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## Exploring the Linkage between Work Flexibility and Work-life Balance in the Hospitality industry

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## **Understanding the linkage between work flexibility and work-life balance in the Irish hospitality industry**

**Key words:** work flexibility, work-life balance, human resource management, regression analysis

### **Abstract**

A debate within the hospitality industry currently centres around the question as to whether human resource policies are progressing and developing. In the context of work flexibility and work-life balance programmes, the question arises as to whether work flexibility is a mutual gains enterprise for employers and employees. The thesis extends the debate on the flexible firm to incorporate the work-life balance agenda. The extent of numerical and functional flexibility is correlated with the extent of work-life balance supports. Company benefits are not linked to numerical flexibility, but in both the employer and employee surveys they are consistently associated with functional flexibility and work-life balance supports. This would suggest an integrated approach to human resource management, whereby some companies engage in a modern employee focused approach, whereas other companies tend to be more traditional.

From an employer perspective, work-life balance and functional flexibility supports employee benefits and mutual gain. The overall conclusion, according to the employee, is that functional flexibility does not benefit either the employer nor the employee while work-life balance favours the employer and the employee.

## **Introduction**

Flexibility began in the hospitality industry in the 1960s. It was employer driven as it was seen to have major cost advantages for the organisation. This was to the detriment of the employee, and many would argue that, in fact, it resulted in employee exploitation. The situation was one where many employees were happy to get work of any kind and they tolerated poor working conditions. In this economic environment, the hospitality industry was considered to have a poor reputation for human resource practice. This traditional image is supported by empirical research and industrial reports (Lucas, 2002).

Over the past four decades, there have been significant developments in human resource management practices. This has led to a change in perspective. In the past, people were viewed as akin to machines, whereas now they are viewed as a unique source of competitive advantage. The person is perceived as a very important human resource to be developed. This has practical consequences in terms of training, benefits and better working conditions (Pfeffer, 2005). In fact “flexible work practices are for many the core of the human resource (HR) system that is associated with high performance” (De Menezes and Wood: 106).

Also, the traditional separation between work and life outside work has disappeared. We have seen the advent of family-friendly/work-life balance policies. There is evidence from industrial reports that people work better when they can balance work and personal life (Saltzein and Yuan Ting, 2001). There is also some evidence which claims that the firm benefits from such policies.

The literature highlights a dearth of service-based research, particularly in the hospitality sector (Hoque, 2000; Illeris, 2002; Van Scotter and Culligan, 2003). In addition, there is a need to research the small establishment as Irish industry is mainly made up of small businesses (Okumus, 2002). Also, the literature highlighted a lack of human resource research in Ireland and insufficient research in the non-unionised sector (Hoque, 2000; Bird et al., 2002).

The tourism and hospitality industry is an important contributor to the wealth of nations as a good provider of employment. It is set to become the largest industry, not only in Ireland but also world-wide. As a result of this gap in research, we have chosen the Irish hotel industry, as it is a sector dominated by small, family run businesses, for our primary research. The study will be an integrated analysis of work flexibility and work-life balance approaches. It will advance the theory on the flexible firm (Atkinson, 1984a,b) to include work-life balance. This will be of direct relevance to the academic community. As it is the first time such research has been carried out in Ireland, it will contribute to the body of knowledge. It will advance human resource research mainly in the small establishment and the hospitality sector. This work will develop an appropriate work flexibility model adapted to meet the modern human resource needs of the hospitality industry.

### **Theoretical Background**

There is a need to examine general factors that influence the decision to use all forms of flexible staffing arrangements (Kalleberg, 2001). Some studies have shown increased costs in administration and management training for supervisors of part-time workers. Other studies indicate savings due to the lower wages, lower or non-existent benefits and decreased absenteeism associated with part-time work (Michie and Sheehan, 2005). In contrast, there is

evidence that flexibility in rostering and the matching of supply and demand in services is an important reason for adopting flexible employment practices. In research conducted by Bird et al., (2002) the question arose as to whether flexibility is the best solution to the challenges of the workplace.

Creagh and Brewster (1998) argue that there are two different viewpoints on the use, within organisations, of flexible working practices. One perspective considers flexibility as a response to the economic requirements of employers. This can result in a lack of job security and poor working conditions (Atkinson, 1984b; De Ruyter and Burgess, 2003). This is a consequence of an employer centred workplace and government pursuit of labour flexibility. The other perspective on work flexibility questions the relevance of work structures for the current needs of society. More specifically, it raises the issue of suitable arrangements for employees (Coughlan, 2000b; Fisher 2000).

