

ORGANISATIONAL FLEXIBILITY AND POSSIBILITIES FOR ITS ASSESSMENT

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Abstract

Overall changing environment requests changes in organisation management, one of them being organisational flexibility.

The aim of the paper is to characterise organisational flexibility and the advantages for its application, and to discuss different ways of its assessment.

Materials and methods are content analysis, logical-constructive methods and analysis of survey results performed by the author.

Main results – there are both advantages and disadvantages of organisational flexibility, however, in case it is properly applied advantages may be more. Different methods may be used for assessing organisational flexibility, none of them being superior over others.

Conclusions – basing on the survey results the author concludes that there are still ways for increasing flexibility in most of the Latvian organisations.

Key words: *organisational flexibility, management, employees*

Introduction

Flexibility is considered to be a necessary response to global competition (Peiro, et.al 2002, Dyer, 1998) and has become a catchword in the discussions about the new organizations of the twenty-first century (Martinez-Sanches, et.al., 2009). Flexible working has emerged as a modern concept for managing office resources more effectively, efficiently, and economically (Khamkanya, Sloan, 2009). Companies have to deal with more flexible markets in which product life cycles are short and services must be provided 24 h per day, seven days per week (Wirtz, Giebel, Schomann, Nachreiner, 2008). Also the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), the European Union (EU), and various political leaders promote the merits of flexibility (Reilly, 1998a).

Several authors (van der Meer, Ringdal, 2009, Wirtz, et.al., 2008, Knauth et al., 2006, Giebel, et.al., 2004, Slomp, Molleman, 2002, Peiro, etc., 2002, MacDermid, et.al. 2001, etc.), note the negative effects of flexibility as well.

However, the author considers that in case properly applied positive aspects arising from organisational flexibility may prevail the negative features.

The aim of the paper is to characterise organisational flexibility and the advantages for its application, and to discuss different ways of its assessment. Materials and methods are content analysis and logical-constructive methods.

Results

Flexibility, Its Definitions and Theoretical Concepts

Flexibility presents something of a conundrum, a paradoxical concept where authors cannot agree on answers to even the most basic questions, e.g. What is flexibility? When should a company strive for it? How can it be measured? How can it be implemented? (Oke, 2005). Despite the potential gains there is no clear definition of flexibility, and therefore no agreement on the extent of the hidden costs associated with flexibility (Dyer, 1998). Nevertheless, several definitions of flexibility exist.

Flexibility reflects the ability to stay operational in changing conditions, whether they are predictable or not, completely different or not from conditions known in advance (Bucki, Pesqueux, 2000). Besides, it is seen as a means to improve a firm's competitiveness, by lowering labour costs per unit produced (van der Meer, Ringdaal, 2009) and has adopted several forms such as temporary and fixed term contracts, outsourcing, flexible time, part-time working, overtime, job rotation, or functional mobility (Peiro, et.al., 2002).

Labor flexibility lays the foundations for the flexibility pyramid (Karuppan, 2004) and has been defined as the possibility to vary the quality and the quantity of personnel to suit

changes in the market or the organisation's ability to adapt through the use of labour (Gouswaard, Kraan, Dhondt, 2001).

Organizational flexibility in the broad sense includes different kinds of flexibility, among which managerial flexibility and flexibility as an organizational task are stressed (Verdu, Gomez-Gras, 2009). Organizational flexibility can also be defined as a managerial task, managerial capabilities that endow the firm with flexibility and; an organizational design task or the changeability of the organization (Volberda, 1996).

There are least two ways to create flexibility. One way is numerical flexibility, that is, the ability to change the amount of labour quickly in response to changes in the market. A second way is functional flexibility that is letting the same employees perform different kind of tasks or jobs as needed (Atkinson, 1984a, van der Meer, Ringdaal, 2009). Atkinson (1984a) uses the term of financial flexibility as well, providing that it allows the cost of labour, as indicated by hourly rates and contract prices, to reflect the supply of, and demand for, labour.

