

Flexible working times: towards a new employment relationship?

Marie SCHOTS^a, Laurent TASKIN^b

[Stream “Flexibility”]

Among practices of flexibility, some affects particularly the spatial and temporal dimensions of work. Far from the “fordist arrangement”, working time becomes “burst, diversified and malleable”. Spatial and temporal framework of work constitutes a major ‘lever’ for management practices. The stake of such flexible practices appears to be the *available time* : managers seek to increase it and employees try to better balance work and family duties. This contribution aims at understanding how those flexible practices make sense for groups and employees; how its uses are perceived and justified and; how the employment relationship is finally reorganized or re-constructed by actors. This enquiry is based on two empirical investigations situated in two different contexts: the food retail sector and the IT sector. Beyond the inherent limits in many points with the comparison of two divergent objects, the analysis reveals similarities regarding consequences that these practices of flexibility generate on the employment relationship.

Beyond dominant interpretative registers of ‘flexibility’ we identify – natural process or opportunity to balance various temporalities (household and work) – this paper points out the emergence of a new *employment relationship*, by mobilizing the ‘implicit’ social contract, which reflects the understandings between employer and employee about their respective contributions. Results bring us to (a) reconsider the spatial and temporal framework, which is characterised by a greater and unbounded temporal availability for employees, whereby space also gets a new signification; (b) understand the employment relationship in a more individualized, informal and interpersonal way and; (c) re-think the collective dimension of those work arrangements in order to understand and develop adapted processes of regulation.

^a Institute for Labour Studies, Université catholique de Louvain, Belgium, schots@trav.ucl.ac.be, Place des Doyens, 1 – 1348 Louvain-la-Neuve, Belgium, tel. +32 10 47 29 50

^b Organisational Behaviour and Human Resource Management research unit, Louvain School of Management (IAG), Université catholique de Louvain, Belgium, taskin@rehu.ucl.ac.be, Place des Doyens, 1 – 1348 Louvain-la-Neuve, Belgium, tel. +32 10 47 85 24

INTRODUCTION

According to some contemporary perspectives, organisations become more and more 'flexible' in order to survive in a context of globalisation of the market place. As such, 'flexibility' is not only seen as an adaptative process to contextual constraints. It appears as a strategic management tool.

Among practices of flexibility, some particularly affect the spatial and temporal dimensions of work. Far from the "fordist arrangement", working time becomes "burst, diversified and malleable" (Vendramin, 2004). Work Schedules tend to extend themselves on less prescribed times (early in the morning, late in the evening, the night or the weekend). The accountancy of the hours worked is no more carried out on a weekly basis but well annually and what was formerly regarded as an atypical working time now forms explicit pan of the regular working time (Lehndorff, 1998).

Spatial and temporal framework of work constitutes a major 'lever' for management practices. The stake of such flexible practices becomes *available time* : managers seek to increase it and employees try to better balance work and family duties. Are these different interests compatible? How does the arbitration operate in the daily practices ? And, finally, how do these various way to take the available time into account contribute to redesign the employment relationship?

Facing these queries, this contribution aims at understanding how those flexible practices make sense for groups and employees; how its uses are perceived and justified and; how the employment relationship is finally reorganised or re-constructed by actors. This enquiry is based on two empirical investigations situated in two different contexts. The first case study analyses part-time flexibility in the food retail sector, drawing on 50 qualitative interviews of HR managers and trade union representatives in France, UK and The Netherlands. The second one focus on teleworking in the IT sector. The empirical material is here composed of a Belgian case study in an IT subsidiary, an exploratory survey and other focus groups. Beyond the inherent limits in many points with the comparison of two divergent objects (branches of industry, characteristics of workers, management practices, etc), the analysis reveals similarities regarding consequences that these practices of flexibility generate on the employment relationship. More, part-time, flexibility and teleworking have in common to be developed as tools of flexibility answering both interests of employers and employees; or to be either volunteer or imposed; etc.

Firstly, we present these two configurations of temporal flexibility. The analysis of the interpretations given by the actors allows us to characterise the employment relationship developed in each case. Then we focus on the fundamental transformations of the spatial and temporal framework constitutive of the employment relationship. Underlying the temporal stake of working flexibility, this article addresses finally the question of social time regulation.

WORKING TIME FLEXIBILITY IN THE FOOD RETAIL SECTOR

The food retail sector is characterised by a specific population of workers, whom are low qualified and in majority female, and by the instability of the employment rules to enter in this working market sector. Moreover, the part-time development in this

sector appears as a specific way to regularise flexibility (de Nanteuil-Miribel et al., 2004).

Methodology

The case study presented in this section is based on a research conducted for DARES¹. This research aimed at analysing, in a qualitative and comparative way, the forms of working and employment flexibility in three countries of the European Union (United Kingdom, The Netherlands and France) and three sectors (Chemical, banking and food retail sectors). The analyse focus on flexibility decision-making and its relation with the collective bargaining at the enterprise level. As the flexibility trend is underlined by representations, a specific attention was allowed to the normative arguments given by the actors to justify their choice. 154 semi-directive interviews were conducted by telephone with Human Resource Managers and Trade-Union Representatives in equivalent proportion. Beyond national divergences, the results let appear a strong sectoral homogeneity concerning the process of flexibility and the type of justifications developed by the actors. This is why we present only the results of the food retail sector without distinction concerning national specificities.

II.1. Working time flexibility practices in the food retail sector

The leading principle of the work organisation in the food retail sector is: to adapt to the variations of clients all along the opening hours, which are extent to the maximum, while minimising the wage costs. To face this triple constraint, managers develop widespread part-time work and combine it with modulated and yearly-based schedules. Indeed, part-time work enables to plan the employees working time all along the opening hours, including evenings, week-ends and Bank holidays, and even nights. Moreover, due to modulated schedules, the working hours can be modified day by day (following the clients affluence) while yearly-based schedules allow complementary working hours paid at the basic rate. Therefore, the weekly working hours of an employee may vary below and beyond what is stipulated in the contract, as long as the annual mean is respected. In total, the number of employees present in the store is constantly minimised. That is what a HR manager underlies: *"[...] those complementary hours are equivalent to supplementary hours but they are paid on the basis wage. That allow us to manage the productivity very well and to put together the need and the resource without creating extra costs we used to with hours to be recovered for example"*.