The above conclusions raise the question as to why the adoption of these practices is not widespread if they increase performance. Have the gains from implementing the alternative practices been too modest to result in a quick growth in these practices? (Appelbaum and Batt, 1994; Gittleman et al., 1998). More research is needed as to the possible answers to the question of who is benefiting from these practices

Research has also shown that the rapid expansion in part-time employment in Australia over the past two decades has largely been driven by the desire of organisations to achieve numerical and functional flexibility, rather than by a desire to help employees balance work and family responsibilities. The interests of employers and employees in flexible arrangements can sometimes differ. Consequently, employers can develop flexible

arrangements solely to fit their own business strategy. This may or may not be beneficial to employees (Casey et al., 1997; Purcell, 1997)'. Furthermore, 'Dex and Scheibl (2001) note that the question as to whether SMEs differ from larger companies in this respect has not been studied. Storey (1997) questions the assumption that the flexible firm is automatically more efficient than its inflexible counterpart. This has been challenged by doubts about effects on productivity, quality and worker commitment. Also, it seems timely to examine the extent to which these practices contribute to or detract from competitive advantage (Marchington and Wilkinson, 1996; Sheridan and Conway, 2001).

According to Kalleberg (2001) there is a need to develop models of different types of work practices in relation to flexible work and in particular to set out the links between functional and numerical flexibility. The question arises as to who are the beneficiaries of work flexibility and specifically does functional flexibility result in disadvantages for employers or employees (Kalleberg, 2001). Benson (1996) in reference to Japan, points to the fact that few studies have provided an integrated analysis of the various forms of labour flexibility. The central aim of this study is to describe the extent and consequences of flexible work systems and in particular to examine the interplay between numerical and functional flexibility. The consequences are the balance of gain between employers and employees. Accordingly, we now hypothesise that:

**H1:** Work flexibility is more beneficial to the employer than the employee.

The role of trade unions in the whole area of work flexibility is unclear. Gramm and Schnell (2001) found that unions were against flexible work arrangements, but not against subcontracting. Also, Benson (1996) found that the presence of unions in large firms restricts the type of employment practices that can be implemented.

In a study conducted in the UK it was found that there were more flexible work practices in the SME sector, which is largely non-unionised (Storey, 1997). Furthermore, Storey (1997) claims that the non-union sector is important for two reasons. Firstly, because small and

medium sized enterprises are usually managed informally and rarely unionised. Secondly, because the non-union sector is a relatively neglected research area. Trade unions are not opposed to non-standard types of work. However, they are against the poor practices associated with them (O'Connell, 1998). Other research demonstrates some positive effects of unions (Cappelli and Sherer, 1989; Baron and Kreps, 1999). Accordingly, we hypothesise that

**H2:**Hotels which are unionised have less flexible work practices than hotels which are not unionised.

Family-friendly/work-life balance policies are now being driven by key players. These include the EU, government, employers and employees themselves (Coughlan, 2000b; Fredriksen-Goldsen and Scharlach, 2001; Glynn et al., 2002). There is some evidence that work-life balance programmes create problems for employees (Fisher, 2000; Nord et al., 2002). Certain conflicts can arise in relation to work and life outside work (MacEwan and Barling, 1994; Frone et al., 1997). The presence of work-life balance policies can have some positive effects on employees such as lower stress (Buick and Mahesh, 2001; Lashley, 2002). Other studies show that the employer is gaining from the present working arrangements (Allen, 2001; Meyer et al., 2001). There is further evidence of limited research (Meyer et al., 2001; Fredriksen-Goldsen and Scharlach, 2001; McLaughlin and Cullen, 2003). Again, the question arises about who is really benefiting from these policies (Fredriksen-Goldsen and Scharlach, 2001). Are they a mutual gains enterprise or rather are they another form of employer control? Firms may be very happy to have these arrangements as an alternative to having permanent contracts of employment. Accordingly, we hypothesise that

**H3:** Work-life balance policies are more beneficial to the employer than the employee.

More specifically, there is some lack of clarity among authors regarding the effect of the size of organisation on work-life balance policies. Some authors found that larger organisations were more responsive (Ingram and Simons, 1995; Milliken et al., 1998). In contrast, there is



also evidence that the small firm is progressive in terms of flexible work programmes (Dex and Scheibl, 2001). Accordingly, we hypothesise

**H4:** There will be more flexible work practices in the bigger hotels, i.e. 4\* and 5\* hotels than in smaller hotels, i.e. 2\*.

