



FLEXIBLE WORKING STRUCTURES: A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

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Abstract: *Work flexibility is a widely adopted approach that emerged in response to the evolving labor market, leading to transformations in the traditional workplace. It focuses on various aspects of work schedules, including timing, hours, and locations, to foster a balance between employers and employees. Five distinct forms of work flexibility have been identified, resulting in different flexible work structures that support organizations to operate effectively. These forms have gained importance as a necessity due to the recent pandemic context. This paper aims to provide an overview of the identified forms of work flexibility and the specific flexible structures associated with each. Taking an exploratory research approach there were analyzed different forms of work flexibility, as discussed in the literature review.*

Keywords: *flexible work, flexible work structures, hybrid work, teleworking.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Work flexibility is a term that is increasingly common today. While various forms of work flexibility have existed since the 1980s, they were used by only a small number of organizations and employees. However, studies have consistently shown that implementing work flexibility, both in terms of work hours and locations, produces positive outcomes.

Over time, in crisis situations (pandemics, war, world financial crises, etc.), forms of work flexibility and flexible work structures began to be taken into account and applied in order not to limit or even stop the activity of organizations. One of the mechanisms applied internationally that ensures an adaptation of the organization to changes on the labor market, but also its development, is the flexibility of work schedules, forming various flexible structures, through which flexibility is offered in terms of working time, the work schedule or the place where the employee works.

Flexible work structures are employment options that involve giving employees significant leeway in fulfilling work responsibilities, a term that represents many forms of work, depending on the needs of workers and organizations.

Flexible working structures are alternatives to the traditional working week, which in Romania is 40 hours per week or 8 hours per day, with two consecutive days off, usually Saturday and Sunday. These structures began to take shape in the 1960s, especially in developed countries in Europe and North America [1], to solve problems arising as a result of the increase in the number of women who began to work, to decongest traffic during peak hours, expand the activity program of some organizations, the needs to reduce labor costs and even reduce high unemployment rates [2].

2. FORMS OF WORK FLEXIBILITY

Workplace flexibility has been a concern in recent years, particularly in the wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, when the extent of flexible employment increased by approximately 20% in 2020 [3]. Very few contemporary researchers question the need for workplace flexibility, so research on workplace flexibility is oriented towards primarily on the ways in which flexibility can be generated for both workers and organizations and how flexibility is enabled but also on organizational performance.

Globally the employees demanded more flexibility in their work and negotiated more flexibility in a hyper-competitive environment, making governments around the world to foster more flexible labor markets for their economies [4].

Through more recent research, specialists in the field have come to the conclusion that work flexibility must be analyzed from the perspective of working hours. Organizations strive to become more flexible in five aspects, presented in figure 1, aspects that might have an influence on the employees' performance [5], [6].

2.1 Spatial flexibility

Spatial flexibility refers to where an organization's employees work from. Employees have the opportunity to work from premises provided by their employers, from home or from any place they want [7].

regulating these work structures even before the COVID-19 pandemic [9].

Teleworking, the practice of working from home using information and communication technology, first emerged in California, USA, in the 1970s. The term "telecommuting" was initially used but has since been replaced by "telework" [10].

Over time, telework has been classified in various ways. The most frequently used classification refers to the multidimensional nature of this form of work and is divided into [11]:

- Telework carried out at home;
- Telework carried out at offices located at a distance from the base office;
- Mobile teleworking, in which case the activities are carried out from other locations than the workplaces of the employers - trips, clients;