Atkinson (1984b) also groups different forms of flexibility using two dimensions: internal vs external, and quantitative vs qualitative. *Internal* refers to how organisations can vary their own labour they use, in quantitative (e.g. overtime) or in qualitative terms (e.g. job rotation). *External* is associated with the ability of the organisation to alter the staff employed. Numerical or contractual flexibility is external. It can be quantitative (e.g. seasonal employment to cover "peaks" of work demands) or qualitative (employing supra-qualified people because the labour market situation is difficult). Temporal or time flexibility and functional flexibility are internal, but time flexibility is quantitative and functional flexibility is qualitative. Very often, human resources practices of organisations combine several flexibility types like time and location or functional and financial flexibility (Peiro, et.al., 2002).

Manufacturing system flexibility includes four identifiable types (Oke, 2005):

- * New product flexibility. The ability to introduce and manufacture novel products or to modify existing ones;
- * Mix flexibility. The ability to change the range of products being made by the manufacturing system within a given period;
- * Volume flexibility. The ability to change the level of aggregated output;
- * Delivery flexibility. The ability to change planned or assumed delivery dates.

Taking into account the different concepts on organisational flexibility, the author has elaborated her own definition on organisational flexibility – possibility of institution (both private enterprise, state institution or non-governmental organisation) to adapt itself on changing conditions, by providing efficient use of labour force, technological and financial resources. Labour market flexibility incorporates term of organisational flexibility.

There are several challenges organisations have to face in case they adjust flexibility. Flexibility enables firms to cope with this increasing uncertainty because it facilitates a quick response (Martinez-Sanches, et.al, 2009). Besides, organizations cannot be "flexible only" and thereby lose contact with general rules binding them together. What is required is loosely-coupled systems, i.e. systems with loose connections between different elements, rather similar to the human spine. It seems likely that a combination of very changeable "hard" elements and very stable "soft" elements is most likely to succeed (Mayrhofer, 1997). The effects of flexible work schedules on self-reported data wane over time, which may be a direct consequence of employees becoming accustomed to the new schedules and accepting them as the norm (Kauffeld, Jonas, Frey, 2004).

Flexibility is often associated with certain demographic groups, e.g., women. Today women aspiring to successful professional and managerial careers are increasingly eschewing the traditional organizational career. Instead, they are negotiating alternative work arrangements such as telecommuting, shared jobs, and reduced-load work for significant periods of time in order to gain some control over their work environments (Catalyst 1997).

However, labour market participants are often segmented in terms of flexible working times, since it is supposed that they all can benefit from such kind of work. Flexible work schedules have positive effects on employee productivity, job satisfaction, satisfaction with the work schedule, and employee absenteeism (Baltes, et.al, 1999). For employees, flexibility promises improved working conditions and more varied and interesting jobs (Dyer, 1998). Increasing productivity may be distributed in the form of reduced working times (that is a kind of flexibility) and higher income. Reduced working times (by forcing employers to reorganization) and higher income (by increasing demand) in turn have a positive impact on competitiveness and productivity (Buruiana, Ioan, 2009). For the most part, both managers and professionals (about 2/3) felt that the quality of their performance had been sustained or improved by working a reduced load, and in most cases their supervisors agreed (MacDermid, Lee, Buck, Williams 2001). Introducing a flexible work-time design changes jobs from being more passive to becoming more active and therefore fosters employees' learning opportunities in the job, improves communication as well as cooperation with colleagues and supervisors, and increases employees' motivation and involvement (Kauffeld, Jonas, Frey, 2004). Even more - most of the managers and half of the professionals were satisfied with the likely career implications of their reduced-load work arrangement. They felt good about both having a career and being able to place high priority on the quality of their family lives (MacDermid, Lee, Buck, Williams 2001). A study of six large American companies found that 70 per cent of managers and 87 per cent of workers reported that working time arrangements which allowed workers to adjust their work schedules in response to their individual needs, such as flexitime and telecommuting had positive or very positive effects on productivity (Boston College Center for Work and Family 2000). Increased change flexibility has the chance to influence the customer configuration shortly before start of production and possibly increase the profit (Voigt, et.al., 2008).