The literature claims that effective human resource management is one of the most important considerations in creating and maintaining a competitive advantage for an hotel. Evidence shows that a focus on human capital has a positive effect on performance. Taking care of the growth needs of people will ensure a workforce that will respond efficiently, effectively and enthusiastically, to the needs of the company (Pfeffer, 1994, Hitt et al., 2001).

Storey (1989) distinguishes between the hard HRM approach and the soft HRM approach. The former stresses cost reduction and numerical flexibility, whereas, in contrast, the latter underscores commitment, employee involvement and training. Numerical control of labour costs is considered significant and is represented by short-term contracts, temporary working and part-time working. Significantly, according to Hoque (2000) and Lucas (2002) there are accounts of the hospitality industry that report poor practice and a lack of HRM among managers.

Accordingly, we hypothesise that

**H5:** There will be more flexible work practices in hotels with a human resource manager on the staff.

Some authors have found that the support of management is key to bringing about management change. Perceptions of a supportive work/family culture were related to employees' use of work/family benefits. Managerial support may be the most important cultural variable affecting employees' decisions to use work-life balance programmes (Thompson et al., 1999; Poelmans and Sahibzada, 2004)'. Also, Forret and de Janasz (2005) found that mentors play a significant role in developing perceptions of an organisation's culture for work/family balance. Accordingly, we hypothesise that

**H6:** There is a positive relationship between management support for work-life balance and the adoption of these policies.

### **The study**

The objective of this study is to explore different forms of work flexibility and work-life balance with a view to ascertaining whether the employer or employee are benefiting.

#### *Data set*

The author's view was that a structured direct survey would be most appropriate in order to provide broad coverage of an integrated study of work flexibility. We decided to conduct a survey of employers and employees. For the employer survey, a stratified sample design was chosen in relation to star rating and geographical spread. Because hotels provide a broad range of facilities, they are classified from 1\* to 5\* categories. All five\* hotels were selected and a random sample of one in two four\*, three\*, two\*, one\* and unclassified hotels. All five star hotels were selected, as there are only twenty three. Also, these hotels offer a wide range of facilities. They have the most sophisticated product. The key respondent for the employer survey was the human resource manager and, in his/her absence, the general manager. This all served to generate a response rate of 40% for employers which included 177 usable questionnaires. Qualitative interviews were used to clarify and confirm aspects of the research setting. Experts were identified through the author's knowledge of the industry and included academics working in the areas of management, tourism and hospitality, leading Irish hotel industry spokespersons and a sample of the owners and human resource managers of Irish hotels.

It was decided to survey employees of five, four and three star hotels in a unionised group, a non-unionised group and two family-run hotels, including a four\* and a three\*. In

approximately half of the hotels the human resource manager distributed the questionnaires to employees and in the balance of hotels the author went along in person and distributed the questionnaires at lunch time. The response rate was 22% for employees which included 246 usable questionnaires. The response was low due to the fact that many employees were part-time and were not working on the day the questionnaire was distributed.

#### *Methodological procedure*

A pilot test was conducted to establish validity and reliability. For reliability of attitude type questions a reliability analysis-scale alpha was conducted which showed alpha to be .6872; this was significant and demonstrated the ability of the questions to test what they set out to test (cf. Table 1). A variety of statistical techniques were used such as frequencies, cross tabulations, correlations and regression analysis.

Table 1: Reliability Analysis of Questionnaire

**Reliability**

\*\*\*\*\* Method 1 (space saver) will be used for this analysis  
\*\*\*\*\*

RELIABILITY ANALYSIS - SCALE (A  
LPHA)

## Item-total Statistics

	Scale Mean	Scale Variance	Corrected Item- Total Correlation	
Alpha				
Item	if Item	if Item	Total	if
Deleted	Deleted	Deleted		
D2A	9.7128	9.9919	.3705	
	.6674			
D2C	9.8617	9.4888	.5038	
	.6118			

D2D	10.0532	9.8795	.5087
.6148			
D2F	9.8883	8.7629	.5138
.6033			
D2G	9.5691	9.7225	.3426
.6848			

Reliability Coefficients Work- life balance scale (employee questionnaire)

N of Cases = 188.0

N of Items = 5

Alpha = .6872

## Results

### An Overview Analysis of the Employers' Survey

#### ***Employer Benefit, Employee Benefit and Mutual Benefit***

In order to work out a model, three dependent variables were chosen to measure whether numerical flexibility practices work more to the benefit of the employer than the employee. The dependent variables were (1) *profit* (employer benefit), (2) *family* (employee benefit), and (3) a combination of labour cost (employer benefit) and one of the employee benefits (*interest 2*). These were considered to be the sharpest measure of benefit for the employer, employee and both.