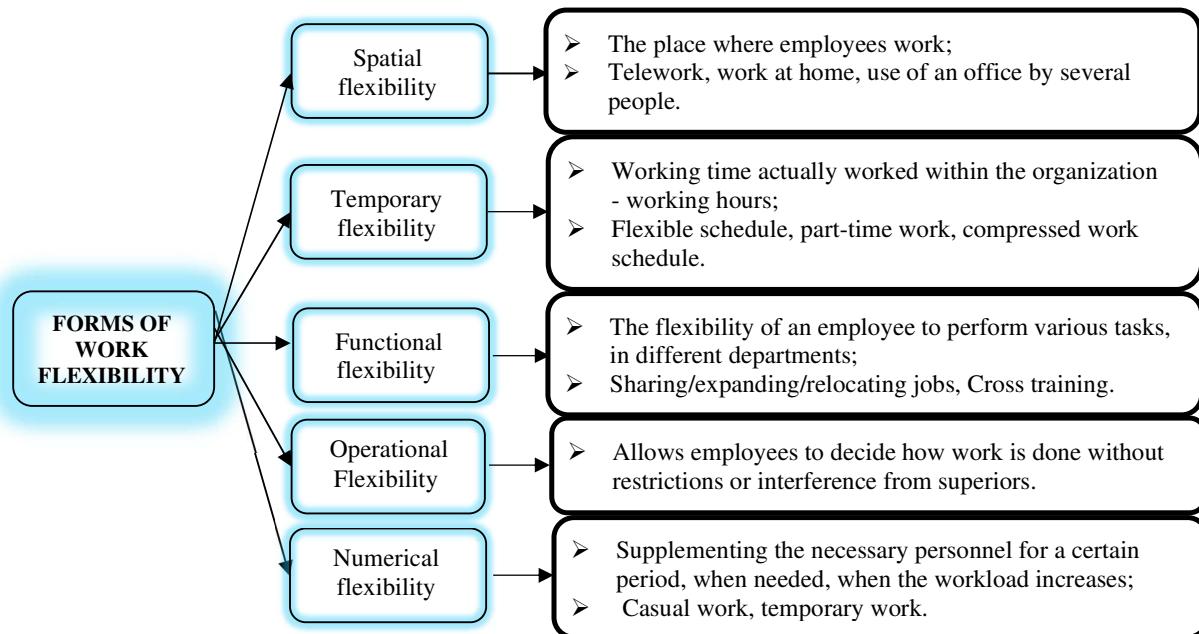


Fig. 1. Forms of work flexibility, own adaptation after [5], [6]

Spatial flexibility is found in many forms [5], [8]: remote work; telework; homework; hybrid work; the use of office spaces in various common spaces; the use of an office by several people in a pre-allocated space.

Telework and home-based work have been relevant and widely studied forms of employment, especially in Europe. Many European countries had legal frameworks

- Ad-hoc teleworking, which refers to employees who usually work from the employer's premises, but have the opportunity to work from home under certain well-defined conditions, or crisis situations, using information technology;
- Nomadic telework – the teleworker is always on the move depending on the job duties, the workplace being anywhere.

Work from home is a form of organization in which the performance of job duties specific to a function is done at the employee's home [12]. The concept of working from home has existed since the 1970s. Then several government organizations, businesses, non-profit organizations chose to practice this form of work to stimulate productivity, but also to reduce costs related to renting spaces for offices and their maintenance expenses [13].

Hybrid work is a system that enables employees to work both from the company's headquarters and from home or another location outside the office. This model allows employees to split their workweek between remote work and in-office work. Hybrid work encompasses scenarios where individuals collaborate both online and in person, at any time and from anywhere: whether at home, remotely, or in the office. This approach combines traditional office work with off-site remote work, offering employees greater flexibility in their lives and helping them achieve a better work-life balance [14].

As organizations increasingly adopt hybrid work models, many are also implementing temporary workspaces. A temporary workspace refers to flexible office areas that are reserved but not assigned to specific employees. These spaces serve as a solution for hybrid work, providing users with a physical place to work when they come into the office, rather than occupying a dedicated personal desk that remains unused while employees work remotely.

Hybrid work has emerged as a significant trend since the pandemic began and continues to play an essential role in the labor market. Many employees view it as a valuable benefit when considering potential job options, often making it a key factor in their decision to accept or decline job offers. The need to limit in-person contact and the ongoing digitization of work processes were two major influences that prompted companies worldwide to adopt this work model. As a result, many organizations have embraced hybrid work as an added benefit, helping them attract more candidates for open positions and retain their existing employees [15].