Therefore, the great majority of the employees -mainly women- have a part-time contract² stipulating a minimal number of hours which can be increased by complementary hours. The schedules of the employees are thus modulated throughout the year and they are informed about it, in general, with 15 days or one month in advance. However it is usual that the manager calls in urgency one or another employee to replace a sick colleague or to face a suddenly affluence of customers, as another HRM specified: *"[...] When the work load is larger than the personnel that I have in the store, I need more people. I call them on their mobile telephone and I say 'Come on quickly!'"*. The employees with a short part-time and a temporary contract are particularly affected by these variations of schedule without delay.

¹ de Nanteuil-Miribel, M., Léonard, E., Schots, M. and Taskin, L. (2004) Les flexibilités en Europe: Pratiques, décisions, négociations. Dossier no.22, Louvain-la-Neuve: IST, PUL.

² The part-time work proportion in the food retail sector raises to 30% in the EU-15. Among those, the percentage of women equals 81% (source: Working Force Survey, Eurostat, 2001).

II.2. Representations about working time flexibility

II.2.1. Manager's point of view

Managers consider flexibility as a 'paramount necessity' for the enterprise from which they cannot escape, while they affirm paradoxically the strategic dimension of flexibility. In addition to its imperative character, flexibility is also legitimate because it meets a need for the employees: balancing its working and family times.

II.2.1.1. Flexibility as an imperative

HR managers perceive flexibility as a vital need: facing a strong market pressure, it becomes imperative for the company to resort to flexibility just to survive. Their arguments refer to the idea of a "naturalised" market, to which everybody has to comply with, and where there is no possibility to withdraw.

In addition, if flexibility is often associated for them to the working time, they don't give a clear definition of it : flexibility seems to be an extensive concept. For some of them, flexibility indicates even an individual virtue or quality, beyond concrete and limited practices: *"In the sale, we need flexibility, availability, if we want to be productive, we don't have choice ... Within the limits of law, employee must be able to adapt to all situations to help the employer"*.

II.2.1.2. Flexibility is a strategy

Perceived as an external constraint, flexibility is nevertheless integrated by the leaders in a strategic view combining a long term planning –especially in terms of Human Resource Management–, and a constant adjustment to the market demands. *"The strategy of the company is to stick to the economic activity, to be more reactive and to develop a fine management in this direction. The short term is not dissociable from the long term and the strategy can be revised from day to day "*.

Actually, this long-termed strategy aims at reconfiguring the employment relationship. Indeed, the standard of the full-time contract with eventual extra-paid working hours is substituted by the part-time contract including complementary hours paid at the basic wage. This global strategy gives to managers the legal support they need to obtain a generalised agreement on flexibility practices, what strongly deteriorates the employees' opportunity to modify or to dispute those practices.

Moreover, as we argued previously, managers want to promote a new attitude from their employees, an attitude of flexibility making them available in time to fulfil the unexpected requirements of the organization. *"Everyone has a mobile phone, some must be available if it's needed ... It is not obligatory but it is the way it works ... It occurs everyday"*. This evolution seems to modify the concept of subordination, which leaves the strictly contractual link to extend to dynamics of the flexible wage relation.

II.2.1.3. Flexibility : a way to balance work and life

For employers, flexibility constitutes also a way for the employees to achieve a better work/life balance in a context of life styles' changes. Flexibility would be thus profitable for employer and employees, both seeking as well as possible to meet their respective needs, especially in terms of time. Managers focus on the possibility allowed to the employees to distribute their working time according to family duties: “

... it allows to the women to envisage a day off or some free hours to consult a specialist with their children or to care them if they are sick ...". This argument seems decisive for a largely female population.

In addition, some evoke also the changes in the sphere of private time: *"flexibility is a survival question for the employer while employees need flexibility to practise sport, to do housework, etc."*.

II.2.2. Trade-Union Representatives' point of view

The TUC's point of view about flexibility meets partly the managers' one but they are largely opposed regarding the implementation of flexibility.

For a lot of them, flexibility is also inescapable because of the economic context of strong competition. Some of them, however, reject this fatalism and blame the administrative principles like, for example, voluntary under-manpower inducing flexibility. Rarely, some others mention also a change of attitude on behalf of the customers, reflecting the evolution of the life styles: *"It is necessary to adapt the time organisation to the customers who have more time for their leisure and are demanding relatively to food stores"*.

Moreover, they know that flexibility is potentially advantageous regarding their private temporal constraints. This is why they strongly denounce a flexibility *"in only one direction"*, i.e. for the single benefit of the employer: *"flexibility should be advantageous for both employer and employees. But it is not the case, it is only the employer point of view which prevails"*. Actually, it seems that the capacity for the employees to resort to extra-professional life arguments in order to renegotiate the changes imposed by flexible work is low, even non-existent.

Thus, for Trade-Union Representatives, flexibility is not legitimated as it does not balance respective waiting of each part. Even more, in its current form it causes harmful consequence for the private life of the employees. Trade-Unions denounce the pressures exerted by the leaders in order to have a personnel available permanently : *"flexibility is supposed being good for employees but it is not the case: they want employees available from 8 am to 10 pm ... there is a lot of pressure"*. With the consequences that it can have on the employees: *"It is presented as if it was flexible for employees but it is not true. You lose the control of your life with the flexible contracts³. It is for the needs of the business, only. Before, when everybody was engaged on a fixed hours contract, there were always people to do overtime voluntarily. Now, you cannot plan anymore your life and that is reflected in the strong turn-over of the personnel"*.

Therefore, it seems that *"for employees, the major problem is the absence of visibility"*: *"free time does not belong to employees anymore, it is defined by the needs of the store"*.