The following analysis focuses on who benefits from these numerical flexibility practices and work-life balance arrangements: is it employer, employee or both? The analysis begins by discussing different aspects of the overall model with their accompanying sets of independent variables 1) company characteristics, 2) external labour market, 3) numerical flexibility

internal labour market, 4) functional flexibility, 5) human resources company policies, and 6) work-life balance organisational culture (Farrell, 2006, Tables 8.1 to Tables 8.6, 187-184).

In relation to the three dependent constructs, 1) *profit*, 2) *family*, and 3) *interest 2* (a combination of employer benefit and employee benefit), it was found that the benefits for the employer were independent of, or somewhat different than the benefits for the employee. Combining employer and employee (*interest 2*) is strongly correlated with benefits for the employee. The main benefit for the employee is in the area of work-life balance. It is interesting to note that work-life balance works to the benefit of the employee. However, the employer also benefits from work-life balance. When the employer takes into account the employees' need for flexible work, he/she is going to get better results in terms of service. This is crucial in the hospitality industry. It is work which is characterised by high emotional labour. The employee must be always disposed to give optimum service irrespective of how he/she feels on the day. By facilitating a flexible timetable for the employee, the employer is helping to ensure more quality time on the job.

#### **A Model of Work Flexibility from an Employer's Perspective` Combined Model**

The final stage was a combined model for each of the three dependent variables, employee benefits, (*family*), employer benefits (*profit*) and mutual benefits (*interest 2*) and including only independent variables which were found to be significant ( $p < .05$ ).

For the combined model with employees benefiting from numerical flexibility work practices (*family*) as dependent, the results identify six independent variables as statistically significant ( $p < .10$ ). The combined model in Table 2 shows that only one independent factor, work-life balance supports, is significant. More supports lead to employees benefiting more from work flexibility. Clearly, employees are benefiting in a significant way from work-life balance policies. Employees now have higher expectations of the employer contract and are seeking greater flexibility and balance.

Five of the nine independent variables identified in the earlier analysis continue to influence the extent to which numerical flexibility benefits the employer (*profit*). They are namely, four flexibility factors (a) whether part-time staff are employed to deal with a changing workload ( $p < .05$ ), (b) whether part-time staff are more likely than full-time staff, in comparable jobs, to have to work more hours than agreed ( $p < .05$ ), (c) the extent of numerical flexibility types ( $p < .05$ ), and (d) the extent of numerical flexibility and the percentage of the types of workers ( $p < .05$ ), and one human management practice (e) whether staff are laid off to deal with a decreased workload ( $p < .05$ ), which is directly related to numerical flexibility. Overall, a more varied and diverse internal labour market is associated with benefits accruing to employers. Part-time workers are not used to deal with changing workloads, instead, staff lay-offs are used to manage business downturn. The findings here show that labour cost considerations are an issue for the employer. The hospitality industry is labour intensive and staff costs account for a high percentage of turnover.

For the combined model of employer and employee benefits (*interest 2*) as dependent the result was significant ( $p < .05$ ). Four of the nine coefficients were significant, namely, (a) hotel classification ( $p < .05$ ), (b) the extent of types of functional flexibility ( $p < .05$ ), (c) family-friendly/work-life balance arrangements ( $p < .05$ ), and (d) whether staff are laid off to deal with a decreased workload ( $p < .05$ ).

Overall, benefits for the employer, such as cost saving, tend to accrue in hotels that have fewer stars, a redundancy policy, little functional flexibility and where family-friendly/work-life balance arrangements are irrelevant. On the contrary, benefits to employees tend to accrue in four or five star hotels that do not have a policy of redundancy, tend to have much functional flexibility and where family-friendly/work-life balance is important.

Table 2: MULTIPLE REGRESSION of Employee Benefit (family), Employer Benefit (profit) and Combined Employer and Employee (interest 2) for Combined Significant Independent Factors.

<b>Organisational factors</b>	<b>Dependent variables</b>		
	<b>Standardised beta</b>		
<b>Company characteristics</b>	<b>Family</b>	<b>Profit</b>	<b>Interest 2</b>
Classification of hotel – stars	.127		.180*
Hotel operating times		-.102	
<b>External labour market</b>			
Indicate the level of difficulty experienced in recruiting full-time staff	-.050	-.069	-.014
<b>Internal labour market</b>			
If part-time staff are employed to deal with the changing workload	-.040	.158*	-.073
Frequency with which part-timers in the establishment with agreed weekly working hours have to work longer hours than agreed	.123	.019	.046
Are part-timers in the hotel more or less likely than full-timers in comparable jobs to have to work additional hours		.150*	
Extent of numerical flexibility types qa6		.279*	
Extent of numerical flexibility qb1, percentage pt caseb5 types of workers		.185*	