Hybrid work maximizes workplace and time flexibility, allowing workers to tailor their work hours to their lifestyle and personal habits, rather than tailoring their personal lives to the hours they have to spend in the office. Hybrid work models allow for the best of both worlds – the flexibility of remote work and the socialization of the office.

The use of office space in various common areas is a type of spatial flexibility that supports collaboration and interaction between employees, within open offices or common work areas. These spaces include coworking areas, meeting rooms and relaxation areas, which allow employees to choose the most suitable environment for their activities, whether it is individual work or teamwork. The model promotes efficiency through the flexible use of spaces, depending on the needs of the moment, and supports creativity, but may require careful management to avoid noise or crowding. Thus, these structures can contribute to a more dynamic and collaborative work atmosphere [16].

The use of an office by several people in a pre-assigned space is an increasingly popular spatial flexibility model in organizations that adopt a hybrid or flexible work schedule. In this system, employees do not have a personalized office, but use an available office based on a reservation schedule. This allows for more efficient use of space, given that not all employees are present in the office simultaneously. This approach can also reduce costs for employers, as fixed offices for each employee can be dispensed with. However, this model can create a sense of instability for some employees, who may feel the lack of a dedicated workplace or personalized space. Effective management of reservations and maintaining a balance between flexibility and comfort remain essential aspects for the success of this type of flexibility [17].

2.2 Temporal flexibility

Temporal flexibility involves the organization of working hours within a company. A flexible work schedule can be created by establishing "core" hours when all or some employees are present and available [7].

Alternatively, an uneven work schedule can be implemented, allowing hours to be distributed according to the needs of both the employer and the employees, while also considering their availability. Temporal flexibility can take four different forms [5]:

- Flexible schedule (flexitime) – employees must maintain the same daily work duration but can select different start and end times each day;
- Part-time work – the number of working hours, per day, week or month, is less than the number of hours worked by an employee with a normal schedule;
- Compressed work schedule – reducing the work week to a maximum of 4 days or less;
- Working hours based on trust allow employees to set their schedules, working where and how much they choose, as long as they complete their tasks

In addition to the above, a form of temporal flexibility called: "career breaks" is used, a form of flexibility that gives workers the opportunity to suspend service and work at the initiative of the employee for a period for a maximum of two years – sabbatical year. In the private environment this form is rarely encountered, but in the public environment it is a common practice. Another form of temporal flexibility is job sharing (job sharing/ worksharing), which assumes that a full-time job is shared by two or more employees, who in turn share the salary and benefits in depending on the time worked. This work scheme worked very well even during periods of economic crisis, when unemployment rates were higher, allowing employees to also cope with responsibilities outside the workplace [5].

Flexible working time from the employer's perspective represents a more efficient organization of working time, respecting changes in workload and unexpected changes in the work process. This makes it possible to avoid periods when the employee is available to the employer but does not perform work [18]. Consequently, the saved working time can be used in times when work is really needed. The recovery of working hours is not treated as additional work and is therefore not covered by overtime pay, which helps to limit employment-

related costs. In order to achieve these objectives, the legislation must support a more flexible approach to normal working hours (average working week, variable daily working hours), relatively long reference periods and flexibility of working hours, including different forms of working hours. working time. These solutions obviously help the employer to have the work done when it is actually needed, which results in a more efficient distribution of working time.

The problem of flexible working time has worsened with the economic crisis. According to employers, the lack of flexibility can lead to layoffs or even bankruptcy and company closures. As a result, many European countries have accepted new legal instruments that have led to an increase in flexibility. In many cases, they are applied with the involvement of the social partners. In addition, the extent of the recession means that the problems that arise cannot be solved by the parties to the employment relationship alone or even by the social partners [19].

2.3 Functional flexibility

Functional flexibility refers to a worker's flexibility to perform various tasks in different departments. Therefore, it also refers to the process of increasing and diversifying the skills of employees to work across distinct traditional occupational boundaries, they must possess very diverse skills that will be used in various tasks. So, functional flexibility is a concept in companies where employees can work in different functions or be intentionally deployed in various functions with different roles and responsibilities [6]. This can be achieved by making the employees multi-skilled so that they can perform different types of tasks whenever required. Thus, employee development must take into account the investment in future skills through training and continuing education of the workforce.

