

***An exploration of the perceived benefits of
flexible work patterns on women and their
continued participation in the Irish
workplace***

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Abstract

In a highly competitive business environment the retention of highly skilled workers is an imperative for organisations and the wider Irish economy. Women in particular are a valuable skillset and retaining this cohort of workers once they become mothers is an ongoing battle as participation rates across Europe between males and females are still wide.

The purpose of this research is to explore the perceived benefits flexible working arrangements can bring to working mothers and whether this can positively impact on participation rates in the Irish workforce.

Using qualitative methods of gathering data through semi-structured interviews, this research analysed the responses from professional working mothers currently employed in the Irish workforce. The ability for these working mothers to have autonomy and control over their work patterns and schedules has provided freedom to continue working at a high level within their organisations. The age and number of their children brought challenges in relation to their existing work patterns and the use of flexibility within their work schedule reduced this conflict between home and work. There was little evidence of occupation downgrading among the participants, this again was due in part to informal flexibility afforded to them as a result of their current positions. Gender stereotyping was apparent in relation to their dual roles and the conflict this creates between being a mother and a worker, however flexible working was found to contribute positively to easing this burden among the participants.

The research answered the question in that flexible working arrangements do benefit some working mothers. Further research would be required to understand how this would benefit the wider population of working mothers, for instances those in low paid positions, or low social capital or indeed working mothers with limited support networks such as single mothers.

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Chapter 1 Introduction

Research context

As both the developed and emerging world is embroiled in the 'war for talent' and that talent has become a commodity, where the ability to not only attract and retain it has become the imperative or war cry known as the 'employee value proposition' (Chambers, Foulon, Handfield-Jones, Hankin and Michaels, 2007). The underutilisation and ability to keep women as participants in the workforce is one of the most significant battles being fought. The conflict in creating a balance between work and life has been identified as a barrier for women where they are facing a choice to opt out of work rather than lean in and progress their career (Ellinas, Fouad and Byars-Winston, 2018; and Silim and Sterling, 2014). It has been shown that across Europe offering flexible work patterns by organisations provides recruitment advantage, increased retention levels and impacts positively on wellbeing and moral (Silim and Stirling, 2014). All impacting on an organisations overall profitability. From a macroeconomic economic level the more employees working and contributing effects output.

In Ireland there is a significant gap in employment rates between men and women aged 15-64; the CSO (2018) shows that at the end of a ten year period 2006-2016 the rate of male participation in the economy accounted for 69.9%, while women stood at 59.5%. In comparison with the EU28 where the percentage gap between males and females is 11.7 (Silim and Sterling, 2014). The trend in Ireland is for the male parent to continue to work full-time (99%) while only (56%) of mothers took this option; with nearly 66% of mothers altering their work patterns to the needs of their family, compared to 30% of males (Barry and Vasquez del Aquila, 2009). For a small open economy such as Ireland this means it is not fully utilising the entire potential of its society. Innovation in the retention policy of employers has to go beyond competitive salaries, it has to examine the structures of work including the average working week. In Ireland the average working week is 39 hours in comparison with the majority of the EU28 where it is on average 38 hours. The statutory minimum holidays amounts to 20 days per annum, the EU average is 34 days per annum (Carbrita, 2017). The biggest challenge

for the retention of women in the workforce is for organisations to recognise that this is a short time period in the potential life cycle of the working mother.

Recent examples of organisations taking the lead in this approach include a New Zealand company employing 200 people, where they trialled a 'four day week for five days' pay', the CEO and his senior team initiated it as they recognised that their employees were doing some of the activities cited as non-work activity, family commitments, hobbies and general life commitments during their working week (Roy, 2018). This demonstrates employer recognition that providing a work and life balance is good for the employees, but more importantly better for organisational growth.

An important facet of this change in work practice is the promotion of equality, this is not just targeting the working mother, it encompasses all workers and it therefore deemed more equitable. The overall benefit of increased productivity can be attributed to fewer days lost to sickness and general absenteeism. It means that the focus is on why we work rather than how we work. UK literature on this topic notes that the need to dispel the stigma held by many organisations is that flexible working only focuses on the needs of the working mothers, it is much broader that this group (Pyper, 2018). Flexible working includes part-time hours, compressed hours or the ability to change location such as working from home; using an array of altered work patterns has enabled women in particular the opportunity to remain and contribute in the work

However, some women are penalised for taking time out of work due to family reasons or for altering their working patterns; from both a business and economy perspective this is not acceptable as the trade-off is usually in terms of career progression and salary penalisation (UK Government, 2017). When working mothers decide to use flexible working rather than the choosing to withdraw from the work force they face the stigma of being labelled less committed than their peers and colleagues. This impacts on their ability to negotiate compressed or flexible working as it is diminished by the fact they may be deemed less productive than colleagues working in full time positions, the result for the working mother is withdrawal from participation in the workforce (Metcalf and Rolfe, 2010). This pressure may arise from working mothers themselves who are keen to demonstrate they are capable of the dual role, of being parent and a perceived need to be the best employee in spite of being a mother. However it does

appear that there is a need from organisations, colleagues and spouses/partners to support working mothers in their endeavours to create a work and life balance.

The purpose of this research paper is to investigate whether women's and in particular mother's ability to access and negotiate flexible work patterns enabled them to balance the dual roles of employee and parent, rather than having to opt out of the workforce. The research question is 'What are the perceived benefits of flexible work patterns for working mothers?'

Chapter 2 Research Question and Objectives

The research question is 'What are the perceived benefits of flexible work patterns for working mothers?'

The research objective sets out to explore the perceived benefits of flexible work patterns to assist working mothers continued participation in the labour force. A further aim is to highlight the importance of working mothers in the work and life balance discussion. The research objectives are seeking to address the following themes:

1. Does a high level of autonomy within their current position enable informal adoption of flexible work patterns?
2. How does family life stages and ages of children impact on the level of work participation?
3. Was occupation downgrading an experience of the participants?
4. Are working mothers primarily responsible for their own careers and the family environment?

The focus of the proposed methodology is to study this question through a qualitative method. The research will be undertaken by semi-structured interviews answered by a sample of working women currently participating in the Irish workforce. Participants will hold some level of autonomy within their work environment and the investigation's purpose will be to seek their attitudes towards utilisation of flexible work patterns. This is to ensure the question is answered in a balanced and meaningful way.

Chapter 3 Literature Review

Introduction

The purpose of this section is to review the most relevant literature on flexible work patterns. In particular, identifying the barriers that exist for working mothers who wish to take advantage or avail of this within their employment environment. Furthermore to explore the impact of its availability to working mother's influences women's continued participation in the labour force. This chapter will explore the different needs for flexible working and how variables such as gender, family life stages and stability impact on career participation and progression. The literature will explore the notion of the dual role identified as a persona of employee and primary carer from the perspective of the working mother, which has been identified as a rising trend (Silim and Sterling, 2014; Metcalf and Rolf, 2010). It will also examine the short term needs versus the long term impacts of those working mothers that avail of flexible work patterns. The research will also highlight the positive impacts from both an employer and societal perspective, in terms of increased output, elimination of absenteeism, reducing stress and improving recruitment and retention of talent (Bloom and Van Reenan, 2006, and; Silim and Sterling, 2014). The challenges presented will be following on from existing literature that focused on the employee gender, in particular how each gender differed in their negotiation and use of flexible working; and the relevance of their job status and level of autonomy as part of this process. Understanding the motivation of working mothers who request flexible leave and how this is perceived by employers and if this contributes to any bias in the workplace between the two genders (Brescoll, Glass and Sedlovskaya, 2013). Moreover demonstrating that in the long term the introduction of flexible work patterns for working mothers can impact positively on women who choose the dual role of carer and career and enables them to continue to participant in the Irish work force.

The main types of flexible working patterns discussed include flexi-time which is used to adjust the hours worked in a day, part-time or job sharing which is temporal flexibility during the course of the normal working week and finally, compression of the working

week, which can either arise through the employee taking unpaid leave or the employer reducing the working hours from a five day week to a four day week, without a reduction in remuneration or hours (Brescoll, Glass and Sedlovskaya, 2013; Greenberg and Landry, 2011).

Employee gender

The gender schism in the labour market

There are many segments within the labour force however the most significant one is gender related. Participation rates of female workers current lags behind their male counterparts in all EU28 countries, although is projected to narrow in the next 40 years (EU Commission, 2018). Even with the changes in work from manual towards services and a desire to create a work and life balance for all, the gap has not equalised between women and men's participation in employment (Vandello, Hettinger and Siddiqi, 2013). It would suggest that even as women progress in their careers, the introduction of increased autonomy has not resulted in female participation rates matching their male counterparts. The literature highlights that employees that achieve a work and life balance are better placed to advance their careers (Kim, Choi and Kang, 2017; and Vandello, Hettinger and Siddiqi, 2013). However, a recurring theme is the advancement of males in their careers and how they surpass females (Brescoll, Glass and Sedlovskaya, 2013) while an impediment for females is taking on the dual role of employee and primary carer within the family. An examination of how to create a work and life balance in the work force points to the recognition of the introduction of flexible working arrangements, and how it can positively impact on productivity, well-being and its importance for positive female employment options (Shockley and Allen, 2010; Silim and Stirling, 2014). This is where the schism between the genders occurs and in spite of the positive outcomes associated with the use of flexible working patterns, evidence suggests its use is under-utilised by working mothers, making it even more challenging for women to go against the working culture and avail of altered work patterns. (Vandello et al., 2013).