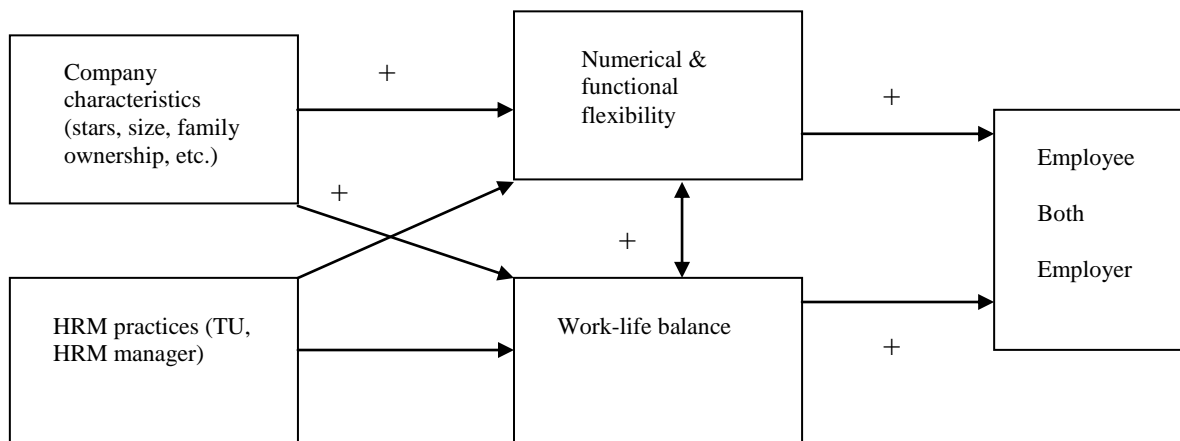
<b>Functional flexibility</b>			
Extent of types of functional flexibility e1	.127		.211*
Functional flexibility employee benefits	.066		.015
<b>Human resource management</b>			
Do you lay off staff to deal with a decreased workload		-.163*	.183*
Company benefits available in organisation g1	.010		
<b>Work-life balance and organisational culture</b>			
Work-life balance supports b3	.235*	.086	.030
Importance of family-friendly/work-life balance arrangements in your organisation	.084		.190*
<b>R</b>	.452*	.511*	.445*
<b>R Square</b>	.204	.261	.198

\*p<.05

\*\* p<.1

The combined model presented in Table 3 shows with a “+” symbol those hypotheses to which the regression analysis gave some empirical support. That analysis so far has shown (Farrell, 2006, Table 7.11, p. 154) that the extent of numerical and functional flexibility is correlated with the extent of work-life balance supports. In other words hotels that have a high level of functional and numerical flexibility also provide many work-life balance supports. In the context of our model it is worth noting that there is no relationship between the extent of numerical and the extent of functional flexibility. In other words, hotels that operate numerical flexibility do not necessarily engage in functional flexibility practices.

**Table 3: A Model of Work Flexibility from an Employer’s Perspective**



From the employer's perspective, in relation to the hypothesis that work flexibility is more beneficial to the employer than the employee, the analysis has shown that numerical flexibility supports cost savings and other benefits for the employer. Functional flexibility supports employee benefits and mutual gain. In respect of the hypothesis work-life balance policies are more beneficial to the employer than the employee, the analysis shows that work-life balance supports are important for mutual gain and to the benefit of employees. In the combined model, there is only one significant indirect relationship in relation to mutual gain for both employer and employee, that is, the company characteristic, number of stars. In the regression analysis we saw that more stars were associated with more numerical flexibility. This refers to the hypothesis that there will be more flexible work practices in the bigger hotels, i.e. 4\* and 5\* hotels than in smaller hotels i.e. 2\*. Likewise, the analysis revealed no empirical support for the hypothesis that hotels which are unionised have less flexible work practices than hotels which are not unionised. Also, there was no empirical support for the hypothesis that there will be more flexible work practices with a HR manager on the staff.

### **An Overview Analysis of Employees' Survey**

#### ***Employer Benefit, Employee Benefit and Mutual Benefit***

In order to work out a model, four dependent variables were chosen to measure whether functional flexibility is more beneficial to the employer than the employee. Numerical flexibility was not considered in any great detail in the employee survey. Hence the dependent variables relating to benefits deriving from functional flexibility are (1) *job satisfaction* (employer benefit), (2) *decision making and developing employee skills* (employee benefits) and (3) *improved service quality* (a combination of employer benefit and employee benefit). These variables were considered to be the sharpest benefits for employers, employees and for both.

