduction of annual hours may offer the prospect of extended breaks from work and it is easier to plan leisure time.

## Part-time working

Part-time working may involve later starts or earlier finishes than full-time work, mornings or afternoons only, fewer working days, or any other pattern different from those of people working normal full-time hours.

The proportion of part-time workers (defined as working 30 hours or less per week) is increasing throughout most of the developed world. Most of these are women - about 44% of women in employment work part-time, as opposed to just 10% of men. The sector with the greatest proportion of part-timers is distribution, hotels and restaurants (40%), followed by public administration, education and health (32%).

For many women (and perhaps some men) the main advantage of part-time working is that it enables them to participate in the labour market while meeting family commitments and achieving work-life balance.

For employers, offering part-time work enables them to:

- retain valued employees who might be unable or unwilling to work full-time because of family or other commitments
- recruit people who might otherwise be unavailable because of such commitments.
- In other words, part-time working widens the pool of available labour.

## Temporary working

- Temporary working may be full-time or part-time, but the term implies that the work is for a limited duration. For employers, it can be a way of meeting seasonal or unexpected demand, and for young people it can provide experience of the labour market.

Defining temporary working is somewhat difficult – for example, is an agency worker full-time (with the agency) or temporary (with the organisation where they are currently working)? Temporary working is most common for people under 25, with just over 10% in this age group reporting that they are in temporary work: many of these will be students who do not want a permanent job, and responses to the Labour Force Survey suggest that the numbers of temporary workers who want a permanent job and those who do not are about equal. In 2003, about 6% of the working population was engaged on a temporary basis<sup>1</sup>.