Negative features of flexibility factors have to be considered as well. At least some kinds of flexible working hours are associated with impairment of health and well-being. The irregularity or variability of working hours seems to play an important role in this context. (Giebel, et.al., 2004). Flexible adaptation of working hours to the demands of companies and/or workers can lead to a shift away from regular daily working rhythms to a constantly alternating pattern of working hours and free time. In contrast, social and biological rhythms remain stable in their daily, weekly, monthly, and yearly periods. This can cause resynchronisation between working time and biological or social rhythms, an outcome that is well documented in the shift-work literature (Wirtz, et.al., 2008, Knauth et al., 2006). In frames of flexible working times the work load can be poorly-bounded and difficult to control; the worker feels unable to maintain boundaries around the work; or the worker has not learned to feel comfortable with the trade-off between time off and work pressure (MacDermid, et.al. 2001). Alternative work schedules can also include such unintended negative effects as increased need for managerial planning, inability of supervisors to be present at all times when employees are on the job, extra implementation costs, and interface and staff coverage problems with suppliers and customers due to different working hours (Coltrin, Barendse, 1981). The volatility of labour relations discourages workers and employers from investing time or money into strengthening or improving these relationships. Investments in general and firm-specific human capital will lag, which could harm the organization in the long run (van der Meer, Ringdal, 2009). As concerns functional flexibility the investments have to be earned back and it might happen that too many workers become too multi skilled to make the changes profitable (Slomp, Molleman, 2002). It is also possible that the level of education of the existing workforce is too low to make functional flexibility work (van der Meer, Ringdal, 2009). Organisational flexibility must be accompanied by personal flexibility, thus it may not be beneficial for all the labour market participants (Peiro, etc., 2002).

At the same time one should note that the employees working with the traditional design were worried about aspects of the flexitime design that employees working with it considered an advantage (Kauffeld, Jonas, Frey, 2004). Besides, flexibility will probably increase during future decades and will be one important feature of work and organisations in the times ahead (Peiro, et.al., 2002). The next chapter is devoted to reflection of different modes for flexibility assessment.

Assessment Methods of Organisational Flexibility

There are no adequate theoretical models that appropriately describe the essential characteristics of flexible working hours and enable a prediction of possible impairments (Wirtz et.al, 2008). In general, most commonly used methodologies are based on the goal approach. They measure the level of achievement of a specific goal or goals. Three commonly used indicators ask if work was completed on time, within budget, and if it met certain quality standards. Other indicators measure levels of achieved profits and/or levels of workers' productivity and compare these levels to specific levels that were established as goals (Addas, 2000). The evaluation of different work-time models and the evaluation of their introduction are normally carried out by human resources managers, without feedback from employees. In most studies there is a lack of multiple data sources and no integration of both benefits and unintended negative consequences for the organization, customers, and the employees (Kauffeld, Jonas, Frey, 2004).

Forms of assessment may involve level of numerical and functional flexibility within organisation. Indicators of *numerical flexibility*: the use of employees on a temporary contract, the percentage of temporary employees, the use of temp agencies to hire temporary employees, and flexible work hours. Indicators of *functional flexibility*: job rotation, if employees were allowed to organize their own work, teamwork, if employees had a reduction in control by others, or if employees could work at home (van der Meer, Ringdal, 2009). Other authors have introduced more detailed assessment of flexibility, concentrating on: *internal functional flexibility*: number of employees who are covered by the following practices divided by the total number of employees: job rotation, multi-skilled teams, total quality management, quality and problem solving teams, employees involvement in job design and planning. *Internal numerical flexibility*: number of employees who are covered by the following practices divided by the total number of employees: sharing week, part-time contracts, flexitime, workload reduction and overtime. *External numerical flexibility*: number of temporary, fixed-term employees, contingent employees, and layoffs, divided by the total number of employees. *External functional flexibility*: number of self-employees who work for the firm divided by the total number of employees. *Financial flexibility*: number of employees who are covered by the following practices divided by the total number of employees: performance-related pay, profit-sharing, employee-based financial incentives, and team-based financial incentives. *Outsourcing*: calculated by multiplying the percentage of activities outsourced in the firm and the sum of degree of outsourcing (measured on a seven-point Likert scale) of all outsourced activities. *Strategic flexibility*. construction of three items (Cronbach's alpha + 0.865): (1) "the firm reacts very quickly to new customer demands"; (2) "the firm reacts very quickly to increases and decreases of demand"; and (3) "the firm has several options to face changes in the environment". The items were measured on seven-point Likert scale with endpoints "totally disagree" = 1 and "totally agree" = 7 (Martinez-Sanchez et.al, 2009).