Dual role

The literature points towards a disproportionate burden on women in their dual role as earner and nurturer; while acknowledging that this does not affect all women or preclude men (Bacik and Drew, 2006; and Noback, Broersma and van Dijk, 2016). It has been suggested that women do have additional non-work roles which either require the ability to have flexible work arrangements or necessitate withdrawal from the labour force (Greenberg et al., 2011; Metcalf and Rolfe, 2010). The implication for this is that there is a conflict between the career and carer roles for the female, and that the need is therefore greater for the females to avail of flexible working arrangements (Shockley et al., 2010). The challenge with this is that this becomes gender specific and that it can increase a cultural bias towards women in the role of primary carer; evidence points towards those taking on part-time work or reduced hours may suffer from occupational downgrading of their work roles or working below their potential in comparison to their male counterparts (Metcalf and Rolfe, 2010; Noback, Broersma and van Dijk, 2016). It can also be cited for a difference in remuneration between the two genders, as suggested by Metcalf and Rolfe (2010) while they also outline “the churn in women’s participation” is significant when children commence school, often resulting in their withdrawal completely from employment. They even go further positing that reduced working hours is a critical facet in the reduction of women’s salary and career advancement.

Negotiation

There is evidence to suggest that both male and female employees hold a view that women are less able to promote themselves and will not seek equality, whether it is the pursuit of career advancements or flexible working arrangements (Kray and Kennedy, 2017). Creating an environment where both male and females employees can reconcile work and life decisions remains a challenge. This is especially true when one set of employees is perceived to be not contributing equal value. This suggests that the reason for not negotiating leave is down to pessimism of having a request denied and then retaliation, it also creates a perception that organisations do not respond to the needs of female employees at different stages of their working career, when they may be most

vulnerable to opting out of the work environment (Brescoll et al., 2013; Kray and Kennedy, 2017).

In countries where parental leave is enforced by legislation and penalties existing for not using them the up take by both male is significant, suggesting that if leave was enforced it soon becomes a norm, making negotiation not as difficult for working mothers and the threat of occupation downgrading and lack of progression is removed (Brescoll et al., 2013; Vandello, Hettinger and Siddiqi, 2013).

If the negotiation is not successful, the long term implications for the organisation could be loss of essential talent and this represents lost revenue through costs of rehiring and training. Employers cannot afford to under-utilise their existing female human capital. It represents significant losses from a cost perspective, as the lack of return on investment from the development of their human capital and from the perspective that the female employee has lost potential future earnings, these are generated by well-developed and engaged employees that area high performing employee. In economic terms the losses to the economy from output, as well as implications around discrimination can create social challenges such as gender pay gaps or introduce stress into the family environment. Both have significant cost impacts on a society and require investment not just at organisational level, but often necessitate changes to government policy.

Job Status

Gender specific career advancement

The work environment is still dominated by the notion that there is a primary provider, and that is often biased towards full-time workers, in the main, the male employee (Rudman and Mescher, 2013). The introduction of flexible working to all or compressed working is often viewed as having a negative impact on career progression (Noback et al., 2016). Coltrane, Miller, DeHaan and Stewart (2013) suggest that there is evidence to show that women work harder than men, and therefore their lower earnings are due in the main to working reduced or flexible hours. They further posit that the 'work place stigma' is dependent on gender and that men experience an increased wage if they are a parent, while working mothers are penalised (Coltrane, Miller, DeHaan and Stewart

(2013, pg.3). This suggests that characteristics of the ideal worker include little or no interruptions in their career which is deemed by employer's to contribute to lower productivity and demonstrates a lack of commitment or loyalty to the organisation (Coltrane et al., 2013). Mothers who are as educated and experienced as their peers, including female and male co-workers are often in positions that are at lower levels compared with positions held prior to the birth of the child and are working below their potential (Metcalf and Rolfe, 2010; and Silim and Sterling, 2014).

Any country that has long working hours, such as Ireland where the legal working week is between 39 and 40 hours per week introduces the possibility of occupational downgrading against working women with responsibilities outside of their employment (Metcalf et al., 2010). The reality is that the introduction and acceptance of flexible work patterns as part of the employment benefits package is connected with large, high performing organisations (Brescoll et al., 2013). The change in culture from long working hours and '24/7' availability may contribute to reducing the conflict experienced by working mothers (Powell and Greenhaus, 2010). There is also evidence that when women in such professional organisations can access flexible working, they do not avail of them (Silim and Sterling, 2014). The perception is that they do not want to go against the culture of the organisation by requesting flexible leave, when their male equivalents who they are competing with for advancement are not making use of flexible scheduling (Greenberg et al., 2011). The aim of the organisation should be advancement by inclusion without compromising the access to opportunities of progression (Shockley et al, 2014); however it does appear that the human condition is to both 'defend and perpetuate' the norm of the organisational culture (Brescoll et al., 2013, p. 15). This suggests that when women do successfully negotiate and secure flexible working their advancement is stalled and they work below their potential (Metcalf et al., 2010).

Choices in the workplace

The ability to negotiate a better position in the work force is attributed to the level of power attained, particularly for women (Greenberg et al., 2011). However, this suggests that women must attain a professional level to avail of the 'freedom, control and influence' as suggested by Greenberg et al., p. 4 (2011). Other literature supports

this proposing the level of autonomy and control of work patterns is a key determinant of the quality of a work and life balance (Silim and Sterling, 2014). The flexibility of the work environment is important and is often not available to all employees (Brescoll et al., 2013) and yet it has been demonstrated that control of working patterns contributes to increased female participation (Silim and Sterling, 2014). It has been shown that women in lower paid roles which are often female dominated such as retail or clerical positions do not have either the autonomy or flexibility to implement changes to their work patterns (Brescoll et al., 2013). While women who have attained a level of autonomy have a tendency not to access flexible work patterns, even though the extension of this in a tight labour market or as a talent acquisition tool is used to bring them into an organisation (Brescoll et al., 2013; and Silim and Sterling, 2014).

The improved educational level of women has narrowed the gap between the two genders and has contributed to greater opportunities for women in the workplace; and while occupational downgrading does occur, higher qualifications are associated with increased attractiveness of the candidate, as well as incentivising women to return to employment (Metcalf and Rolfe, 2010; Noback et al., 2016). The issue with the ability to attain job status is that for women it is more probable for them to take time away from the work environment to have and rear children, which impedes or delays their advancement to a position within an organisation that may provide them with a level of autonomy (Brescoll et al., 2013). For employers this narrows the pool of talent to select from which may mean less capable employees being promoted, as high social capital can trump qualification, this is especially true where the employee is lacking in networks or has low visibility in the work place (Bacik and Drew, 2006; Silim and Sterling, 2014).

This comes back to perceived commitment by the employer towards their available talent pool, and the reality is that more women are becoming uncertain about taking time away from work (Coltrane et al., 2013). When women move between opting in and out of the work place it does have an impact on their social capital compared to their colleagues that remained full time in the work environment; as they often forgo future earnings and development prospects (Coltrane et al., 2013). A trend identified among women returning to work post maternity is to create a persona for themselves.

The working mother almost challenges herself to become a 'better employee' than before becoming a parent, without benchmarking this against their previous performance or that of their peers, this may be done by working mothers to be taking control over their work environment (Kossek and Lautsch, 2008). It may also be to demonstrate their commitment, the suggestion is that the working mother assumes a dominate persona, creating a boundary between their life and work environments, which means organisations may not be aware or take into account their status as a working mother and the emotional challenges associated with the dual role, this has implications on the wellbeing and performance of the employee.

This behaviour appears to be costly to the health of some working mother, with long term impacts including stress and guilt which may led to opting out of the work force during the period when their children are in post-primary and primary school (Kim, Choi and Kang, 2014; Shockley and Allen, 2010). When working mothers do create a work and life balance through the use of flexible work patterns, there is a suggestion that employers may perceive working mothers as less productive than their peers and move them towards less career progressive roles within the organisation. The implication is that those women that display a dominate persona, that of the worker rather than the working mother experience greater acceptance, which leads to the ability to advance their careers (Coltrane et al., 2013; Kim et al., 2014). Thus perpetuating the male dominate culture and the negative perception towards flexible working patterns used by working mothers.