³ Some British supermarkets companies have introduced a new type of contract: *the flexible contract*. Combining various forms of flexibility, it stipulates that employees have to be available to work on schedules overflowing largely the usual schedules (evening, even night, week-end and banking holiday work)

Nevertheless, to be heard, Trade-Union Representatives have only very weak means which vary according to the country. If it takes place⁴, the collective bargaining is generally held at the level of the company or the sector. Therefore, the elaboration of the schedules in the stores gets most of the time off the Trade-Unions control and concerns only the effective organisation within each establishment, that is sometimes carried out ray by ray. In this situation, each employee stands alone in front of its direct manager : *“the issue is schedule changes ... the relation with the local direction is bad”*. This ‘power relation’ appears unbalanced, asymmetrical, supported by a strong rotation of the personnel itself related to a potentially small degree of job satisfaction.

II.3. Characteristics of the employment relation

In a sector such as the food retail, the effectiveness of the organisation relies on the capacity of immediate reaction to the fluctuations of the market demands. Thus, temporal co-ordination –and the availability of the employees– plays a central role (Martinez, 2003). The working time management is a crucial point of the corporate organisation and, to some extent, it merges with the management of the individuals (Bernard, 2003). The individualisation of the employment relationship which tends to take place in the sector defers the risks related to the entrepreneurial activity on the employees, while evacuating the reciprocity link which formerly bound the company and its employees. While individualising, the employment relationship tends to over-estimate the weight of its constitutive subjective dimension.

An employment relationship based on the concept of “friendly turn”

When the working number of employees is insufficient, the HR responsible calls by telephone one or the other employee and asks him/her to come to help him/her and to start working immediately : *“ all of them have a portable on which I can join them ... and I know which one I may ask to help me directly”*.

As it was said, employees have to be available to meet the “needs” of the company. However, before satisfying the company, employee does its direct manager a friendly turn. The employment relationship turns off in an interpersonal relationship between the employee and his direct hierarchy. There is no intermediary. And on the back of the intrusion in the private space and time of the employee – for him it is a day off – appears the idea of service, of ‘friendly turn’, suggesting a relationship of ‘equal to equal’. However, it is fundamentally asymmetrical, as already showed, due to a slightly qualified labour market where the possibilities to negotiate with the employer remain weak (Corre, 1998).

That is why the manager is trustful: he knows that he will find “collaborators” ready to modify their timetable. Beyond an acceptance forced by the fear of losing its job, the stakes are related to the professional conscientiousness, to the idea of friendly turn and the principle of “give-giving”.

First, HRM and employees are convinced of the need for being flexible: the customers are there and it is necessary that employees serve them and ensure the correct progress of the organisation. Therefore, the HRM will not have any scruple to ask some help to resorb a manpower insufficiency. Employees, on their side, have

⁴ Trade Unions in the British food retail sector are not often recognised and there is nearly none collective bargaining.

internalised this "higher reason": employees must serve the customers. For them, there is not only a problematic situation which calls upon their professional conscientiousness but also a colleague – even if he is a manager – asking for a friendly turn.

In addition, this interpersonal relationship is also sustained by the idea of "give-giving". Indeed, this is the HRM who grants the day-off when the employee asks it. It is thus convenient to maintain with him a relation likely to support these arrangements in favour of the employee. That is why he does his direct superior a friendly turn, being available for schedules modifications. Consequently, he becomes a 'confident' employee and hopes, in return, that the HRM will remind it when he will ask for a day-off. The idea of a symmetrical, egalitarian relationship appears once again though it occurs rarely. This reveals that this flexible management of the working time throws a blur on the formerly clear border between work and private life. Employees cannot be ensured of their work schedule, their out-work time gets off them partly: their temporal horizon is reduced to the "preventing delay" of their schedules and during this time-off, they can be called and finally work

III. FLEXIBILITY OF WORK LOCATION IN THE INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGIES' SECTOR (ICT/IT SECTOR)

III.1. Telework, a new form of flexibility?

Behind traditional forms of flexibility, Vendramin & Valenduc (2002: 46) identify and define the flexibility of work location as recovering "the diverse forms of teleworking, the remote access to the employment market or consumer market, the delocalisation and, roughly, all geographical forms of work organization requiring ICT capabilities for working everywhere". The key role of those technologies explains telework first of all develop in the IT sector. This sector of activity is characterised by a population that is highly qualified, male, and that knows a low trade union rate⁵.

Telework refers to the achieving of a professional activity, fully or partly, at a distance (i.e. outside from the place where the result of this work has to be delivered, and away from any physical capability to monitor the execution of tasks), and requiring ICT use⁶. Telework is then characterized by (a) the distance, i.e. a spatial and temporal dispersion, and (b) the use of ICT.

Considered first as an exclusively technological innovation, telework constitutes nowadays a component of a flexible way to manage work, as a tool of flexibility that gives action' opportunities adapted to problematic situations. Those action' opportunities are potentially favourable to employees as employers, but they can lead to mutual prejudices too. In a recent book⁷, teleworking is compared to another tool of flexibility: part-time working, that we discussed early. Authors show that teleworking addresses challenges that are similar to those addressed by part-time working: the constrained or voluntary character, the schedule management and the availability, the socialization in the company and in the collective, the great diversity

⁵ Eurostat, EFT, 2000; Eurobarometer, 2003.

⁶ Adapted from Breton T. (1994), *Le télétravail en France: Situation actuelle, perspectives de développement et aspects juridiques*. Paris :La Documentation Française.

⁷ Taskin L. & Vendramin P. (2004), *Le télétravail, Une vague silencieuse. Enjeux socio-économiques d'une nouvelle flexibilité*. Louvain-la-Neuve :PUL, coll. e-Management.

of situations (from a constrained third time to a voluntary four fifth). As telework, part-time working constituted a tool of flexibility to satisfy both company' needs and employees' demands.