Kauffeld, Jonas, Frey (2004) suppose other forms of organisational flexibility assessment (1) The management designed a time framework based on customer counts, delay time measurements, local and temporal conditions, and the launch of new products. (2) The team members autonomously established a time plan for their work group and tailored the time plan according to their needs. (3) Short-term corrections of the plan were undertaken by the employees on the spot.

Other scientists have distinguished four steps of organizational flexibility: *Stage 1* – Traditional working environment (e.g. cellular office) is used. Availability of shared equipment is very limited. Staff -work within an organisation’s premises. *Stage 2* – Shared-office environment (e.g. hotdesking and open-plan working area) can be found. Staff can relocate within a limited area. Data can be electronically transferred via wired ICT network. *Stage 3* – Informal support (e.g. breakout areas or informal meeting rooms) are provided for staff. More types of activity-based working areas can be seen in the office. Electronic data can be transferred from a distance. Various working-time schemes (e.g. flexitime, compressed hours, and annualised hours) may provide to staff. *Stage 4* – Flexible working environment is generally available for staff. Staff may work anywhere within the office. Wireless ICT system may be provided in some working areas. Staff can work from distant offices under controlled environment security system (Gibson, V. and Luck, R. 2006).

Koste and Malhorta (1999) proposed four elements to be used for measuring an organisation’s flexibility: (1) Range-number (number of options – operations, tasks, products, etc.); (2) Range-heterogeneity (heterogeneity of options – differences between operations, tasks, products, etc.); (3) Mobility (transition penalties – time, cost, effort of transition); (4) Uniformity (similarity of performance outcome – quality, costs, time, etc.).

Adas (2000) acknowledges that flexibility should be assessed in terms of organizational effectiveness, since the latter is the main force for driving organization. The competing values approach is based on the premise that there is no one criterion for evaluating effectiveness. It organizes, consolidates, and integrates multiple criteria in the domains of effectiveness into sets of incompatible dimensions. These are flexibility versus control, internal versus external focus, and means versus ends phasizing final outcomes and the short term.

The models in the competing values approach and their effectiveness criteria are reflected in figure 1.

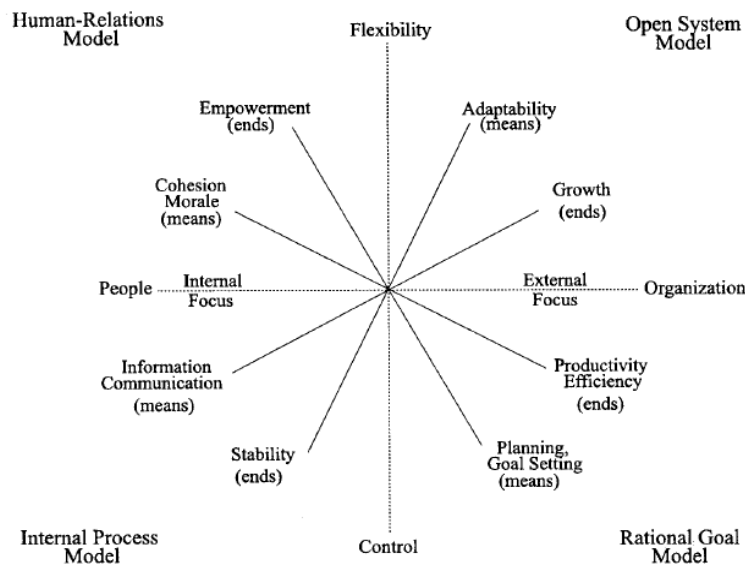


Figure 1: Four Models in the Competing Values Approach and Their Effectiveness Criteria (Maloney and Federle, 1993)