Employee Perspective

Impacts of requesting flexible work patterns

For some female workers the decision to have a family is associated with loss of status within the workplace which for them can translate to a lack of clarity around opportunities for development and career mobility. The challenge around gender perceptions remain, as male workers seeking leave for family purposes are often tainted with the same characteristics attributed to their female counterparts, such as being less committed or visible within the work place (Rudman and Mescher, 2013). This continues to contribute to the tension created between being an employee and a

working mother, in particular between the persona of being an overachiever in early career which may not translate to the new aspirations of the working mother (Kossek and Lautsch, 2008). Karasek and Theorell (1990) posited that working mothers over the course of their work life move between the roles of integration and separation within the work place arising from their personal circumstances and not by their own choice. During the working mother's lifespan this tension is relatively short but for some this imposed behaviour due to family need results in missing opportunities for professional development and career advancement, this also is reflected in the losses of output to the wider economy (Noback et al., 2016; Silim and Sterling, 2014; Vandello et al., 2013).

The literature points out that this loss is never recovered across the employee's lifetime and can be intensified by the use of flexible work patterns (Russell, O'Connell and McGinnity, 2007; Silim and Sterling, 2014). The clear issue is not just tackling short term needs of flexible work patterns among female employees but addressing the long term challenges so that impacts experienced by working mothers do not result in penalties that are carried on throughout their working lives (Coltrane et al., 2013). The need to adjust work patterns is often linked to the different stages of development relating to the children's age and this gets more challenging after the first child (Metcalf and Rolfe, 2010). The ability of the working mother to retain some level of control within their work pattern can help achieve a balance between the environments of work and life during this challenging period (Kossek and Lautsch, 2008).

Not being present in the work environment for set periods can be perceived by management and co-workers as demonstrating a lack of commitment to the role and the organisation. Organisations may consider that a formal policy is an effective strategy for retaining working mothers however it does not take into account the various needs of the working mother throughout the stages of development of their family and that an informal approach based on trust would on occasion, be a more effective strategy (Silim and Sterling, 2014). Formal flexible work patterns may include part-time work (working less than fulltime colleagues), flexible working hours (working core hours), job shares (sharing a role with a colleague), all of these are temporal work patterns (Darcy, McCarthy, Hill and Grady, 2012). They all result in the working mother not being present for set periods in the office, which again may be perceived by

managers or colleagues as this set of employees not being committed to the organisation, to the same degree as the colleagues present in the work place. For the working mothers availing of formal flexible work patterns it can lead to exclusion from certain networks which reduces social capital and increases invisibility in the work place (Metcalf and Rolfe, 2010; Noback et al., 2016). This increases levels of work related stress for the working mother and adds to the risk of withdrawal permanently from the work environment.

Stability and security

While there has been a shift globally to more align the genders towards the balance of work, the move towards equalisation of the family responsibilities is less obvious from the literature. It is acknowledged that the stereotyping of gender is a significant barrier to this (Barry and Vasquez de Aguilera, 2009; Brescoll et al., 2013; Rudmen and Mescher, 2013), I identify penalisation of male workers for availing of flexible work patterns and that in the main this continues to be a feature of women's working life resulting in the shift of responsibility as primary carer. Throughout the literature there are accounts of workers openly acknowledging the connectivity between availing of flexible work patterns and an absence of stability and security within their organisation (Bak-Grabowska, 2014; Brescoll et al., 2013). The consequence is that for the working mother accessing work life balance at particular stages relating to the development of their children does not become the norm. An important variable is the attitude of the direct management and management in general to the practices of either introducing or using flexible work patterns (Darcy, McCarthy, Hill and Grady, 2012). Without this support the return to work is often challenging for working mother due in part to the difficulties in combining paid work and childcare, this is exasperated where there is more than one child per family and when they commence school (Metcalf and Rolfe, 2010). As the work place is a dynamic environment not having an inclusive policy to retain valued employees once they return to work post leave would suggest a narrow mid-set from the organisation. In particular in any economic climate where there are shortages relating to skilled employees the ability to provide a secure position to working mothers and facilitate a short period of their working life where the use of flexible work patterns provide a work and life balance, would appear to be myopic.

Conclusion

The purpose of this chapter was to review the most relevant literature in relation to the research question which is 'What are the perceived benefits of flexible work patterns for working mothers?' Fundamentally this is to explore to what extent flexible work patterns enable women to participate within the work force when they have family commitments. The main implication is that the norm is for the primary care activity to reside with women, and that men who wish to avail of flexible work are subject to gender stereotyping thus perpetuating the cultural norms that working mothers are primarily responsible for taking care of the family (Coltrane et al., 2013). It is also apparent that the level of autonomy over ones work is highly advantageous when making or seeking changes to work patterns for work and life balances. However, there may a view of underperformance in working culture where employees avail of altered work patterns for family reasons (Rudman and Mescher, 2013); and this is particularly stigmatic where the work culture is of long hours, which is often viewed as commitment in most working cultures (Rudman and Mescher, 2013).

Another suggestion from the literature is the long term effects of balancing work and life for working mothers and its serious impact on output due to loss of potential from employees and their personal effectiveness, as well as the social implications on the various familial relationships (Russell, O'Connell and McGinnity, 2007; Silim and Sterling, 2014).

The most striking aspect of the review is the conclusions of Brescoll et al., (2013) where their findings demonstrated the attitude of employers towards flexible working. Their research showed an obvious bias towards working mothers compared to that of their male counterparts. High status males were often given access to flexible working ahead of working mothers where the male worker was using it to further their career through personal development and the female was using it for family reason (Brescoll et al., 2013). The difference in status between workers and working mothers was also contributes to this theme in the literature, with Korabik and McElwain and Chappell (2008) suggesting that a greater level of authority would provide a greater level of

control over determining work patterns. In Ireland the research on the impact of flexible working is limited, while some literature exists it acknowledges this limitation but also recommends the need to embrace flexible work patterns across all organisations in Ireland (Russell et al., 2007).

Chapter 4 Methodology

Introduction

The primary research objective is to explore the perceived benefits of flexible work patterns among working mothers, and if this has an impact on their continued participation in the Irish workplace. A further aim is to highlight the importance of working mothers in the work and life balance discussion. The purpose of this section is to explore the researcher's philosophical reasoning for selecting a qualitative research method. This section also demonstrates how the research was undertaken as well as the rationale for the selection of this method. The researcher understands that the purpose of research is the gathering of information in a manner that is both logical and systematic on a given area of interest (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2007). The research methodology is then developed from this process to ensure that it is capable of underpinning the research and bringing it to a robust conclusion (Quinlan, 2011).

Proposed Research Methodology

From the literature reviewed it demonstrated the need to consider the complexity and diversity of organisational environments that people inhabit. As well as giving further consideration towards the variety of experiences employees encountered in relation to flexible work patterns. It was evident from the literature that not all working mothers have the same experiences in their work environment. It is reasonable to acknowledge that the entire working population in Ireland is not a homogenous group and therefore their needs or ability to create a work and life balance will not be the same. Heron (1996) suggests that the process of research is based on our own values and the importance of the topic to the researcher, thus the researcher's own philosophy is evident in the chosen approach. The selection of interview for data collection is reflective of the value placed on personal interaction rather than the anonymity of a survey. This approach falls under the assumption of axiology referring to the role of values and ethics of the researcher and their chosen participants (Saunders, Lewis, Thornhill, 2016).

Research Philosophy

On review of the literature relating to the use of flexible work patterns researchers used a mixture of either qualitative or quantitative data collection approaches (Bacik and Drew, 2006). The primary methods used were surveys or questionnaires and in the main researchers employed a quantitative method (Brescoll et al; 2013; Coltrane et al., 2013; Noback et al; 2016 and Shockley and Allen, 2010) of analysing this data. As an observation both approaches worked equally well in providing evidence on existing theory or providing new hypothesis in the area of flexible work patterns and their use and adoption in organisations. However as the research question relates to the experiences of the subjects currently in a work environment the researcher has decided to adopt a qualitative method approach (Greenberg and Landry, 2011; Silim and Stirling, 2014). This method lends itself to the interpretivist paradigm as suggested by Saunders et al., (2016) as it is reflective of a particular 'set of circumstances, interactions and involves individuals at a set period in time'. This paradigm seeks to interrupt experiences of individuals or groups within their social worlds and is context based (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011; Quinlan, 2011). This philosophy is suited to the undertaking of this dissertation which is seeking to understand the behaviours in a work environment relating to the use and adoption of flexible work patterns so working mothers are not at a disadvantage to their colleagues.