Methodology

The material used comes from three main sources (an exploratory case study, an exploratory quantitative research and two "focus groups") that we complete with different research reports to which we took part, at several degree. First, an exploratory case study was led into the renamed company "Softech". This Belgian company is the local subsidiary of an American multinational active in the IT sector and selling softwares and solutions adapted to the customers'needs. Among the 150 employees, 40 were teleworking. They are consultants, sales representatives and marketing representatives. We collected our data from 17 teleworkers, by combining semi-directive interviews and the diffusion of a questionnaire. Since this research took place (2001), it has to be mentioned that telework is now proposed to all employees. In 2002, we conduct an exploratory quantitative research measuring the impact of telework on the employment relationship. The questionnaire was addressed to teleworkers and non-teleworkers from the same two companies, belonging to the IT sector (n=77). Finally, to learn more from several socio-economical stakes, we organize some focus groups (taking place in 2004 and 2005) and reassembling actors strongly concerned in telework matters (HR Directors, Trade union representatives, political and regional institutions, etc.)

III.2. Flexibility of work location practices in the IT sector

Finding a common rule that characterise the organisation of work in the IT sector is not an easy game. However, key words are again adaptability, efficacy and availability. An adaptation to products and innovations, first. Working in a sector that is called "knowledge-based" implies a constant actualisation of skills. Adaptation refers of course to the customers' needs and the availability, both for clients, colleagues and hierarchy. Since work schedules are informal, since working environment is international and that projects generate an important amount of money, the availability becomes an imperative, even in the evenings and during the weekend. And finally, the efficacy is a pregnant criteria of excellence, and sometimes a selection criteria. In the name of the required and rewarded efficacy and performance, employees invest strongly in their job.

Illustration – THE SOFTECH CASE
training days a year.

- *Sales representatives and Consultants benefit from 30*
- *The average working time is around 50 hours per week.*
- *On the HR intranet of the company, we can read : "a fascinating job in an exciting environment, where each victory goes with sweat and tears".*

Flexibility of work location remains closely related to the physical structure of the organisation. In a context where the mobility of workers constitutes a core principle, workplace often takes the form of sharing desks or hot desking.

Illustration – THE SOFTECH CASE

This is not our own property. More, when we have to achieve a piece of work that requires a high level of concentration, it becomes unfeasible.

[a Sales Representative]

In this context, telework is often welcomed, if not asking by the employees themselves. It offers indeed the opportunity to work in a quiet place: the home.

Home-based telework constitutes otherwise an economical solution for the company, as argued a HR Responsible from Softech (see below).

Illustration – THE SOFTECH CASE *It is more profitable to invest in the in the individual house comparing to satellite offices that would generate an unjustified overhead cost.*
[a HR Manager]

This configuration of telework allows the employee to work from home, by using a computer and a network access, that are often provided by the employer. Ideally, the employee has to fit out a dedicated place at home to work. In most cases, home-based teleworking is not carried out permanently but well in an alternate way, or occasionally (less than one day per week). For most of IT sector employees, telework constitutes a superposition time (working time at home is added to traditional working time) instead of a substitution time. We observed the increase in the total working time, with the switching to telework, as other researches show it before (Bélanger, 1999; Daniels, Lamond & Standen, 2001).

Other forms of telework emerged in the IT sector, such as mobile teleworking. This form mainly refers to employees that have to travel frequently for working, as sales representatives or maintenance technicians. Those mobile or nomadic workers may combine different forms of teleworking. They spend the most of their time in customers' premises, but they can write reports or check databases from home or satellite offices. The great motivation for those workers consists in making professional commuting times profitable.

Telework in the IT sector is finally characterized by his informal form. No convention, written agreement or specification to the employment contract: telework really consists in a flexible and tacit arrangement between the worker and his manager or hierarchy.

Briefly, the practice of telework in the IT sector is done alternatively, from different workplaces that can combine with each others, and is a matter of males and high qualification. Those knowledge workers are typical from this sector that is characterized by : project work, high autonomy, strong values and culture, informal arrangements (flexibility) and management by objectives, among others.

III.3. Telework-related perceptions

Harris (2003) noted that the importance of the “implicit”, “social” or “psychological” contract which reflects the understandings between employer and employee about their respective contributions to the employment relationship is well recognised in the academic literature. Besides, Watson observes that the “implicit contract is never fixed, nor is it ever stable and two particular factors tend to threaten its stability – the push towards increased efficiency on the part of the employer and the tendency towards collective action and challenge on the part of the employee⁸”. The employment relationship therefore refers to interactions, and more specifically to the perception of mutual exchanges between employer and employee. When we tend to know how teleworking may affect this relationship, we must have to identify the related perceptions of actors involved in telework, and then to determine the effects of these perceptions on this kind of “social contract”.

⁸ Watson T., *Sociology, Work and Industry*, 2d ed., London, Routledge, 1987, p. 141, cited in Harris L. (2003).

III.3.1. Employer's perspective

III.3.1.1. A hazardous search of effectiveness

Employer's benefits related to telework practice appear from themselves : increase in productivity, decrease in overheads and estate costs, and even reducing absenteeism (Jackson and van der Wielen, 1998; Lindorff, 2000). Anyway, telework is often adopted in a rational perspective, i.e. to reduce commuting times, to improve service to the customers, to improve ICT use or to extend flexibility (IDS, 1996; Baruch, 2000; Konradt et al., 2000).

The "increase in productivity" refers in fact to two distinct realities: this is used by employees to mention an increase in the workload, but it mentions a better quality of work too. The rise in productivity –in quantitative terms– comes from both the reducing of breaks and disturbances (working time becomes more crowded time) and the lengthening of the working time. As working time lengthens and gets more thick, absenteeism diminishes. Employees tend to work even if they feel less in health, or even with some physical handicaps. This illustrates the inability to clearly distinguish private and professional life, as a four young children mother explains (see below).

Illustration – TESTIMONY

As far as I am concerned, very few absences due to personal or children diseases. Anyway, at this period, my children felt often ill. If I had to work in my office, and knowing that nurseries do not welcome sick children, I would have been missing more often.