Examples of functional flexibility structures are [20]:

- Job sharing (including expansion, and temporary relocation) along with spatial flexibility in the workplace;

- Cross-training refers to professional training provided by the organization, along with participation in various training courses by employees to gain knowledge beyond their usual tasks;
- Rotational jobs are a form of functional flexibility [5]. In many organizations, employees are typically transferred to different departments, work locations, or subsidiaries after a period of 3 to 5 years. This practice helps achieve functional flexibility and ensures all work tasks are fulfilled at each stage. Periodic professional training that aligns with the current and future needs of the organization plays a crucial role in this process. Additionally, the successful implementation of functional flexibility relies on modern human resource management practices, including the use of autonomous teams. This approach grants each worker, as well as the teams as a whole, a degree of autonomy [21].

Functional employee flexibility provides transferable skills that enhance broader employment opportunities. However, it has faced criticism for potentially increasing the number of tasks in the workday under the pretense of offering flexibility and autonomy. For organizations, functional flexibility breaks down the barriers of clearly defining each worker's responsibilities and creates a highly skilled workforce that can be easily assigned to various functions [20]. Nevertheless, this approach tends to benefit only core workers, and training costs can become a concern. Additionally, employee morale may suffer as workers adapt to new environments, undertake undesirable tasks, and face a diminishing distinction between skilled and unskilled roles.

Functional work flexibility involves a series of essential characteristics, such as professional versatility, internal workforce mobility and continuous skills development, which allow employees to respond quickly to organizational changes. This reduces rigid specialization and encourages collaboration between departments, increasing organizational resilience. Employees also benefit from more autonomy and responsibility, and organizations adopt flatter structures to support effective communication

and operational decisions. Functional flexibility thus promotes an integrated and adaptable approach to everyday challenges [22].

2.4 Operational Flexibility

Operational flexibility allows employees to decide how work is done without restrictions or interference from superiors. Self-management refers to the policy of allowing employees to have more freedom in managing their own behaviors, which has been shown to increase worker engagement. Operational flexibility provides some positive outcomes for both workers and the organization, improving the overall work-family balance, and being positively associated with psychological well-being.

In a result-oriented work environment, where employers prioritize performance over employee attendance, operational flexibility is ideal. Employees will be compensated based on their results, as long as they complete tasks within the deadlines. This approach allows for flexibility in work schedules without the need to focus on the total number of hours worked [6]. Increased perceived worker autonomy also boosts employee engagement, as they can access various resources and feel that all aspects of their work are within their control. An example of this arrangement is borderless work, which allows employees to work from any location around the world. This form of remote work focuses solely on results. Borderless offices ensure that employees have the flexibility to work from anywhere and in any time zone, as long as they complete their work tasks [23].

Operational flexibility of work is the ability of an organization to quickly adjust its processes, resources and activities to respond effectively to changes in the external or internal environment. This involves adapting workflows, efficiently allocating resources, integrating technology and promptly reacting to unforeseen situations. Such flexibility is based on effective interdepartmental coordination, rapid decision-making and constant monitoring of performance, being essential for maintaining competitiveness and business continuity in dynamic contexts [22].

Although it contributes to cost reduction and organizational adaptability, it can generate professional instability for employees, requiring a balance between economic efficiency and social protection.

2.5 Numerical flexibility

Numerical flexibility refers to the ability to adjust staffing levels to meet fluctuating workloads. This may involve using casual or temporary workers. However, these employment practices can lead to certain organizational challenges, such as higher staff turnover, which can result in poor management of human resources [5]. Numerical flexibility can be categorized as either external or internal [21]. The external aspect is particularly achieved through fixed-term employment contracts, temporary employment agencies, flexible employment conditions, or reasonable dismissal restrictions. Temporary employment agencies represent a third entity involved in labor relations, representing a unique triangular form that helps fill jobs. This involves a temporary employment relationship between an intermediary agency, an employer, and an employee, which makes him available to an organization that uses its services – a user company. It is a more atypical form of work being used mainly by students, migrant workers, people with special needs, and the unemployed, and ensures better flexibility in the labor market and better control of payroll expenses. At the European level, the share of this type of work relationship is increasing.