Research Approach

The interpretivist approach allows for a reality that employees are individuals and each experience their own differences in their workplace environments (Saunders et al., 2016). When conducting research there are two approaches that can be taken either deductive or inductive to achieve the objectives of the research. When employing a qualitative approach and interpretivist framework, induction is typically used in the research process, as it allows for small samples and in-depth investigation as well as providing a better understanding of the nature of the issue to be addressed (Saunders et al., 2016; Quinlan, 2011). This approach allows the social reality of the participants own experiences to emerge, meaning it is less rigid in terms of research design than the deductive approach (Quinlan, 2011; Yin 2014). The social reality being examined is

whether the availability of flexible working arrangements to working mothers reduces the conflict perceived between work and life, this is in line with McNall, Masuda and Nicklin, (2010) and Silim and Sterling (2014) research in this area. In order for the researcher to commence using an inductive approach they would either have to be fully immersed in the research topic or have completed secondary research from peer reviewed journals and academic sources that already exist on the topic. This provided a framework and sign posts the themes emerging in this research area, such as the issues and barriers facing working mothers and the attitude towards work patterns among organisations. The literature on this topic is wide and fragmented, so a deductive approach was adopted in the first instance in order to build a connection between the existing body of work on the topic of flexible work patterns and the main research objective of exploring the perceived benefits of flexible work patterns for working mothers, as well as highlighting the importance of their role in the discussion on work and life discussions. As deduction is more rigid than inductive, the decision to not continue with this approach was the most logical one as it lends itself more to qualitative analysis. This approach was challenging in terms of the constraints of the research project as it required significant time reviewing relevant literature.

Research Strategy

Taking into account the aim of the research, the population and the information required the choice of interview was deemed the most efficient method of gathering data within the time frame of the research project. While questionnaires are an efficient method of gathering data and would have taken from a wider population, the responses from a semi-structured interview process were richer and enabled the researcher to establish a rapport with the participants. This research focuses on individual experiences and therefore lends itself more to a qualitative approach. The adopted research strategy provided the opportunity to meet and engage with participants and listen to their issues and actions in achieving a work and life balance for both themselves and others. It also helped identify needs and wants and the perceived or real challenges experienced by them in their workplace. A longitudinal study would have been interesting using a mixed methods approach of focus groups and questionnaires to investigate how any participant's work and life balance needs

change at different periods over the course of their working life. Due to the nature of the thesis and its time constraint this was not possible and the interview with a small sample was a more achievable strategy.

Face to face interviews are a very common method of data collection (Saunders et al., 2011). This method has been employed by Teasdale (2013) when researching the implications of flexible work in professional settings. This provides the researcher an opportunity to explain the research and probe the participants in real time. The unstructured nature of the discussion allows for the experience of the interviewee to guide the conversation. The key skills employed by the researcher using this strategy are empathy and the ability to actively listen. The main risks with undertaking this approach for the interviewer is not to influence the interviewee or to introduce bias. The ability to park a point being made by an interviewee and returning to it again is part of the rigour used in the interview process. The nature of the face to face interviews are informal. When undertaking this form of interview there are no pre-determined questions which require clarification on the topic being investigated which is the essence of qualitative research (Quinlan, 2011).

Unlike a self-populated questionnaire that provides a certain level of anonymity, the nature of the face to face structure is less so, the implication is that the interviewee can be, on occasion, less forthcoming with their own experiences or views. This requires management of the interview process and dictates whether the format is an 'informant interview' style, where the interviewee is free to talk during the discourse. The other approach brings a 'respondent interview' approach where the flow of the discussions is sign posted or directed throughout by questioning from the interviewer (Quinlan, 2011). During the course of the interviews both techniques were employed. The data gathered as part of the research needs to emphasise why people are working not how they work, as the context of the research is the ability to create a work and life balance and ensure working mothers are not disadvantaged in the workplace.

Research Instrument

The primary research must be accessible to the researcher as this is the data used in the analysis of the findings and conclusions. According to Quinlan (2011) primary sources are the origins of the information and evidence used as part of the phenomenon or theory being investigated. To achieve the primary research all instruments were examined including qualitative, quantitative or a mix methods approach to gathering of the data. A fourth research approach was also considered by the researcher due to the focus and aim of the project, a Delphi method.

The methods were reviewed and an understanding by the researcher of each one's own merits and use was undertaken so that the right method for the aim of the project was selected and the other methods could be rejected based on acquired knowledge. Quantitative methods are widely used as a strategy for research, it involves the gathering of data that is numerical in nature and then can be statistically interpreted (Saunders et al., 2007); as opposed to the qualitative method of analysis used in relation to determining information from experiences through verbal and non-verbal cues. In some research use of both methods is considered, however this was rejected by the researcher for this project due to the length of time required to develop this strategy and its complex nature. This approach has three variables in which quantitative and qualitative are used in parallel known as convergent parallel; or can be used where one is used in the first instance and then employing the next method for further analysis, and, or vice versa. These are known as explanatory (quantitative, then qualitative) and exploratory (qualitative, then quantitative) methods respectively (Cresswell, 2016). The limitations of the Delphi methodology are that it requires the researcher to organise and document the outputs from a panel of people who will provide a more specific research idea from the main research questions. These participants are usually grouped by their interest in the topic or expertise in the area of the research itself (Saunders et al., 2011). This process was rejected on the basis of time limitations, accessibility to the panel and the costs implications of bringing a group together.

Research Design and Sampling

As there was a large number of questions to be explored and these were open ended, a semi-structured interview was the most advantageous instrument to engage participants (Quinlan, 2011). When identifying participants (**see table below*), the researcher used convenience sampling as this facilitated ease of access to the relevant subjects from the researchers networks from work, college and family. This type of sampling is prone to bias as the participants are selected due to their ease of access, therefore it required additional care on the part of the researcher in the selection process to ensure those selected were representative of the target population (Saunders et al., 2016). Unexpectedly, snow balling occurred from the initial group of contacts and they nominated other potential participants that fitted the intended sample of working mothers. The researcher selected two participants using this approach, with the knowledge that this can lead to further bias and that they may not be exact representatives of the population which can only be determined when they are engaged during the semi-structured process (Bryman and Bell, 2011).

The participants in this study are all currently employed in different organisations however the main criteria was that all participants be female as the focus of the research was on working mothers and their own experiences, furthermore the research is from an Irish perspective and so all participants needed to be employed in Ireland. Lastly the participants for this research were at a level in their organisations or stage of career that was either deemed supervisory, management or had a level of control as an independent contractor. The selecting of this group as representatives of the target population was not random as they can all contribute to the research aim, which is to seek understanding of flexible working patterns and how it impacts on participation rates of working mothers. Ten participants were approached in person by the researcher to partake, with six completing the process. The main selection criteria were that they are all currently participating in the Irish workforce. Given the aim of the research, the gender of the participants was an important facet, another key consideration related to whether they had dependent family members. The participant's age range was within 35 to 47 years. From the sample, 83% were responsible for children, the ages of their children ranged from 3 years to 17 years and

included pre-school and post primary. The remaining participant is currently expectant with their first child, due in late December 2018. As this participant was technically an outlier it was interesting to understand her current work patterns and perceptions towards flexible work and compare it to the other participating working mothers who at a more advanced stage of motherhood. The participant's occupations included a mix from the private, public sectors as well as an independent contractor.

Each initial participant was approached by the researcher in person, other than those identified by others as potential candidates. To screen the cohort the researcher developed a template based on the themes emerging from the literature review as well as two specific pieces of work (Ten2Two, 2017; Wisely, 2017). The format of this was twenty questions developed for potential participants as an introduction (*see appendix 2*). A key consideration that emerged from the literature reviewed was that many women work in positions that provide support to others making it more challenging to implement flexible work patterns (Brescoll et al., 2013). This introduced another level of criteria, and the researcher only selected participants with a level of autonomy within their roles. This approach also meant that the researcher did not have to seek permission from the gatekeepers of any participant's organisations. As part of the debriefing of the participants they were offered either a copy of the notes taken during the interview process or typed transcripts; all declined this and instead indicated they would wait for a copy of the finished dissertation.

Coded Name of Participant	Current Role/Duration in current role	No. of Children/Age
Participant 1	Finance Manager (Public Sector)/8 years	1 Aged 3 years
Participant 2	Independent Contractor (ICT Sector)/5 years	2 Aged 6 & 7 years
Participant 3	Vice President (Financial Services)/3 years	0 Pregnant due 2019
Participant 4	Quality Engineer (Pharmaceutical Sector)/7 months	2 Aged 6 & 7 years
Participant 5	Garda Sgt – Area Manager/6 years	4 Aged 12, 14, 16 & 17
Participant 6	HR Manager (Public Service)/4 years	4 Aged 10, 12, 15 & 17

(*) **List of Participants**

Open Questions

Asking open questions as part of the data collection enables flexibility within the process. Each participant was encouraged to describe their own unique experiences. On occasion one set of questioning led to other areas experienced by the participants in relation to their wish to create a work and life balance. This approach often meant that the interviewee was unhindered in their response, providing long and detailed accounts of situations and perceptions relating to the research objectives. These situations provided the interviewer the opportunity to observe the participant during the interview as well as capture detailed notes. The flow of open questions lends itself to more of a conversation as part of the data collection process. During some of the interviews the conversation required the use of probing questions to explore meanings behind phrases or sentences used by the participant. This involved taking the phrase or sentence and reflecting it back to the interviewee, so they had the opportunity to provide clarification or context.