Some authors argue that the system flexibility comprises fundamental factors, shared factors and generic factors. The indirect source of flexibility is a strategy which plants use to obtain flexibility from external sources. There is also another category referred to as internal flexibility evaders or avoidance strategies. These are used to reduce the need for internal flexibility or when the plant simply cannot cope (Oke 2005). More detailed reflection is included in figure 2.

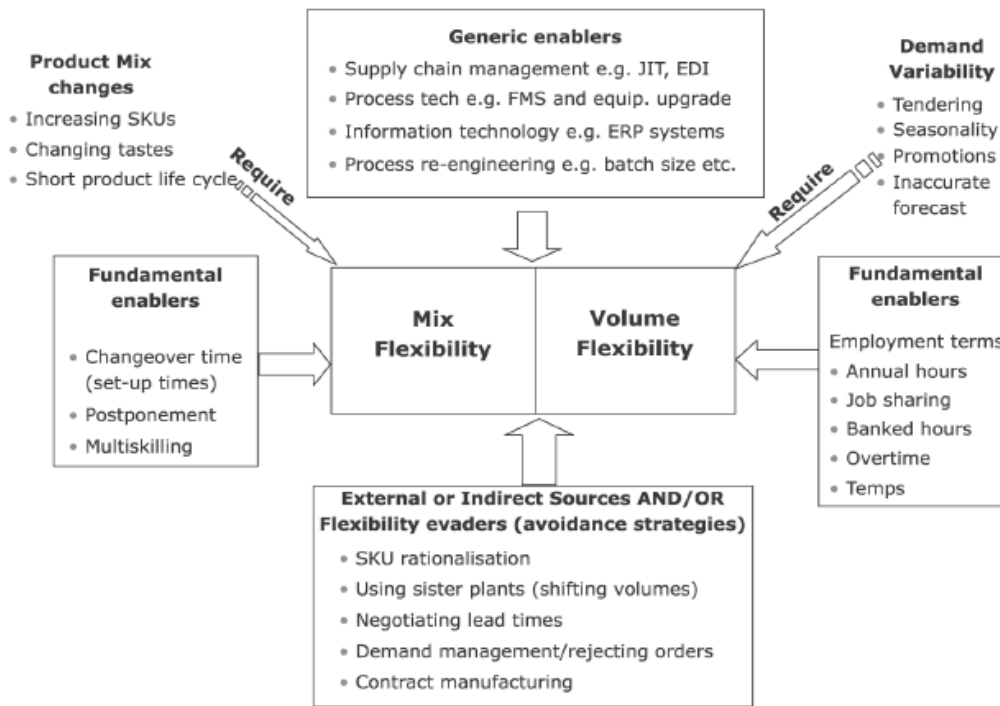


Figure 2: A Refined Framework for Achieving System Flexibility (Oke, 2005)

Flexibility involves several factors, including possibility to adopt innovative solutions that is often not taken into account into organisational flexibility assessment. Thus for evaluating the flexibility level of organisation, the author suggests using a scheme that provides possibility for organisational flexibility assessment. The scheme is reflected in figure 3.