Internal numerical flexibility refers to the availability of flexible working hours for different categories of employees. This type of flexibility has been utilized for a long time and includes structures such as shift work, night shifts, and working on weekends. Initially, it was primarily limited to specific sectors, including security and protection services, medical services, hotels, and certain manufacturing industries.

Currently, flexible work structures are widely adopted across various fields and take many forms, including extended shop hours, compressed workweeks, and more adaptable holiday policies. Research has shown that

implementing these flexible practices can enhance organizational performance by optimizing employee numbers in different sectors. This approach fosters innovation, adaptability, and productivity while identifying the most effective ways to organize and utilize working hours.

Consequently, this type of flexibility serves two key functions for organizations: substitution, which replaces temporarily absent personnel, and supplementation, which secures the required employees during peak times.

3. FLEXIBLE WORK STRUCTURES

One mechanism used internationally to help organizations adapt to changes in the labor market and promote their development is the implementation of flexible work schedules. These structures offer employees various options regarding when and where they work. Flexible working structures provide employees with significant freedom in managing their responsibilities and encompass a range of work formats tailored to meet the needs of both employees and businesses.

Flexible working structures or schedules are alternatives to the traditional workweek of 40 hours, typically consisting of 8-hour days. These structures started to develop between the 1960s and 1980s as employers and political leaders in developed countries sought new employment practices to address various emerging challenges. These included traffic congestion, the increasing participation of women in the workforce who also had family responsibilities, the expansion of enterprise activity schedules, high unemployment rates, and the need to reduce costs [2].

In the early 1980s, there was a growing awareness of the importance of work-life balance, which led to the widespread implementation of flexible work programs as family-friendly work policies. [9]. Employers began to support and encourage employees in balancing work demands with their family and personal responsibilities. Today, these structures are commonly used in many European countries, including Great Britain, France, Germany, and Romania, as well as in Canada, United States, Japan, and New Zealand.

The use of flexible work structures has many advantages and many disadvantages. When a manager decides that the organization should implement flexible work, he must analyze very carefully whether the organization's field of activity is suitable for such an approach, and if there is compatibility, decide which of the many options is the most compatible with the organization's field of activity.

The introduction and implementation of flexibilization tools are seen as ways to improve labor productivity, boost enterprise development, mobilize workers' capacities to remain in the labor market and advance in their careers.

Flexible work structures became visible worldwide during the COVID 19 pandemic, when both organizations and employees tried and succeeded in finding the best working practices so that their activity would not stop permanently and would survive the crisis. With the end of the pandemic, a number of practices were preserved because they worked and were even developed, some of them being clearly legislated at the global level [24].

4. ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES OF WORK FLEXIBILITY

Over time, extensive research has been conducted on the advantages and disadvantages of using a standard work schedule – typically eight hours a day and forty hours a week –

compared to flexible work structures with an impact on both employees and organizations. The main advantages and disadvantages of the five types of forms of work flexibility are presented in Table 1.

Analyzing the data in Table 1, it can be seen that temporal and spatial flexibility focuses on the adaptability of employees to their own needs, and functional and operational flexibility aims at the adaptability of the organization in the face of external and internal changes, while Numerical Flexibility is more related to the forced adjustment of team size and can be used to optimize costs and resources, but comes with risks of instability for employees.

All these forms of flexibility can improve organizational efficiency, but their success depends on proper management and their alignment with the overall strategy of the organization.

Extensive research has been conducted over time on the advantages and disadvantages of using a standard work schedule – typically eight hours a day and forty hours a week – compared to flexible working structures. This research has identified various benefits and drawbacks for employees, organizations, and society as a whole. Notably, two key advantages of implementing flexible work structures at certain levels are presented in figure 2, and in figure 3, notably, two key disadvantages of implementing flexible work structures at certain levels are presented.