Data Analysis

During the interviews annotations were taken by the interviewer to note observed changes in the participant's tone of voice, their physical gestures or facial expressions (Brinkmann and Kvale, 2016). After each interview the researcher's notes were typed and saved to a laptop owned by the researcher, each interviewee was given a code name as part of the electronic file name, 'P' for participant, and either a 'M', 'S' or 'I' to denote their work position, either management, supervisor or independent contractor. Finally, each interviewee was assigned a number in the chronological order they were interviewed that is from 1-6; so one interviewee notes were saved as 'FM1'. As recommended by Saunders et al., (2016) a theme sheet was commenced from the first interview, highlighting words that corresponded to the main headings that emerged during the literature review process. Once all six interviews were complete these were reviewed and evaluated against the research objectives and became the focus of my findings. This process took time and required reflection on the emerging themes, often when they were revisited, themes collapsed together to form a single theme. Yin (2014)

suggest revisiting the themes that emerge during the analysis of the data to ensure they are aligned to the objectives of the research.

This required planning as a key consideration was whether the themes would answer the research questions. Kirk and Miller (1986) suggest that with any research undertaken, the question of the validity of the responses is a challenge due to the variances in answers from the participants, this was noted by the researcher when presenting the results in the next section. Organising the themes in an order that made sense and linking them to the themes that emerged during the literature review was done manually. This is part of the interpretative philosophy employed by the researcher for this dissertation. As the participants related their perceptions and experiences this created a narrative on attitudes to flexible working patterns and its contribution to participation rates of working mothers in the workplace. Their stories were then connected as the patterns from the coding developed to form the analysis in the next section. The researcher created a table to aid with the analysis using the following headings i) Literature headings, ii) Titles to be coded, and; iii) Phrases/Words to be coded. While this enabled linkages between the literatures reviewed, it also highlighted areas discussed during the interview process that did not link directly back to the identified themes, this information was captured and presented in the findings section.

Ethical Consideration

All participants were treated equally and fairly throughout the interview process. Each participant at the beginning and end of each interview was told how the information collected would be treated, this was in line with the email sent prior to the interview being scheduled (see *appendix 1*). Each participant had provided their agreement verbally to participate and were given the opportunity to review the questions and confirm their willingness to participate by return email. Several of the interviewees are in positions that are identifiable and requested that this was not included in the transcripts, others declined to be recorded. Any recordings saved to the cloud are deleted two weeks after the interview date by the interviewer, and any hand-written notes will be shredded as part of the ethical process once the final dissertation is

submitted. The only identifiers on the notes was the date the interview occurred and a numeric relating to the order of each interview from 1 to 6.

All participants disclosed information regarding their current role and position, including job titles, therefore the full transcripts have been omitted but will be available to the examiner upon request. The interviews were on average 40-55 minutes in duration and the participants was reminded that they had the right to withdraw from the process at any stage of the dissertation process. All interviews took place in their offices which was most convenient for the participants. After the first interview, the template was reviewed and no changes were made; all participants were asked for their feedback on the process and experience at the end of each interview and were given the opportunity to comment. All indicated that the research objectives was clear to them and that the flow of questions were in line with their expectations and understanding of the purpose of the research proposal.

Chapter 5 Research Analysis and Findings

Introduction

The research objective set out to explore the perceived benefits of flexible work patterns to assist working mothers continued participation in the labour force. A further aim of the researcher is to highlight the importance of working mother's role in the work and life balance discussion. This was achieved by semi-structured interviews with six participants, all females currently working in the Irish work force. From the interviews a number of themes emerged relating to the research objectives and are presented below as a question:

5. Does a high level of autonomy within their current position enable informal adoption of flexible work patterns?
6. Has the age or stage of development of your children impacted on your work-life balance?
7. Was occupation downgrading an experience of the participants?
8. As well as being responsible for you own career are you primarily responsible for the family environment?

Below are findings and the analysis on the emerging themes from each of the six interviews.

Does a high level of autonomy within their current position enable informal adoption of flexible work patterns?

The participants were asked a number of questions relating to autonomy within their current role, and were further probed as to whether this enabled them to change their working patterns on an informal basis. There was broad agreement across all six participants that they had autonomy within their position to change their work patterns. A number of participants spoke about this being a job attribute; however when asked what they sought in a role, this was not always their main criteria for job selection. While it has been suggested that lifestyle is considered a greater consideration than other job attributes (Vandello et al., 2013), among some of the

participant lifestyle equated to financial status, which was identified as a motivator for job selection. The type of the organisation was also identified as a criteria for role selection, with participants stating they had made choices in their careers not based on want but on need, and had foregone financial opportunity for security in their present roles.

“Salary is always a primary motivator, to be honest, more than the flexibility in the role. My main preference is for remote working, away from the work environment.” (Participant 1)

“...my preference where I work has a big impact on my decision if you are working in a smaller organisation you have a greater responsibility to all involved as you are undertaking a number of roles and autonomy within the role is definitely restricted, while I would like to work in a more dynamic environment the reality with kids is that a big organisation is more forgiving”. (Participant 6)

“Being close to home was an important selection criteria for my job...within a 20 minute drive is ideal”. (Participant 5)

Four of the six participants cited ‘*trust*’ and ‘*integrity*’ as an important characteristic to have in a work environment, and if you are operating at a certain level with a degree of autonomy. They also viewed ‘*flexibility*’ as an important facet, especially when an adjustment in your work pattern is needed, the view from the participants was on the whole that ‘*transparency*’ and the willingness to ‘*work hard*’ were the most commonly used phrases in their description of what they perceived as characteristics employers sought when informal arrangements relating to flexible work patterns were in place. This was strongly emphasised by Participant 1 *“be trusted that you will complete work projects on time to the level expected of you”*.

Another strong theme that emerged during the interviews relating to the level of autonomy was the ability to adapt within the position, this word was used by most of the participants when they were asked to describe their work persona. Some of the

participants felt this was particularly relevant to their ability to progress in their career in the future:

“It is important for me to be seen as a team player as this sets the bar for the whole team which means that everyone can adapt to meet each other’s needs while still delivering for the organisation...for me that is around flexibility of my child’s needs”. (Participant 1)

“One of the biggest changes when returning to work as a working mother was the need to be adaptable to my own child’s needs, in particular when the childminder calls saying their temperature is still running high and I am due in a meeting in 10 minutes...this was a big change for me in terms of priorities”. (Participant 6)

“After child number two when they needed me at home and there was no one else to ask, such as my sisters or mam; I had no hesitation in using technology, and work from home”. (Participant 6)

The word ‘*adaption*’ was also used in relation to the working schedule of the day, the ability for organisations to adapt to the needs of working mothers is a key consideration of taking on a role. When asked in the interview if this was their employer or themselves that needed to be adaptable there was a split in responses:

“It is useful to be able to adapt working hours to start the day earlier if I need to get out by a certain time”. (Participant 3)

“Employers need to be aware of different challenges to working full time with young children so I have turned down roles that would require weekend work for example”. (Participant 4)

“As a manager I do expect people to be available and adaptable as others depend on this availability and if they need to change something once in a

while that's OK, as long as it's flagged and works for the rest of their team".

(Participant 6)

One participant stated that the main reason for *'pursuing working for myself'* (Participant 2), was a direct result of a lack of autonomy in previous roles, and the absence of the employer to adapt to her needs *'...in particular when they (children) are small and more vulnerable and needed me much more"*. (Participant 2)

Has the age or stage of development of your children impacted on your work-life balance?

Four of the six participants identified the different stages of their children's development had impacted on their work patterns. Four of the five stated that when children go to school it becomes more difficult to work *'normal hours'*. A number of the participant's working environment had a policy of flexible working, two participants 1 and 6 noted that *'this was only available to lower grade employees'*, while Participant 4 was the only working mother that held a management position and had access to flexible working. While Participant 5 had total autonomy over their working hours, this was entirely due to the nature of their work, which was not bound to any one environment and required them being *'out on the road'*. Participant 2 is self-employed and can use *'any method of work pattern that makes sense for her children's needs'*.