### ***Employee Model***

We carried out a regression analysis for the various dependent variables i.e. *job satisfaction*, *decision making*, *developing employee skills* and *improved service quality* and the various independent variables which could impact on them (Table 4). This second stage of the model focuses on the influence that the extent of functional flexibility and work-life balance has on who benefits from the introduction of functional flexible work practices. In relation to the dependent variable *job satisfaction* (employer benefits from functional flexibility) the overall regression was significant ( $p < .05$ ). The analysis shows that the extent of functional flexible has no impact, while just one of the four measures of the work-life balance agenda, the work-life balance scale ( $p < .05$ ), was significant. Higher job satisfaction is associated with a positive attitude to employees' current balance between work with family and life commitments. The more positive the work-life balance scale, the more job satisfaction was recorded. This reflects other findings that people work best when there is a balance between work and life outside work.

In addition, a number of control variables were found to be significant, i.e. number of stars ( $p < .05$ ), type of hotel ( $p < .05$ ), age ( $p < .1$ ), pursuing an educational qualification ( $p < .05$ ), company benefits available ( $p < .1$ ) and trade union in organisation ( $p < .05$ ).

In relation to the dependent variable *decision making* (employee benefit), three work-life balance variables were found to be significant. None of the indicators of functional flexibility nor any of the controls were statistically significant. The three significant variables were whether current working arrangements suit family/personal commitments ( $p < .05$ ), the work-life balance scale ( $p < .1$ ) and whether work-life balance is a very important issue in the hotel ( $p < .1$ ). More involvement by employees in decision making is associated with a negative

attitude to their current balance between work with family and life commitments. Family supports being put in place did not enhance the empowerment of employees.

In relation to the two dependent variables *developing employee skills* (employee benefit) and *improved service quality* (mutual benefit), neither the extent of functional flexibility nor work-life balance supports nor the importance of work-life balance in the hotel had an impact. However, in relation to the dependent variable *developing employee skills* (employee benefit), three control variables were found to be significant (cf. Table 4).

In relation to the dependent variable *improved service quality* (mutual benefit), the control variable whether employees are pursuing an educational qualification was found to be significant ( $p < .05$ ).

Table 4: MULTIPLE REGRESSION of 1)Employer Benefit (job satisfaction, 2) Employee Benefit (decision making and skills development) and Combined Employer and Employee (service quality)

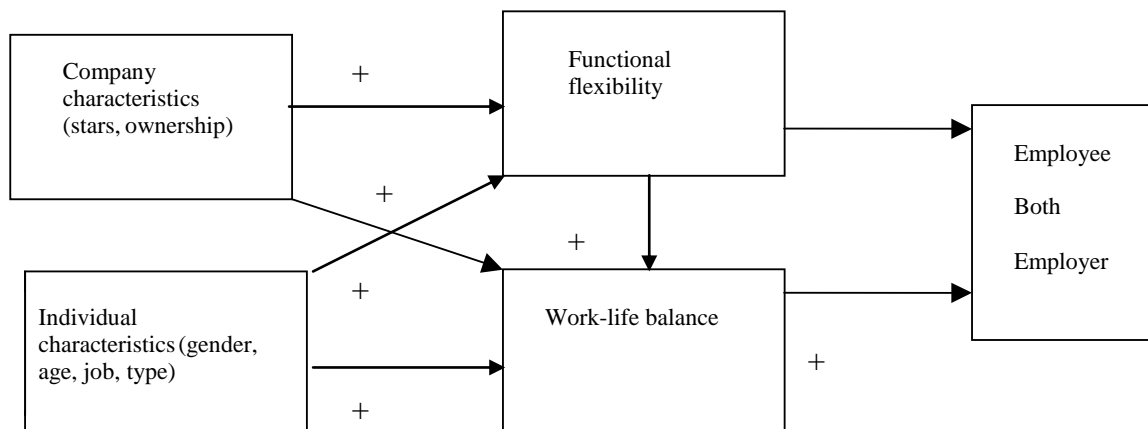
<b>Characteristics</b>	<b>Job satisfactio n</b>	<b>Decisio n making</b>	<b>Skills develop</b>	<b>Service quality</b>
<b>Company characteristics</b>				
Number of stars	-.515*	.200	.316	-.271
Type of hotel	-.634*	-.132	-.266	-.191
<b>Individual characteristics</b>				
Age	-.262**	-.042	-.080	-.136
Gender	.065	-.050	.324*	-.191
Highest educational qualification	-.086	-.161	-.382*	.052
Pursuing an educational	.579*	.038	.302**	.498*