This situation may lead, for the employee, to work intensification, as we will argue below. The rise in productivity –in qualitative terms– constitutes a consequence of the perceived diminution of stress allowed by a quiet and adapted work environment, as well as by the decrease of commuting times. Finally, employers perceive telework as an "advantage" for employees.

The worker's despatialisation –induced by the practice of telework– addresses new stakes to Human Resource Management. The first "uncertainty" consists in the control modes adapted to telework. How to control a remote worker? How to know if he or she really works and what is done?

Telework calls the "three units' rule" (place, time and action) in question, even though most of control's dispositives are based on this rule. Since telework implies the multi-localisation of employee (to which the concept of despatialisation refers), the rule of the "unity of place" that allows to control employees and their work *de visu* and *in situ* is no more effective. More, teleworking affects mainly services' activity, where "operations are too diversified and unpredictable to be monitored on the base of a uniformity of time"⁹. Felstead et al. (2003) also identify the challenges addressed by despatialisation to traditional management control. They argue the workplace represents the "visibility" (the capability to observe the employee) and the "presence" (the capability of the employee to interact with co-workers) of employees. Those two dimensions are the essential components of the traditional management control. In this perspective too, the phenomenon of despatialisation, related to telework's practice, will modify both the "visibility" and the "presence" of workers, what will affect the coordination of working team, and finally, the control modalities.

⁹ Lallé B., « Nouvelles technologies et évolution de la dialectique (contrôle/autonomie) dans le secteur des services. Application au cas bancaire », in *Revue de Gestion des Ressources Humaines*, 31-32-33, 1999, p. 99.

Broadly speaking, managing telework constitutes the real challenge, and especially in terms of employment relationship: how to remote control, indeed, but how to commit, coach, coordinate employees remotely? The traditional answer is : trust management. Of course, building a trust relationship is not so easy. However, recent research underline the necessity to re-think the managerial framing of teleworkers. Harris (2003) and Deffayet (2002) illustrate how telework affects the role of the supervisor or manager. Managers need to coach their employees in a more qualitative than quantitative way. Obviously, we observe the opposite: in a first time at least, telework contributes to duplicate formal procedures of quantitative feedbacks¹⁰. Finally, in line with Taskin & Delobbe (2002) contribution, those articles moderate the perceived positive impact of telework on turnover, illustrating the negative impact of telework on organisational commitment.

III.3.1.2. Telework as a “win-win” arrangement

The employer's perception of telework consists of, on the one hand, hopes of quick wins, measurable and quantitative, and on the other hand, long term doubts regarding the management of telework, and of teleworkers. Telework appears as an interesting tool, but the deeper changes it may occur on the structures and management moderate its adoption.

Nevertheless, employers perceive telework as a “win-win” arrangement, as a mutual flexibility for employer and employee (Reilly, 2001). The feasibility of such balanced arrangement depends on the conjunction of several characteristics (Peters et al., 2004) : organisational, the job itself, individual and household. Baruch and Nicholson (1997) argued that telework was often adopted in line with employer's arguments (costs rationalisation) because of the scarcity of the conjunction of the previous components.

III.3.2. From the employee's perspective

III.3.2.1. The story of a thin and moving border

Time management –more than place or localisation management– constitutes nowadays an important incentive to the adoption of telework, both for employees and employers. Teleworks allows indeed to reduce time spent in transportation, but, more generally, to manage the unexpected, the delays, it allows to work without idle time between demand and supply. Teleworkers want to gain from this flexibility to have the opportunity to be more available for their families.

Illustration - THE SOFTECH'CASE

This is an opportunity to be more efficient. And there is not only the efficiency at the work level, there is the family environment too. I can be more present (...), I drive my children at school, at noon, I can have lunch with my wife and then to turn up working. [a consultant]

Knowledge workers from the IT sector particularly appreciate this kind of flexibility, even if they know it has a cost : to get away from a Wednesday afternoon involves to work during evenings or week-ends. This seems reasonable for all and the

¹⁰ Harris L., “Home-based teleworking and the employment relationship, Managerial challenges and dilemmas”, in *Personnel Review*, 32(4), 2003, p. 422-437; Deffayet S., “Nouvelles technologies de l'information et de la communication et contrôle dans la relation managériale», in *Recherches sociologiques*, 1, 2002, p. 27-48.

Management By Objectives that is effective in this kind of companies reinforce this culture of flexibility : work has to be done on time.

Of course, those “small arrangements with time” constitute the origin of major tensions between private and professional times. By reducing stress related to work , home-based telework seems to increase the level of stress related to private life (Konradt et al., 2003). The fundamental question consists in knowing to which degree an employee can put limits to this intrusion of work in his/her private life. Is the teleworker able to propose a balance that is own, and to fix the limits that the employer cannot cross?

The despatialisation relative to the practice of telework generates a feeling of social isolation. Social interrelations appear more important for teleworkers, but they become scarce because of the diminution of exchange opportunities in the workplace. Most of the time, it is the responsibility of the supervisor to bring employees together, and this lack of face-to-face interactions may become clumsy for teleworkers who can feel “invisible” for the company (Cocula & Frédy-Planchot, 2001).

Illustration - THE SOFTECH CASE

I have some colleagues that don't come very often at the office. This is a real problem. I go one time a week, or every two weeks, at the office, for an afternoon, to work administratively, and to meet colleagues and have some informal talks. You have to keep a visual contact with your managers and colleagues...what we write in an e-mail is never the same as the “one-to-one de visu”. [a consultant]

Those feelings may lead teleworkers to feel less committed to the organisation (Taskin & Delobbe, 2002). According to Harris (2003), 80 percent of her sample feel less committed to the organisation, what contradict commitment theories which link the level of autonomy to the organisational commitment.

III.3.2.2. Towards a better quality of life (at work)

As underlined by Harris (2003), teleworking has gained an image of a “liberating form of employment” (Moon & Stanworth, 1997) through working in a home environment free from the stress of daily commuting, with greater autonomy to organise the working day and the opportunity to work undisturbed by office politics and distractions. In that way, the “teleworking arrangement” appears adapted to employees who want to improve their quality of life at work. According to recently research, this constitutes a well-shared concern in Europe, especially for the most youth categories of workers¹¹. The mastery of time and the balancing of private and professional roles contribute work to penetrate into the private sphere, with such unexpected consequences : lengthening of the working time, family-related tensions and an increased availability to the company.