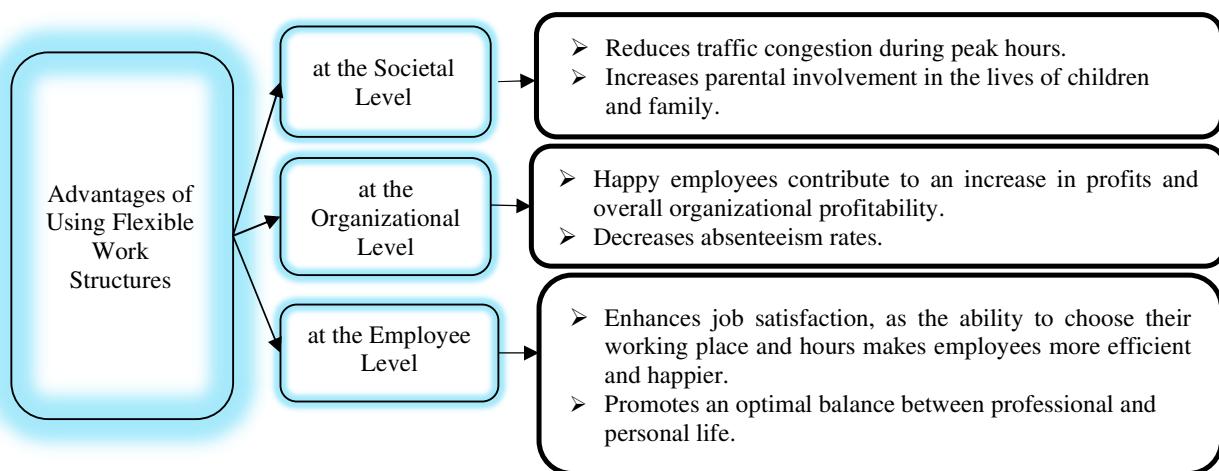


Fig. 2. Advantages of implementing flexible work structures, developed after [4], [9], [13]

Table 1
Advantages and disadvantages of flexible forms of work, developed after [1], [4], [6], [19], [20], [21], [24]

| Forms of work flexibility | Advantages | Disadvantages: |
|----------------------------------|--|--|
| Temporal Flexibility | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increases employee satisfaction by giving them more control over their time. Reduces stress related to fixed schedules and improves work-life balance. Can lead to higher productivity as employees work during times when they are most productive. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Can be difficult to coordinate in teams that require synchronization. Requires careful management of time and resources to avoid overloading or loss of productivity. |
| Spatial Flexibility | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Cost savings (e.g., reduced commuting and office expenses). Increased flexibility for employees and improved work-life balance. The ability for employers to recruit talent from diverse geographic locations. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Challenges in maintaining team cohesion and organizational culture. Difficulties in performance management and efficient collaboration at a distance. Risks of social isolation for employees. |
| Functional Flexibility | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Organizations can respond quickly to market changes or internal requirements. Increases adaptability and innovation as employees approach problems from multiple angles. Promotes continuous skill development. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Can lead to employee overwork if not properly managed. Requires ongoing training and effective human resource management practices. |
| Numerical Flexibility | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Allows organizations to quickly respond to rising or falling demand. Helps optimize labor costs by hiring temporarily or using flexible contracts. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Can lead to instability in labor relations, negatively impacting employee morale. May increase precariousness of employment and reduce job security for workers. |
| Operational Flexibility | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Allows organizations to maintain competitiveness in a constantly changing economic environment. Helps maintain operational continuity even during crises. Increases operational efficiency by rapidly integrating new technologies or methods. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Requires agile management and a culture that supports rapid change. Can lead to complexity in decision-making if not implemented efficiently. |