qualification				
Job description	.212	-.075	-.040	.230
Length of time in present employment	.010	-.030	-.106	-.208
<b>HRM practices</b>				
Company benefits available	.272**	.150	-.030	.190
Work longer than standard hours	-.115	-.086	-.003	-.090
Trade union in organisation	.355*	.010	.187	.206
<b>Functional flexibility</b>				
Extent of functional flexibility	.000	.209	-.140	-.012
<b>Work-life balance and organisational culture</b>				
Work-life balance supports	-.215	.159	.046	-.146
Importance of family-friendly, work-life balance arrangements	.219	.279**	.219	.245
Work-life balance scale 2db- 2de	-.389*	.404**	-.240	.003
Current work arrangement suit family /personal commitments	.219	-.420*	.047	.051
<b>R</b>	.740*	.590	.631	.621
<b>R Square</b>	.548	.348	.398	.386

\*p<.05

\*\* p<.1

**Table 5: A Model of Work Flexibility from an Employee's Perspective**



The analysis of the employee survey showed that the extent of functional flexibility is correlated with the extent of work-life balance supports. In other words hotels that have a high level of functional flexibility also provide many work-life balance supports.

The employees' model presented in Table 5 shows with a "+" symbol those hypotheses to which the regression analysis gives some empirical support.

From the employee perspective, in relation to the hypothesis that work flexibility is more beneficial to the employer than the employee, the employee regression analysis shows that there is no relationship between functional flexibility and benefits to either employer or employee. This does not support the hypothesis which proposes that work flexibility policies are more beneficial to the employer than the employee. In the first stage of the model, we saw that there was no association between the number of stars and functional flexibility. This finding does not support the hypothesis that there will be more flexible work practices in the



bigger hotels i.e. 4\* and 5\* hotels than in smaller hotels, i.e. 2\*. Likewise the analysis presented in Table 2 provided no empirical support for the hypothesis that hotels which are unionised have less flexible work practices than hotels which are not unionised. The hypothesis that stated that having a HR manager on the staff would result in more flexibility was not part of the employee survey. There is a positive relationship between management support for work-life balance and the uptake of these policies (cf Table 6). The overall conclusion, according to the employees is that functional flexibility does not benefit either the employer or the employee and that work-life balance favours the employer and the employee.

Table 6: Pearson Correlations of Work-life Balance Supports and Importance Attached to Work-life Balance Issues

	Employee WLB supports available	Work-life balance is very important	Work beyond official hours to keep up with my workload
Employee work- life balance (WLB) supports available	1	-.218**	-.016
Work-life balance is a very important issue in this hotel	-.218**	1	.082
Work beyond official hours to keep up with my workload	-.016	.082	1

\*\*P<=.01

## **Discussion**

There are three focuses: flexibility benefits, work-life balance benefits and the interrelationship between them.

### ***Work Flexibility***

This section highlights the mutual benefits of work flexibility for both employer and employee. Service work is dominating the economy and its importance should not be understated. Some authors claim that it is debatable whether part-time employees have positive benefits for a firm's core competencies (Pfeffer, 1994). Many benefits of part-time work were found and these are in keeping with the literature. Part-time work leads to an increase in service quality. This is an indispensable skill for the hospitality establishment. There is some evidence that work-life balance policies increase productivity.

The improvement in human resources in the area of work flexibility is in contrast to the view expressed by Nolan (2002) that there is low commitment to HR management in Ireland. In addition, unlike the UK findings (Lucas, 2002) the evidence on flexible work practices would not support a hard model of HRM. The hard approach would imply a calculating approach to people and it would view employees as a cost to be reduced as much as possible. It seems that interest in human resources in the hospitality industry has increased (Buick and Muthu, 1997). There is a change for the better in the employees' position. The employee is in a good bargaining position, with a tight labour market and high levels of staff turnover. In a tight labour market, hotels are under pressure to recruit and to retain the best employees. There will be a greater emphasis on working conditions. He/she is proving capable of achieving, for the most part, some good working conditions with flexibility. The fact that employees received a certain number of benefits is not supported by some authors (Houseman, 2001). Also, the challenge of achieving a balance between the needs of the employer, the employee and society are being addressed (Edwards and Robinson, 1999). There is evidence of some investment in people. This approach makes sense. If employees are to take responsibility for service quality and work related tasks, then employers have to be committed to the welfare of

employees. Employers would do well to plan for better human resource practices in the area of work flexibility.