Illustration – IPSOS SURVEY

39% of Frenchmen who telework home-based do it because they have not sufficient time to complete their work during the traditional working time.

[Tempos Review vol.3, 2005]

This confusion of times, consequent to telework' practice, illustrates that the idealistic project of balancing private and professional life did not convince employers.

¹¹ See the IPSOS/Chronopost surveys conducted in 2003 and 2004 on social times (www.chronopost.fr). The issue relative to the place of work in the employees' life is developed in an article of D.Méda, in the related Tempos Review: Méda D., « La place du travail dans la vie des salariés », in Tempos, 1, 2004, p. 10-17.

Teleworking asserts itself as a tool of flexibility able to meet both the requirements of new forms of organisations and management, and some employees' aspirations. According to Taskin & Vendramin (2004), the major risk that is linked to this form of flexibility consists of a continuous availability. This enlarged available time refers to the mastery of time: whose belong the commuting time that is saved?

III.4. Characterisation of the employment relationship

Asking for the subjective involvement of individuals, teleworking –requiring autonomy and responsibility– contributes to the emergence of a new social contract where exchange becomes “commitment, competition of the individuals versus development opportunities offered by the company” (Veltz, 2000 : 203). Beyond loyalty, outgoing social value in a world characterised by precarious involvements, the notion that better characterises the employment relationship is “individual responsibility”. Telework develops in the IT sector in the name of this principle of individual responsibility, that closely bind trust and performance. This principle appears quite improved in this sector, with the commonly-adopted MBO where employers impose deadlines or performances to reach. In return, the employee may feel more autonomous in the organisation of his/her work schedule. Alternate, occasional or mobile telework are part of those compromises between the pressure of objectives and the need for a relative quality of life. Those compromises are continuously temporary, not optimal, individual, and informal or tacit.

Those compromises define an employment relationship where the flexibility of work appears mutual and balanced. Anyway, teleworking asks for a “trust management” (Baruch, 2000). Indeed, since telework constitutes a interpersonal and tacit arrangement in this sector, trust becomes the key of the employment relationship, that take place in a changing environment.

Beyond the needs to define new borders between private and professional times (focusing on the emblematic issue of the available time), the employee' perception of a loss in support or understanding constitutes a critical issue that can occur a breach in this trust-based social contract. In such circumstances, a recalibration of the employment relationship may arguably lead to a less relational and more transactional relationship with lowered employee expectations and emotional commitment but greater realism about reciprocity and increased individual freedom (Robinson et al., 1994).

Finally, in the case of telework, the employment relationship seems to be primarily affected by managers' propensity to consider the specific situation of teleworkers, and especially to take into account their specific needs in terms of balancing work and non-work times and duties.

IV. DISCUSSION

To answer the question of how flexibility makes sense for individuals and groups, we selected two situations of flexibility affecting the spatial and temporal frames of the employment relationship: (1) yearly-based part time in the food and retail sector and (2) telework in the IT sector. At first sight, those situations have little in common: the flexible arrangements, the employee's characteristics, the type of the population (male or female) and the management practices are different. Nevertheless, the analysis of the representations associated with those forms of flexibility points out

some common features. The cultural frameworks on which actors' perceptions are based seem to converge and contribute to re-design the employment relationship, beyond contextual divergences.

IV.1. Beyond “naturalisation”, long-term adaptative strategies

In those two cases, flexibility is perceived as an inescapable, external constraint, both by employers and, what may be more surprising, also by a large number of employees. This common trend to “naturalise” a phenomenon that is however the resultant of social interactions plays an important role in the process of its legitimization: flexibility is not questioned as such, but only through its results. The Social Critic's capability becomes affected: Trade-Union face real difficulties in building alternatives to this naturalising perspective. According to Arnsperger (2005:104, our translation), “This is, at the same time, giving up to the temptation (...) to consider as unpersonal forces socio-economical mechanisms that are the results of interpersonal interactions and that can therefore constitute the object of the collective criticism”.

However, beyond this naturalisation process, some research (de Nanteuil-Miribel *et al.*, 2004) partly questions this dominant vision as firms also show capabilities in building long-term adaptative strategies. The objective of such strategies are to decrease costs and to adapt employees' ability to the needs of the company in the long run. This strategy takes form through concrete tools of flexibility (telework and part time) that combine legal bases and informal arrangements. Normative discourses and practices reinforce each other to create a flexible context of work, allowing to react –immediately and more cheaply– to structural transformations of market constraints.

IV.2. Beyond “conciliation”, management of temporal availability

Flexibility is also conceived as a tool to balance working and private life. Besides, this “logic of conciliation” (de Nanteuil-Miribel, 2005) is strongly supported by the European Commission. Flexibility appears here as an opportunity for employers and employees. This argument is very often used to legitimate flexible practices and constitutes a part of the “social contract” which links the employee to the employer: imposed flexible practices of work can lead to a counterpart of flexible arrangement regarding work-life balance.

In fact, such an approach is utilised by employers through two main arguments: (1) the construction of work culture that sets value on trustful workers; (2) the increase of employee's temporal availability.

The first argument focuses on the individual characteristics of the worker. To be considered as a *trustful worker*, and to keep his/her job, the employee has to appropriate objectives and constraints that the organisation is facing. Indeed, “companies' objectives are to better allocate the cost of labour to production level, to optimise the quality of the work done, and to make integrate to the management of this labour force the objectives of profit of the company” (Peretti, 2001:35, our translation). Employers of the IT sector sustain values of efficacy, loyalty, availability, communication and responsibility. Similarly, as noted by a HR Manager of the food and retail sector, “in sale activities, we need flexibility and availability if we want to be

competitive, we have no choice... In the limits of the legality, the employee has to adapt to all situations to help his employer out". According to this perspective, flexibility refers to a way of thinking (a state of mind) that is concretely expressed through personal motivation and involvement into company's success.