When asked *'whether your current work pattern meet your needs?'* responses were divided with three participants answering *'yes'*, and (Participant 3) indicating *'yes...albeit hours can be long'*, this was interesting as this interviewee had no children and is currently expecting, however their currently experience of their work pattern would suggest that it is not ideal. Participant 2 chose not to answer this questions as she felt it was irrelevant to her current job status as a self-employed worker. The use of flexible work patterns were used as follows:

"Time to be with my children when they aren't at school, to allow me attend their special events (e.g., sports carnivals, concerts etc.,) and be available during their school holidays". (Participant 2)

"I try to take time off around the various breaks. I have been taking more time off for myself with the added bonus of being home when they arrive home." (Participant 6)

The research revealed that some of the participants viewed the need to reward themselves and that their ability to this was attributed to the use of flexible work patterns. It was also noted that job satisfaction was generally high among the participants. In the main this was from participants with children in post primary who acknowledged that while the challenges of the daily routine become greater with the second child and subsequent children, there is less emphasis on work and that there is a definite *'ebb and flow between the two, that is family and work'* Participant 4. This appears especially true when children reach primary school as their activities and social needs increase. The participants noted that this was the time to start *'treating yourself'* (Participant 5) and *'being good to yourself'* (Participant 6).

"It can be really hard to be all things to everyone...so I'm not! I work around the kids and their routines and make sure that I do something for me, sometimes I achieve this and other times it doesn't happen, but I get don't get the 'guilt's' over this as there is plenty to worry about". (Participant 4)

"I used 200 days of parental leave when they were younger and spent most of my time playing catch up (on those days off), now when I am dropping them off to music or whatever I find a nice café and enjoy a coffee on my own...this didn't happen when they were small. Yes having flexibility gives me this time back without the loss of salary". (Participant 5)

"Looking after yourself is vitally important, stress is not good for anyone and when I'm not good everyone feels it! Heading off to the gym works wonders and leaving it all behind for an hour. The flexibility of working for myself gives me these little pockets of time throughout the week". (Participant 2)

The biggest challenge for the participants appears to be when their children entered formal education, most had used their parental leave and two big factors were mentioned as inhibitors during this period for family; the limited availability of after school childcare and the general cost of living. Metcalf et al., (2010) noted this in their study that ‘working mothers become constrained within their dual roles, particularly when children commence school’. Only one of the participants currently worked a reduced working week, currently working a 4 day week. None of the participants viewed working from home or e-working as a solution to balancing the challenges of work and family life.

“I have noticed that my oldest is not as interested in going to crèche after school, it should help that his school day ends a little later... it has been a challenge during the summer period to juggle sports camps and other activities to keep them occupied. Activities are expensive and I think I will take on an Au Pair for the summer next year” (Participant 4)

“My younger sister always minded the kids, as Child X has special needs this has not always been easy for her. It was never an option to use after school for him, so I would have had to pay someone to come to the house. I know that I am lucky with my family and I do pay her.” (Participant 6)

“I could never have afforded to send all four of them to afterschool, it was great to have the work flexibility...we did use childminders when they were at primary school but little as possible to reduce the costs”. (Participant 7)

“My little one is currently availing of the early childcare scheme (“ECCE or Early Childhood Care Education Scheme”, a government led initiative). The crèche is great and fairly flexible, they offer afterschool care and this is the main reason I chose it as it serves the local primary school. It is expensive, but the scheme helps some at the moment”. (Participant 1)

Was occupation downgrading an experience of the participants?

When asked about career progression and whether they were still seeking advancement, all participants had different views however none referred to any experience of downgrading of their work on return from maternity leave or subsequent children. There is a suggestion that some working mothers with more than one child feel it necessary to withdraw from work and more so when children enter school (Paull, 2006; Smeaton and Marsh, 2006). Two of the participants had achieved promotion or laterally moved to positions with greater responsibility they had achieved this during the last six years, both of these participants have more than two children each. Another participant had a career change in her 30s and was in a new position for less than a year, indicating that this role had significant autonomy; this participant has two children at primary school. This appeared to provide the participant with a great sense of pride and when further questioned on this provided the following insight:

“I had a career change 8 years ago so started a new career in my 30s...yes I am hoping to progress into management level. This was just before my first child was born and was a big decision for me to take – when you have a passion in your endeavours it is a little easier to take all the setbacks, it wasn’t easy but it is rewarding”. (Participant 4)

“Evidence suggests a high percentage of those working part-time work below their potential. Occupational downgrading may occur due to restricted availability of part-time jobs, a need to reduce work pressures or reduced importance placed on paid employment” (Metcalf and Rolfe, 2010, p. 6). None of the participants indicated that they felt restricted in their current roles or had been made to feel less productive on their return to work. One theme running through the interviews was that at times participants felt they were *‘spread a little thin’*. Four of the participants stated that the ideal for them would be working a set number of days during the working week and have the flexibility to change their hours during these set working days. Two of the five participants with children had worked reduced hours and both of these were facilitated within their work environment. While Participant 3 will likely avail of a reduced working

week on her return from maternity leave, but will review this based on her own wants and needs, and her financial position.

Some of the participants used the word *'trade-off'*, when asked about their experience of returning to work after their maternity leave, this was in the context of career progression:

"I didn't feel it was right for me or my family to seek promotion so moving laterally within my work was a good alternative, others that had started with me moved up the ranks but this didn't bother me, it was more the loss of salary because I couldn't do shift work and parental leave doesn't come cheap...there is a trade-off with being a mother". (Participant 5)

"At the start there was no grand plan with work or the kids for that matter, as each new baby arrived there was a trade-off between home life and work life. Saying that each time I returned from maternity leave I would seek a new opportunity to learn new skills and work in different areas of the business – although I always had in the back of my head that I wanted to end up working in the area I am in today and took the opportunities to develop myself whenever they came up". (Participant 6)

None of the participants had ever taken a career break, the only leave taken identified among the participants was marriage leave, maternity leave and parental leave. Each participant stated that a career break was not feasible from either a personal or financial perspective. Most indicated that they would be seeking progression in the near future and not one of the participants indicated that they felt *'left behind'* in their career advancements compared with their peers:

"It has taken me 9 years to reach existing level and yes would still be seeking progression. Timeline is relatively on par with peers, maybe slightly ahead". (Participant 3)

“Yes I am still seeking progression (more clients/more work from current clients) I seem to have achieved success in this role at a similar rate to my colleagues who have become independent contractors”. (Participant 2)

“8 years in this position, I entered as an experienced hire recruited for a particular skillset. Yes, still seeking progression, new opportunities and challenges!!” (Participant 1)

Having control over the ability to set working hours was a major theme from the interviewees, some participants had this ability while others did not and would like to avail of this in the future. Others indicated that this is one reason for seeking progression so that a level of autonomy around setting one’s own working hours would be part of the new work package, as this is only available at certain levels within their organisations. It is noted within the literature that the ability to access flexible work patterns does facilitate the ability to combine work and care, and that this may be a contributory factor to career advancement among working mothers, as well as having control over the setting of the hours worked. (Noback et al., 2016; Silim and Sterling, 2014).

As well as being responsible for you own career are you primarily responsible for the family environment?

When asked about this through a series of questions around social expectations around genders and in particular their own belief that as working mothers they are responsible for their own career, all participants noted that the working environment is changing ‘*slowly*’. Participants 1, 2, 4 and 5, all felt strongly that it is much more difficult to change the behaviour of their partners or husbands in relation to the household. When asked ‘who is mainly responsible for the house, children?’ all responded as follows:

“Me for the household activities and child other than external [garden/DIY etc.] (Participant 1)

“Me!” (Participant 2), “I am.” (Participant 4).

"House responsibility is shared! Participant 3)

"It is a share responsibility, but I do more!" (Participant 5)

"I am, I come from a large family and have an excellent support network as back up". (Participant 6)

Only one respondent cited family back up, while Participants 1, 2 and 4 stated that *'family back up was only available in emergencies'* and *'that distance of siblings, parents'* was a challenge. When asked *'had their partner/spouse taken leave, such as parental leave etc.'*, only Participant 6's spouse had taken formal leave, this was in the form of a one year paid career break from his role in the public service. Participant 6 indicated that the reason for this was the late diagnosis of their child with special needs, and her decision to return to university to complete a master's degree.

The ability to *'negotiate'* was mentioned by a number of the participants in relation to both their work and home responsibilities. Kray and Kennedy (2017) suggest that it is often a perception that women struggle to advance their careers due to their own deficiencies as poor negotiators, when in fact this might be due to unfair circumstances in both home and work environments. The participants were also asked if they had undertaken any additional development opportunities after returning to work post maternity leave. Two of the participants (1 and 6) had taken on a level 9 master's degree after the birth of their first child, the remaining had all done some level of professional development within their work environment. Participant 1, 2 and 3, noted that this could not have been achieved *'without the support of their spouse or manager'*.

When asked what this contributed to in terms of their work outcomes, Participants 1 and 6 stated *'that this was part of their career advancement'*, and helped with their work personas by *'demonstrating commitment to the organisation'*. Participant 2's view on development opportunities is *'... it shows that this is my career and not just a job'*. All agreed that the work environment has become more normalised to working mothers using some form of flexible work during the early years of child care. They all

stated that it is becoming the norm to work reduced working weeks and having greater control of the flexibility over working hours per week.