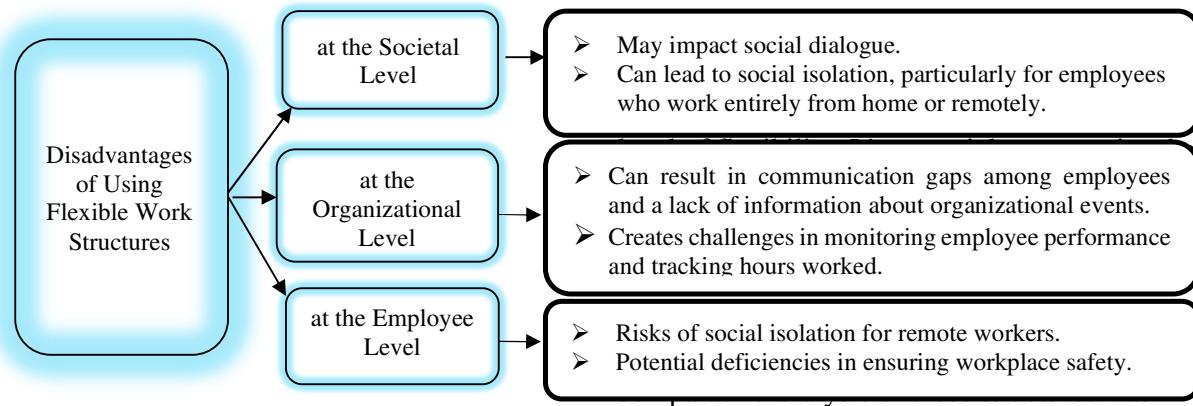


Fig. 3. Disadvantages of implementing flexible work structures, developed after [4], [9], [13]

5. CONCLUSIONS

To fulfill the purpose of the article, an exploratory research approach was undertaken, which involved a review of various structures of

conducted, focusing on the main advantages and disadvantages.

This comparative analysis highlighted how work flexibility has become a cornerstone of modern employment practices. Such flexibility

allows both organizations and employees to adapt to the rapidly changing labor market.

According to this analysis each type of work flexibility (temporal, spatial, functional, numerical, and operational) present unique benefits and challenges.

Adapting to the specific nature of a workplace enables both individuals and organizations to thrive and succeed in diverse contexts. Flexible work structures provide numerous benefits when implemented through clearly defined plans and methodologies that guide decision-making and set expectations for flexibility. Temporal and spatial flexibility primarily support employees in achieving better work-life balance, while functional and operational flexibility enhance organizational adaptability and responsiveness to market demands. Numerical flexibility, though effective in managing labor costs, can introduce instability and insecurity for employees.

Organizations need to carefully evaluate the specific needs of their workforce and business environment to adopt the most suitable flexibility model. The key to success lies in a balanced approach that supports employees' personal needs while ensuring that the organization's operational goals are met effectively. When implemented thoughtfully, work flexibility can drive productivity, increase employee satisfaction, and enhance an organization's resilience in an ever-evolving global market.

Building on this research as a foundation, a future study will involve a comparative analysis of the five identified forms. Each form will be examined in detail, with a focus on its advantages and disadvantages. This analysis will employ a mixed-methods approach, integrating both quantitative and qualitative methods, based on a sample of organizations.

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Structuri de lucru flexibile: cadru conceptual

Flexibilitatea muncii este o abordare larg adoptată, apărută ca răspuns la evoluția pieței muncii, ducând la transformări în locul de muncă tradițional. Aceasta se concentrează pe diverse aspecte ale programului de lucru, inclusiv orarul, orele și locațiile, pentru a promova un echilibru între angajator și angajați. Au fost identificate cinci forme distincte de flexibilitate a muncii, rezultând în diferite structuri de lucru flexibile care sprijină organizațiile să funcționeze eficient. Aceste forme au căpătat importanță ca o necesitate datorită contextului recent al pandemiei. Această lucrare își propune să ofere o imagine de ansamblu asupra formelor identificate de flexibilitate a muncii și a structurilor flexibile specifice asociate fiecărei. Adoptând o abordare exploratorie a cercetării, au fost analizate diferite forme de flexibilitate a muncii, așa cum sunt discutate în analiza literaturii de specialitate.

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