The second argument appears as related to the management of employee's temporal availability. This is clearly showed in some British food and retail lines when offering jobs to new applicants: when signing the employment contract ("flexible contract"), the employer asks them to propose availability times during which they are disposed to work if required. Later, those employees feel fooled when employers do not take their preferences into account. It is also the case of those teleworkers who use flexibility to better accommodate their private duties (in terms of schedule, mainly), but who will be constrained to work during evenings, nights and/or weekends, in compensation (Musson and Tietze, 2004).

Through the spreading of temporal and spatial limits, the employment relationship appears to be deeply re-designed through a double process: (1) the fact that border between working and private life becomes more and more blurred; (2) the spatial and temporal extension of the employment relationship creating a "surplus of power" for the employers. According to Bouffartigue and Bouteiller (2000:122, our translation), this is symptomatic of the crisis of the working time category. Comparing food and retail cashiers and executives –who can be compared to teleworkers in the IT–, they note:

From the cashiers' availability to the executives' fatigability, two forms of the crisis of the working time category clearly appear. The cashier's time constitutes a fractioned time, through its irregularity, unpredictability, and finally through the proportion of "capted" time, i.e. a non-professional time that is partly dependent of the professional time. The time of executives is characterised by the lack of borders and measures. (...) The executive's fatigability refers to the multiple constraints and norms that contribute to developing an extensive available time for professional duties even if it is not subjectively experienced as such. As we can see, from largely distinct situation, we come to forms of availability for professional work going beyond its classical spatio-temporal frame".

IV.3. Re-designed working relations

Increased individualisation

Following a logic of long-term adaptation –adjusting personnel management to company's needs on a structural basis–, work schedules are individualised in both food and retail and IT sectors. Teleworkers benefit from latitudes in the way of determining their work schedules, which is not the case for food and retail workers. In this way, working times contribute to differentiate individual workers among professional communities. This takes part to the process of individualisation of the employment relationship.

Moreover, these increasing individualisation makes informal arrangements easier and contributes to place the employment relationship in a more 'intersubjective' way, based on face-to-face interactions. Indeed, as we mentioned above, telework often results from informal arrangements between employer and employees. It is partly due

to the low Trade-Union rate but not only. Indeed, in the food and retail sector, where the trade union rate is greater, collective bargaining takes place at the level of the company, what gives considerable “rooms for manoeuvre” to local establishments. Therefore unexpected is managed in an informal way, by individual arrangements. This “good turn” that is done to the employer makes the employment relationship more subjective. The asymmetry of the power relation becomes blurred due to the perspective of a mutual flexibility, combined with the internalisation of constraints and with the personification of the relationship.

Moving borders and transfer of risk

The employment relationship diverges from the traditional “fordist contract”. The fluctuation of the working time illustrates this phenomenon: generalisation of minimum and modulated part time contracts in the food and retail sector, management by objectives or projects-based in the IT sector –what contribute to not count working hours. Working schedules become heterogeneous: no more concentrated, fixed in advance and largely collective, they become discontinuous, unpredictable and individualised.

This new “norm” –based on a greater availability of workers– is intrusive as long as it does not precisely fix the times of subordination to the employer. Work becomes re-introduced in the private spatial and temporal framework. As already said, the border –previously clear– between work and private life becomes confused. This is the case when teleworking from home or when the employee of the food and retail sector is called at home to come working.

Times of the employees depend on the fluctuations of the economic activity (de Terssac et al., 2000). The quality and the speed of the service that is provided to customers depends on the employee. These constraint is internalised by individuals, as it is shown in some interviews : “*Customers have to be served*” (one employee in the food an retail sector) or “*Telework allows employees to work without any idle time between supply and demand*” (one manager in the IT sector). The responsibility previously assumed by the employer fades: risks are transferred to employees themselves.

IV.4. Individual choice vs. collective regulation?

Employees ask for a more flexible management of working time that can allow them to better master private and professional times and duties, as we illustrated in this paper. Flexibility represents a possible compromise between employer’s and employees’ aspirations. Spatial-temporal flexibility appears as an answer to what was criticised in the Taylorian-Fordist organisation of work: it takes into account the singularity of workers. This flexibility concretises the idea of “individual choice”. However, this stays at the level of discourses, without being clearly observed in the day-to-day practice. We already illustrated situations in the food and retail sector where “individual choice” is inexistent or relative. Let’s take a last one: an employee who refuses to modify his/her schedule on last minute will be less requested in the future, even if he/she wants to complete his/her working schedule to increase his/her monthly salary. In the IT sector, the notion of “chosen time” is insidious: the employee contributes to the elaboration of new temporal norms. This can be verified in the observed increase in the working time of teleworkers.

The issue to be considered deals with the limits that can be opposed by the employees to face these temporal pressures. The individualising employment relationship lacks of a collective frame. According to Freyssinet (2000:245, our translation), "trade unions have today to think to a new conception of *collective rights*, that would focus on the definition of general norms and procedures *in which employees' individual choices* could take place". However, de Nanteuil-Miribel *et al.* (2004:218, our translation) showed the limits of "negotiated flexibility": the latter can not be implemented without deep deliberation on the search of new collective orientation. The issue at stake is to be able to build a "common world" at an era of naturalisation of the market and of strong individualisation of social behaviours.

Such collective orientation is also needed to coordinate the various diary times at the society scale. As Gadéa and Lallement underline (2000: 42, our translation), "Permissive condition of the flexibility development, the new latitude that allows companies to negotiate the working time at the local level has increased the risk of juxtaposition of multiple norms produced according to individual interest". Those norms become contradictory and generate difficulties : how conciliate non-standard working times with the school schedules and the rhythms of the family members (Gadéa and Lallement, 2000)? The various constituent times of the social life, among which working time represent a great part, demand some sequence of tenses to be compatible between them and for each individual. How and at which level could we regulate these social times, balance aspirations and demands of each one, in a collective perspective? Which kind of rules do we need: substantive or procedural rules? The question reminds in suspense and request to be solved a coordinate mobilisation of the social and civil actors (employers, trade-unionists but also local government, associations, institutions, ...).