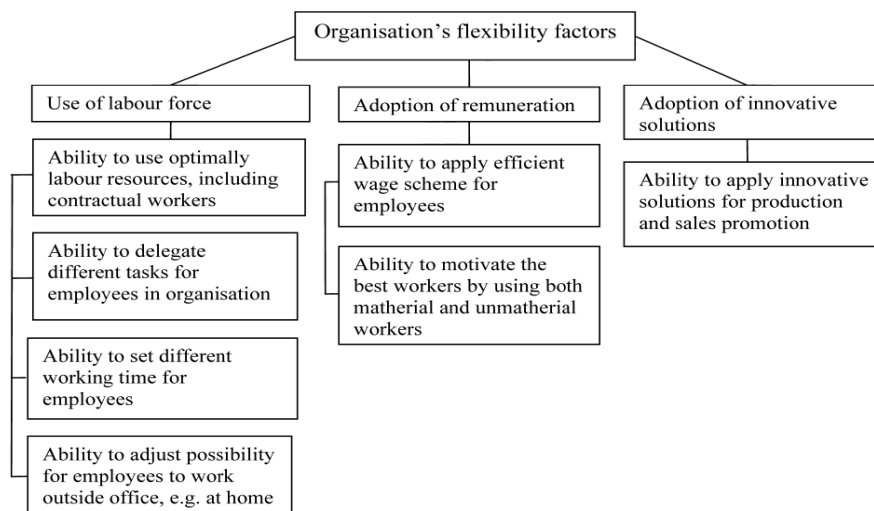


Figure 3: Organisational Flexibility Factors (developed by the author)

Since one of the most commonly used organisational flexibility factors is part-time employment, the author surveyed possibilities on part-time employment introduction in Latvian enterprises. Entrepreneurs' survey was performed in July – September 2009 and in frames of it 2 000 small and medium sized enterprises representatives were surveyed, out of them relevant answers were provided by 1 526 representatives.

One of the questions asked in frames of the survey was related to entrepreneurs reaction in case their financial resources are reduced by 10%. Detailed results are reflected in figure 4.

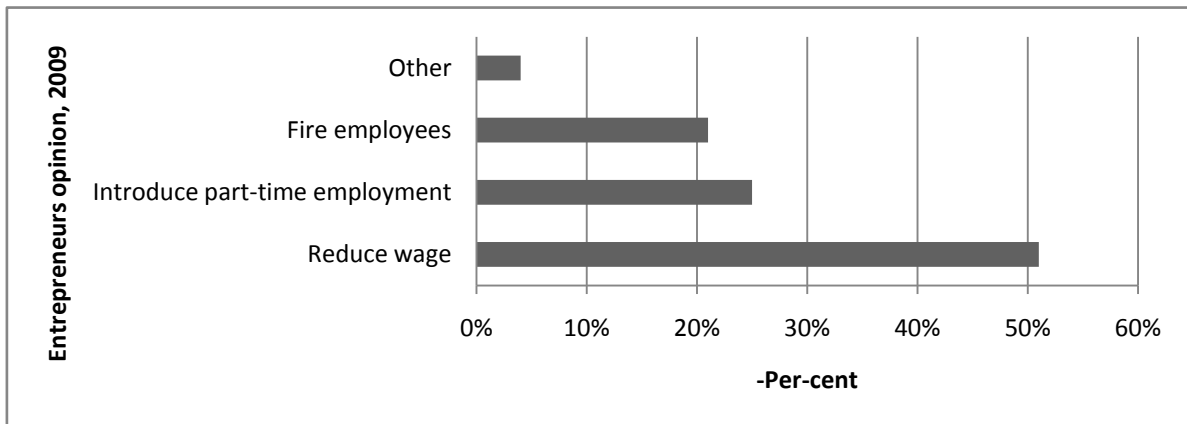


Figure 4: Entrepreneurs opinion on their action in case financial resources are decreased by 10%, 2009 (results of the entrepreneurs survey performed by the author, 2009, n=1524)

The survey results prove that most of the employers would reduce wage, without reduction of working time, regardless to the fact that it may reduce also motivation and thus productivity of employees. Concerning other possibilities the respondents indicated that number of employees in the enterprise is too small (1 – 3 persons) for deciding the kind of questions. Approximately 1% of the persons surveyed noted that they would decrease other costs but the ones related to wages.

Taking into account the survey results, another question was related to further analysis on the entrepreneurs unwillingness to adjust part-time employment. Detailed survey results are reflected in figure 5 and out of them we conclude that work specifics is often names as the main reason for not applying part-time employment.