Participant 6 felt *“that employers and HR professional are recognising the need for women and more men to have access to altered work patterns, not just for family but for themselves and the management of their health”*.

Participant 1 suggested *‘it is easier than ten years ago to ‘ask’ for alternative work patterns, most managers recognise this is short term and know they recruited for your skills – they have invested in your development and see you as part of their future management team. So they will do whatever they can to hold on to you’*.

Some of the interviewees had availed of a mentor programme on their return to work, and two of the participants had access to a business coach through their employer. These initiatives had impacted positively on their career to date as they felt included within their work environment, as well as relevant to their employers. In summing up the women reflected on their careers choices and advancements to date positively and were generally *‘content’* with their current positions, there was an unsolicited acknowledgement that the burden of family responsibilities feel to them, this was particularly strongly stated by Participant 1, 2, 4 and 5.

Summary

The main points to emerge from the findings were the participants all expressed a high level of autonomy within their own roles which enabled them adapt their flexible working patterns. The staged of development of their children, especially when they entered primary school had a significant impact on their ability to balance work and home life. None of the participants perceived they had been subjected to occupational downgrading during their careers as a result of their role as a working mother. Finally, the participants that were working mothers perceived they were the main carers within their family and carried the main burden of responsibility in this role. These findings will be discussed further in the following chapter.

Chapter 6 Discussion

Introduction

The research objective is to explore the perceived benefits of flexible work patterns to assist working mothers continued participation in the Irish labour force. A further aim of the research is to highlight the importance of working mothers' role in the work and life balance discussion. This section will interpret the findings from the previous section in relation to the research objectives. Broadly all participants agreed the availability of flexible work patterns is important for family purposes. To date none of the participants had opted out of the work force for family purposes. Flexible work patterns benefit employers, and more particular working mothers to achieve some level of control over how and when they work (Lambert, Marler, and Gueutal, 2008).

Does a high level of autonomy within their current position enable informal adoption of flexible work patterns?

Within the literature it has been identified that work-life policies have been put in place in most organisations as a strategic response to ensure the continued participation of women (Kadarko-Dizaho, Salleh and Abdullah, 2017). It may be the case that many organisations offer this to their employees but the literature does suggest that as women advance in their career, even if available to them, women are less likely to avail of formal flexible work arrangements (Brescoll et al., 2013; Silim and Sterling, 2014). Data gathered from all of the women interviewed identified a high to reasonable level of autonomy within their roles, and while all did not have access to formal flexible work arrangements they did informally avail of flexible work scheduling as needed to suit their own needs. Autonomy has been defined as the amount of control or discretion attached to a role (Wheatley, 2017). All of those interviewed identified trust and integrity as part of the key traits needed by workers availing of flexible work patterns, irrespective of it being offered formally or informally. This suggests that with a certain level of autonomy within a work environment employees can adjust their work patterns

to meet their needs for short periods of time, mainly when their children are making the transition from pre-school to primary education.

The link between autonomy and ability to control and manage scheduling and workloads, allows employees to create a balance between home and work. The literature which points to high levels of controls among employees as having a positive impact on their well-being and contributing to sustained performance from an organisational perspective (Greenberg et al, 2011; Kossek and Lautsch, 2008; Wheatley, 2017). This would suggest that empowering employees to make decisions regarding how they work, provides a better work environment contributing less to stress and more to employee effectiveness in the workplace. The rationale for informal flexible work patterns maybe that it provides benefits to both organisation and employee. From an organisational perspective offering this level of autonomy creates a positive working environment which results in higher retention rates and lower levels of staff turnover (Beauregard and Henry, 2009). All of the participants are currently employed by organisations with the exclusion of Participant 2 who changed her career, have held their positions for greater than 3 years or more. From the employee perspective the participants are not being penalised in any way for using flexible work patterns, this was suggested in the literature review, that working mother's career progression can be negatively impacted by availing of formal flexible work patterns (Brescoll et al., 2013; Vandello, Hettinger and Siddiqi, 2013).

Control relating to autonomy provides employees with a level of freedom in their roles, which contributes to increased efficiencies and outputs. Freedom to control work levels and scheduling is a high priority for working mothers. Creating a working environment where control rests with the employee has been shown to improve overall job expansion and improve employee retention rate (McNall, Masuda and Nicklin, 2010).

Has the age or stage of development of your children impacted on your work-life balance?

The literature review indicated that there is a conflict between combining work and children, as costs increase relative to the increase in the number of children in the family

(Metcalf and Rolfe, 2010). Most of the participants had two or more children, and in the main all are in or near to primary or post primary education. During the course of the interviews the participants were asked if they had ever considered a career break, a number of participants indicated that this would be too costly. Two of the participants indicated that they had changed career, one retaining in a new discipline the other deciding to work for herself. While a number of participants cited the cost relating to childcare, no one indicated this as a potential reason for formal withdrawal from work.

Most participants had made use of parental leave, which is unpaid in Ireland; this was used by the majority of the participants during the early years of their children's development and pre-primary education. In the main this was used to compress their working week from a 5 to 4 or 3 day week. The literature suggests that women's work patterns are most disrupted during the time period between early primary education and the first year of post primary education, when there is a greater need for after school care (Metcalf and Rolfe, 2010). The ability to rely on family or siblings to provide additional after care once they are in primary school would appear to be the ideal solution for all the participants, although this was not always available to them all. Cost of aftercare appeared to be the biggest concern for participants with primary school children, this was less so for those participants that had children in post primary.

Participants were strong on importance of their own well-being, this related to their perceptions of only being able to care for others when they themselves are at their optimum health. This was discussed in terms of their own engagement with external networks as part of the work environment and their level of participation in clubs and societies. The literature suggests that women who use flexible work patterns become less visible in the work place, this in turn diminishes their freedom to negotiate and reduces their social capital impacting their career advancement (Bacik and Drew, 2006; Greenberg et al, 2011). While not all the participants were in formal activities their overall level of participation in health pursuits was high, in particular the use of running and Pilates. Participation use of informal work networks was much higher among the participants and many expressed the desire to increase this as they viewed them as being of high importance to build and maintain work relationships and to increase their work profile.

Some of the participants indicated that the use of flexible work patterns were not used to only meet the needs of their family but on occasion to facilitate their own needs, this was viewed as a method of reward. This led to expressions of satisfaction with their employer for the availability of flexible work scheduling. The literature points to job satisfaction in a role as increasing employee loyalty and can lead to increased employee productivity. This literature on job satisfaction further suggests that this creates a positive experience in all aspects of working mothers many lives, improving overall quality of life (Greenhaus and Powell, 2006). This need for working mothers to prioritise their own needs ahead of others in their lives was highlighted as high in importance by participant 5 and 6, who had children in post primary. They both emphasised the need to maintain a persona for themselves within the family and work environment and to achieve this early in their children's development as it becomes more challenging as the family increases and as children develop through their own life cycles.

Overall the research indicates that the stage of development of their children is an important facet of the working mother's life cycle. Ensuring that the working mother is recognised as an important employee and is relevant to the organisation is essential, while providing a work environment in which there are some levels of control is vital. This contributes to wellbeing as well as increased job satisfaction, which is a high indicator of performance, loyalty and reduced churn in high value employees.

Was occupation downgrading an experience of the participants?

Evidence from the literature points to the occurrence of occupational downgrading when women avail of flexible work schedules (Metcalf and Rolfe, 2010; Noback, Broersma and van Dijk, 2016). The literature suggests that this occurs due to a conflict that arises for women when they acquire the dual role of employee and mother (Shockley et al., 2010). The connection between the ability to remain in the workforce when children enter school is also seen as a key contributor to downgrading, in particular when mothers decide to re-join the workforce after a period of leave (Metcalf and Rolfe, 2010). None of the participants indicated that they had experienced any form of occupational downgrading since returning to work as a mother. A number of

the participants had achieved progression within their roles and acquired greater responsibilities. All of the participants indicated an aspiration to achieve more in their current careers with most indicating this would involve future progression.

There was a high level of acknowledgement among the participants that the level attained in their professional career related directly to the ability to create a work environment for themselves that contributed to a positive family environment. There was also strong indication that they all perceived the need to adapt their working schedule, as a short term measure in context of their overall lifetime of their career and in the main this was supported by their organisations. Also, the one participant who choose the career path as an independent contractor acknowledged that this was facilitated due to the high level of credence attached to her in previous organisations and which gave her a high profile, as well as maintaining membership in various professional networks.

There appears throughout the literature an association between the use of part-time hours with restricted job mobility and occupational job downgrading in particular after becoming a mother (Dex and Bukodi, 2008; Smeaton and Marsh, 2006). While previous research indicated that working mothers do experience occupation downgrading this was not reflected by the participants interviewed. The ability to avail of informal flexible work patterns were cited as very beneficial among the participants. This may be that this particular cohort of working mothers view their employment as just as important as their status as a mother. While some of the participants had used lateral positions to facilitate their use of parental leave and working a compressed week, none of the participants viewed this as equating to their role being downgraded in any way. In fact, some of the participants indicated that while the lateral role may not have required management of people, the position was operationally important and rewarding.