BIBLIOGRAPHIE

- Bailey D.E. et Kurland N.B. (2002), "A review of telework research: Findings, new directions, and lessons for the study of modern work", *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, n°23, p.383-400.
- Baruch Y. (2000), "Teleworking: Benefits and pitfalls as perceived by professionals and managers", *New technology, work and employment*, vol.15(1), p.34-49.
- Baruch Y. et Nicholson N. (1997), "Home, sweet work: requirements for effective homeworking", *Journal of General Management*, vol.23(2), p. 15-30.
- Bélanger F. (1999), "Workers' propensity to telecommute: An empirical study", *Information & Management*, n°35, p.139-153.
- Bernard S. (2003), "Règles formelles et pratiques informelles des caissières d'un hypermarché", *Interventions économiques*, n°31, juin.
- Breton T. (1994), *Le télétravail en France : Situation actuelle, perspectives de développement et aspects juridiques*, La Documentation Française, Paris.
- Campbell Clark S. (2000), "Work/family border theory: a new theory of work/family balance", *Human Relations*, vol.53(6), p.747-770.
- Cocula F. & Frédy-Planchot A., « Freins et motivations liés au télétravail chez Electricité de France et Gaz de France : l'apport de la théorie de la structuration », in Autissier D. et Wacheux F. (dir), *Structuration et management des organisations, Gestion de l'action et du changement dans les entreprises*, Paris, L'Harmattan, 2001.
- Daniels K., Lamond D., et Standen P. (2001), "Teleworking: Frameworks for organizational research", *Journal of Management Studies*, n°38, p.1151-1185.
- Deffayet S. (2002), « Nouvelles technologies de l'information et de la communication et contrôle dans la relation managériale », *Recherches sociologiques*, n°02/1, p.27-48.
- de Nanteuil-Miribel M., Léonard E., Schots M. et Taskin L. (2004), *Les flexibilités en Europe: Pratiques, décisions, négociations*, Dossier n°22, Institut des Sciences du Travail, Louvain-la-Neuve.
- Felstead A., Jewson N. et Walters S. (2003), "Managerial control of employees working at home", in *British Journal of Industrial Relations*, vol.41(2), p.241-264.
- Fox A. (1974), *Beyond contract: Work, power and trust relations*, Faber, London.
- Harris L. (2003), "Home-based teleworking and the employment relationship, Managerial challenges and dilemmas", *Personnel Review*, vol.32(4), p.422-437.
- IDS (1996), *Teleworking, Study 616*, IDS, London.
- Jackson P. et van der Wielen J. (1998), *Teleworking, International perspectives*, Routledge, London.
- Konradt U., Schmook R. et Mälecke M. (2000), "Impacts of telework on individuals, organizations and families-a critical review", In Cooper, L. & Roberston, I. (eds), *Organizational Psychology and Development*, p.339-375, Wiley, Chichester.
- Lallé B. (1999), « Nouvelles technologies et évolution de la dialectique (contrôle/autonomie) dans le secteur des services. Application au cas bancaire », *Revue de Gestion des Ressources Humaines*, n°31-32-33, p.99.
- Le Corre S. (1998), « Les grandes surfaces alimentaires : un marché du travail ouvert », in Gerritsen, D., Martin, D. (dir.), *Effets et méfaits de la modernisation dans la crise*, Desclée de Brouwer, Paris.
- Lehndorff S. (1998), « Les nouvelles formes d'organisation du temps de travail: Entre réduction des coûts à court terme et arrangements sociaux solides », *Communication au*

colloque IRIS Changement institutionnel et dynamique de l'innovation, 2,3 et 4 décembre 1998.

Lindorff M. (2000), "Home-based telework and telecommuting in Australia: More myth than modern work form", *Asia pacific journal of human resources*, vol.38(3), p.1-11.

Martinez E. (2003), "Les disponibilités temporelles dans les organisations flexibles du travail", document de travail, séminaire de l'école doctorale Sociologie de l'action organisée, Bruxelles, 2 octobre 2003.

Méda D. (2004), « La place du travail dans la vie des salariés », *Tempos*, n°1, p.10-17.

Moon C. et Stanworth C. (1997), "When employees feel betrayed: a model of how psychological contract violation develops", *Academy of Management Review*, vol.22(1), p.226-256.

Reilly P. (2001), *Flexibility at work, Balancing the interests of employer and employee*, Aldershot, Gower.

Roustang G. et al. (1996), *Vers un nouveau contrat social*, Desclée De Brouwer, Paris.

Schein E. (1978), *Career Dynamics*, MA, Addison-Wesley.

Taskin L. et Vendramin P. (2004), *Le télétravail, une vague silencieuse. Les enjeux socio-économiques d'une nouvelle flexibilité*, PUL, coll. E-Management, Louvain-la-Neuve.

Taskin L. (2003), "Télétravail et organisation: Les mythes d'une success story", *Gestion* 2000, n°2/2003, p.113-125.

Taskin L. et Delobbe N. (2002), "Conséquences de la pratique du télétravail : vers une désocialisation ou une nouvelle forme de socialisation ?", in Karnas, Vandenberghe et Delobbe (eds), *Bien-être au travail et transformations des organisations*, PUL, Louvain-la-Neuve.

Terssac, G. (de) et Tremblay, D. (dir), *Où va le temps de travail ?*, Octarès, Toulouse.

Veltz P. (2000), *Le nouveau monde industriel*, Gallimard, Paris.

Vendramin P. (2004), "Organisation du travail et conciliation", *Tempos*, n°1, p.17-25.

Vendramin P. et Valenduc G. (2002), *Technologies et flexibilité: Les défis du travail à l'ère numérique*, Liaisons, Paris.

Watson T. (1987), *Sociology, work and industry*, 2nd ed., Routledge, London.