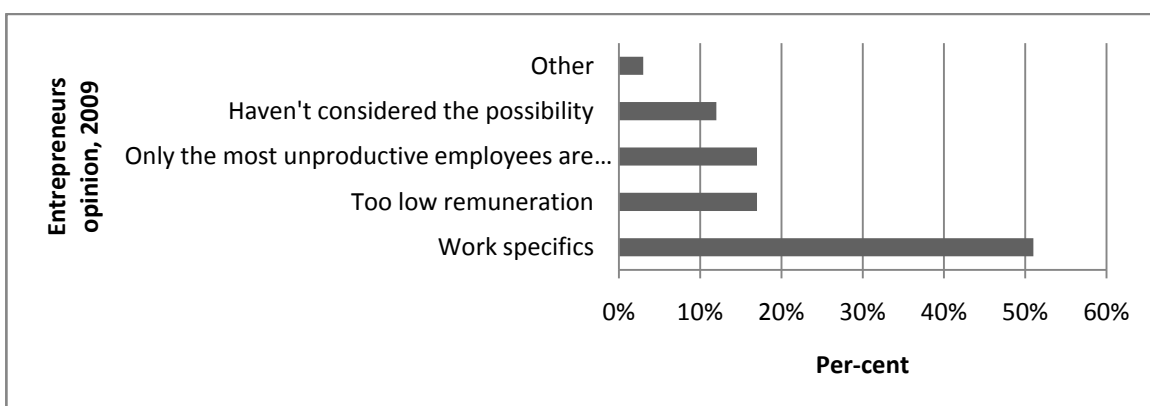


Figure 5: Reasons for not applying part-time employment in Latvian enterprises, 2009 (results of the entrepreneurs survey performed by the author, 2009, n=1384)

Thus we conclude that part-time employment is not very much fascinated by Latvia’s employers. However, taking into account that part-time employment (as well as other forms of flexible working time) is much more widespread in the EU, e.g. more than 40% of the Netherlands employees work part-time (EUROSTAT, 10.05.2010), than in Latvia, it may be considered that possibilities for increase of flexible working time (and part-time work) exist in Latvia, even more – other organisational flexibility forms should be considered.

Introduction of part-time employment is related to certain specific indicators in management sphere, besides the costs for part-time employed on average are higher than for the full-time employed. However, employers may benefit in creating part-time employment

places, besides in case work is adequately organized – reach that employees are fulfilling the same amount of tasks in shorter time period.

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Conclusions

There are different definitions concerning organisational flexibility and the author considers it as possibility of institution (both private enterprise, state institution or non-governmental organisation) to adapt itself on changing conditions, by providing efficient use of labour force, technological and financial resources. Labour market flexibility incorporates term of organisational flexibility.

Flexibility is suggested to be applied within organisations' for providing more beneficial working conditions for employees and for remaining competitive in the global arena.

Negative aspects of organisational flexibility involve such features as more difficult management system for flexible working schedules employees, possible problems with suppliers and customers due to different working schedules and in some cases even health problems of employees due to uncertain working schedules. However, in case properly adjusted, negative aspects arising from organizational flexibility may be easily decreased.

Several organisational flexibility assessment models are related to functional and numerical flexibility modes developed by Atkinson (1984). Despite number of organisational flexibility assessment models, it is often forgotten that when measuring flexibility organisation's possibility to provide innovations should also be evaluated.

Great part of Latvian entrepreneurs has not considered possibilities for part-time working places creation in their enterprises. Thus it may be concluded that there are possibilities in Latvia for increasing such kind of working places, by increasing free time for employed persons (compensating it with decrease in wages that is currently applied in many Latvian enterprises) as well as ensuring decrease in unemployment (by ensuring possibilities for not reducing employees in enterprises).

Employers should consider possibilities for introduction of flexible working time in their organisations, since it allows productivity increase of work performed.

The first possibility for measuring flexible working time is assessment of employers and employees opinions on the necessity to introduce the kind of working time. The more positive is the assessment, the more one can understand that there is necessity to increase flexible working time in Latvia.

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