The literature also suggests that women are less likely to invest in their own development if their careers are broken intermittently for family reasons (Dex and Bukodi, 2008) and are more impacted by gender when in a profession dominated by males. The argument that follows this is that women are subject to lower pay and occupation downgrading. From the research with the participants when asked about their perceptions regarding pay, most felt that there was a gap between their colleagues

due to their breaks due to childbirth or unpaid parental leave. In the main the participants felt they were exactly at the same stage as their peers in terms of work progression.

This was particularly true for the participants in a professional role that was perceived to be predominately female. There was also a high level of self-development among the participants in terms of availing of additional educational qualifications and business coaching all done with a view to progress in their current roles. The level of success in securing their current position was given credence by the level of professional development invested by each participant before and after childbirth, this is supported in the literature where higher levels of human capital act as a buffer to occupational downgrading (Dex and Bukodi, 2008).

As well as being responsible for you own career are you primarily responsible for the family environment?

According to Noback et al., (2016) there is a growing recognition among organisations that flexible working enables women combine their dual role as worker and carer, and that this phenomenon occurs due to the gender division of care. From the interviews with the participants it was clear that most of the working mothers perceived themselves as primarily responsible for both the care of their family and their careers. While some of the participants noted household duties and tasks were shared, their overall perception was that the responsibility for the children rested with them as mothers. The literature suggests that women, even with professional qualifications face obstacles as working mothers that prohibit their progress in organisations (Chênvert and Tremblay, 2002).

The cohort of participants acknowledge that family life does have an impact on their work and life balance there was no stated disadvantages by the group on having a family and their career progression to date. None of the women interviewed expressed a view that they were in any way conformist. While some studies suggest that the number of children has a positive impact on men and a detrimental impact on working women (Chênvert and Tremblay, 2002). In the case of this cohort most of the women had more

than two children, some had four and this had not impacted in a negative manner on their career advancements.

Their own view in relation to their spouses/partners careers overwhelmingly was that they provided the necessary support for the spouses/partners career progression, this is in line with the literature. Having dual earners helped alleviate the financial burden associated with family life and enabled the working mothers avail of unpaid parent leave, when necessary.

From the participants responses it was clear that there are no ideal work patterns and that the use of formal flexible work patterns such as unpaid parental leave provides a limited level of flexibility and freedom to adapt work patterns, mainly as it was unpaid which made it inhibitive to use from a financial perspective. This may be the reason why the use of flexible work patterns is more evident among women rather than men, as culturally men are still perceived as the main breadwinner (Silim and Sterling, 2014; Teasdale, 2013).

Limitations

Finally the challenges of this study included the decision to use semi-structured interviews which can introduce bias by the researcher (Saunders et al., 2016). This was mitigated by the researcher by the choice of open ended questions that were probed if further clarification was required. Using semi-structured interviews to gather data usually lends itself to small samples of the target population, and only six participants were interviewed. Due to the time constraints of the project the researcher used convenience sampling (Quinlan, 2011). The participants were fairly homogenous in terms of their levels of qualification and current job status. A further study may be to further explore the roles of working mothers that are deemed lower paid and that are female dominated where the ability to create flexible work patterns are significantly prohibited due to the nature of the work.

Chapter 7 Conclusion

This chapter revisits the research thesis which was to explore the positive consequences of using flexible working patterns for working mothers and whether this contributed to their continued participation in the Irish work force.

Semi-structured interviews were undertaken with six professional female workers employed in the Irish economy, all participants are mothers or expectant workers. Participants were asked a number of questions as part of the process on their experiences of the Irish workplace, in particular since becoming a working mother. The questions were based on the literature reviewed and focused on understanding their experiences in relation the level of autonomy within their current roles, their views on their own career progression and their views towards the work patterns required to meet the needs of the different stages of their children's life-cycle and their own observations on the dual role of being a working mother in Ireland today.

The findings presented suggest that the level of control of the working mother's scheduling was vitally important to enable them continue within their present careers. Empowerment was a key attribute for each of the working mother and this resulted in positivity towards their organisations and a high level of job satisfaction in their current roles. This is in line with the literature that suggests control is an important attribute of the working mother's career (Greenberg et al, 2011; Kossek and Lautsch, 2008).

Maintaining a high level of well-being was an important attribute for the participants, in particular as their children entered primary education. Well-being was of high relevance to the participants as they indicated that a high level of well-being equated to better performance both in work and at home and which translated for most to a level of financial security. The costs associated with the addition of one or more children beyond the first born and children entering primary education is seen as very disruptive periods in a working mother's career (Metcalf and Rolfe, 2010). This was reflected by all the participants in their need to stay in full time employment as this provided them with a level of security an important facet to alleviate the financial

burden of after school care and children in Ireland. The use of flexible work arrangements enabled continued participation in the workforce.

There is strong evidence to suggest that women experience occupational downgrading when they commence using flexible work arrangements (Metcalf and Rolfe, 2010; Noback, Broersma and van Dijk, 2016). Furthermore among professional women, even if available to them, the use of flexible work arrangements are low. This was not the experience of the participants in this research. Their career outcomes have continued to be positive after using flexible work patterns, and the ability to use this informally within their own roles is a key theme among these working mothers. Controlling their own working hours and schedules while working set days during the week was an important facet of their ability to continue to work and maintain their level of seniority within their respective organisations. The importance of high human capital and the ability to develop oneself is also important (Dex and Bukodi, 2008). This has enabled each of the working mothers to attain a level within their chosen careers which enables them have the freedom to alter their work patterns to meet their needs. This has acted as a buffer between them experiencing any downgrading within their current organisations, and has enabled at least one of them to work for themselves giving them complete control over their work and family environment as an independent contractor.

The salient point for the research was the women's view that despite all the progress with women's education and increased participation in the workforce their biggest challenge is that of gender. The reality for most working mothers is that they will continue to carry the burden of responsibility of rearing and being responsible for the family. While supporting their partner/spouses' career development, they are in the main responsible for their own career progressions and are still challenged in the work environment with gender stereotyping when they avail of formal flexible working arrangements.

Appendices

Appendix 1

Dear Participant

I am currently undertaking my Master's in Business Administration in the National College of Ireland.

As part of my dissertation, '**an exploration of the perceived benefits of flexible work patterns on women and their continued participation in the Irish workplace**'.

I am trying to gain an insight into the use of flexible work patterns and to explore its impact on working mother's participation in the work place.

All information is anonymous, no names will be revealed as part of this dissertation. The only persons with access to the transcriptions will be myself and my supervisor in the National College of Ireland.

I will record the interview by note taking and if you do not object I will use a recording device known as 'Otter' which automatically transcribes the interview. This is stored in an encrypted format in the cloud and will be deleted by myself within two weeks of our interview. The notes taken will be subject to GDPR regulations and stored on my laptop, coded so as not to identify anyone involved in the process. They will be held on my laptop in a folder titled 'interviews' until after the board has met and discussed my dissertation and with your permission will then be deleted.

I expect our interview to last approximately 1 hour and it will be held in a venue of your choice at a date and time most convenient to you.

Attached for your consideration is the template of questions that will be addressed during the course of our interview, please can you confirm by return email that you are satisfied with same and willing to participate?

I appreciate your time and assistance if you require any further clarification please do not hesitate to contact me on 0872729525 or at this email address byrne.susan@gmail.com.

Regards

Susan Byrne

Appendix 2 - August 2018 Advance Interview Questions

1. What is your current job title and how long have you held this position.
2. Within this position are you responsible for others?
3. Does your position afford you autonomy in your role?
4. Does this autonomy include your ability to schedule your work pattern
5. Is this formal and available to all, or informal and only available to some within your organisation.
6. Did it take you long to progress to your current level; are you still seeking progression? (Did you achieve this in the same time frame as your peers)
7. Do you have children if so how many?
8. What stage of development are they currently at, pre-school, school, post primary.
9. Do you provide a caring role for anyone within your family other than children; do you do this for anyone outside your immediate family?
10. Who is mainly responsible for the house, children?
11. Has your partner/spouse taken leave for family reason?
12. Have you ever considered a career break, either facilitated by work or through necessity?
13. Does your current work patterns meet your needs?
14. Are you involved in any external organisations such as clubs, societies or activities?
15. Do you use formal or informal networks, such as those relating to work, or activities?
16. Have you ever taken on additional studies while still working
17. Do you think that your working pattern has changed thus far in your working life?
18. Have you ever taken leave other than annual leave or sick leave?
19. As a user of flexible work patterns what do you look for in a role?
20. As a manager what skills or capabilities do you view as required by a worker that is a user of flexible working patterns?
21. As an employee/employer what would your preferred working week schedule look like?
22. Are you aware of those around you that don't work

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