In summary, work flexibility seems to be a mutual gains enterprise for employers and employees. In contrast to Braverman's thesis (1974) there are now opportunities for skilled flexible workers to be in a better core position in the workforce. There is a debate that flexibility has replaced rationalisation as a method of organising manpower (Atkinson, 1984b). Others argue that flexibility is a result of traditional labour market segmentation. A tight labour market drives flexibility. Employers need people who can respond quickly and easily to changes. In order to be able to compete in today's market, it is necessary to achieve organisational flexibility and high quality service. Good human resource policies are necessary, to achieve employee commitment to quality and to get employees to feel responsible for the service encounter.

### ***Work-Life Balance***

The traditional view of HR emphasised the importance of work demands and did not consider the needs of employees (Sennett, 1998; Rousseau, 1999). There is now a focus on the quality of work life. Employers are being asked to provide a supportive environment for employees.

A majority of all establishments have permanent part-time working arrangements. Both full-time and part-time employees are happy with their working arrangements. This supports the view that it is lifestyle that is driving the worker, as opposed to money, power and job security (Fisher, 2000; Saltzein and Yuan Ting, 2001). Employees are concerned about quality of life issues (Withers, 2001; Clinch et al., 2002). The debate about work flexibility is no longer limited to family-/friendly working arrangements but to the achievement of work-life balance. It is accepted now that it is no longer the case that employers manage work and employees manage life outside the workplace. This is in keeping with the literature on the

protean career and the changing psychological contract which involves a care consideration (Stredwick and Ellis, 1998). Also, the literature identifies various types of conflict between work and family (Frone et al., 1997; Ashforth et al., 2000). There seems to be a connection between the work-family interface and employee performance in the workplace. Childcare concerns were the main reason given by employers for the demand by employees for work-life balance arrangements. This reflects the view that family relationships are a high priority for Irish people (Clinch et al., 2002). There is a consensus of opinion among both employers and employees that work-life balance is a significant aspect of the human resource agenda. In the case of employers this has to be compatible with business targets (Poelmans and Sahibzada, 2004). There are obstacles to work-life balance. The impact on career prospects was mentioned by employers and this reflects the literature (Allen, 2001; Nord et al., 2002). Employees are of the opinion that working long hours helps career prospects (Kodz et al., 2002). There is a long hours working culture in the hospitality industry, and this reflects other findings for British workplaces (Hogarth et al., 2000). In addition, the practice of presenteeism has given rise to the long hours culture. There is a perception that employees who avail of work-life balance arrangements are less committed than other employees. Issues have been raised relating to the commitment of people who take up work-life balance programmes. Employers were found to be more concerned about work-life balance policies being perceived as unfair by employees not availing of them. It was less of a difficulty for employees (Faludi, 1992).

### ***Interrelationship between Functional/Numerical Flexibility and Work-Life Balance***

The extent of numerical and functional flexibility is correlated with the extent of work-life balance supports. Hotels that have a high level of functional and numerical flexibility also provide work-life balance supports. Employees concur with the employer in this regard. It has been observed that much of the family-friendly research has tended to focus on conflict, stress and negative effects on peoples' well being (Greenhaus and Powell, 2006).

There is no relation between the extent of numerical and the extent of functional flexibility. Some authors have found that functional and numerical flexibility are negatively correlated (Penn et al., 1992; Cully et al., 1999). In contrast, other studies have found a positive correlation between numerical flexibility and functional flexibility (Lautsch, 1996; Kalleberg et al., 1999). The findings show that, where there is more functional flexibility present, there are more company benefits. In addition, more company benefits and more work-life balance supports coexist in the same companies.

### **Conclusions**

The evidence suggests that the hospitality industry, an industrial sector which has the reputation for not treating its employees well, has progressed, in terms of human resource policies, in the area of work flexibility. These findings advance the literature on the status of the part-time worker. There is a consensus of opinion among both employers and employees that work-life balance is a significant aspect of the human resource agenda. In the case of employers this has to be compatible with business targets. The findings show that the hospitality industry has merits as an employer who can facilitate work-life balance. This

study advances the literature on the flexible firm by incorporating the family-friendly/work-life balance dimension. The extent of numerical and functional flexibility is correlated with the extent of work-life balance supports. There is no relation between the extent of numerical and the extent of functional flexibility. Company benefits are not linked to numerical flexibility, but in both surveys it is consistently associated with functional flexibility and work-life balance supports. This would suggest an integrated approach to human resource management in some organisations, whereby some companies engage in a modern employee focused approach, whereas other companies tend to be more traditional.

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