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The business case versus the moral case for flexible working arrangements

Laurent Taskin

Abstract

From a business standpoint, flexible work arrangements appear – in the short term - to be bearing fruit for employers and employees alike. These arrangements facilitate sharing of management and decision-making functions; offer more flexible work schedules to allow reconciliation of professional and private roles; and consolidate office space to be more productive and responsive, among other advantages. In the medium and long term, there is a moral case for such fluid arrangements, which we argue in this paper. In this chapter, we use a conventionalist approach to explore the forces (and their consequences) that make this moral case emerge—i.e., the shaping of a new ideal worker as well as Human Resource Management (HRM) practices fostering individualisation and psychologization. We identify the absence of anthropological roots as the key element of the moral case of flexible work arrangements, and sketch out a research agenda to further investigate this employer-driven flexibility.

Keywords

INDIVIDUALIZATION; DEHUMANIZATION; ISOLATION; COMMUNITY; FLEXIBLE WORKING

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<a> INTRODUCTION

The concept of flexibility in management originated in the operations management literature and conveys the ideal of the fastest possible adaptation between demand and supply in the production of goods and services (see e.g., Psarommatis et al. 2019). The management principles that reflect the need for flexibility (i.e., zero defects, zero delays, zero stock) are now also used in the management of people and the organisation of work, firstly in terms of employment (through the use of temporary staff and limited-term contracts) and then in terms of work (through the development of multi-skilling and the enrichment of tasks). People were considered as resources to be optimized (see e.g., Gomez-Mejia et al., 2012). In the 1990s and 2000s, these practices were backed up by a modern sense of morality that made the individual the one primarily responsible for his or her own employability—a perspective that could mutually benefit (highly skilled) employees and employers. Adaptability then became an individual skill. The flexible work organisation has thus shaped individuals who are adaptable, responsive, agile and resilient in a context where the contractual relationship is becoming more fragile, contributing to the emergence of a ‘new model worker’ (Hancock & Spicer, 2011) who is available, hyperconnected and committed to their work (Ajzen et al., 2024).

This desired adaptability, from the employer’s perspective, led organisations to promote individualised HRM practices, also known as high performance work systems (Kossek et al., 2006; Taskin & Devos, 2005). At a time when individuals are being urged to get to know themselves, to (re)focus on their personal projects – a movement that has been denounced by some authors as a dictatorship of individual well-being and autonomy (see, e.g., Cederström & Spicer, 2015; Ehrenberg, 1991) – management practices and ways of organising work have in turn become individualised with *à la carte pay* (cafeteria plan), individual bonuses and performance targets, on-demand training, flexible working hours or even remote working

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have been the ingredients of flexible working arrangements agreed between employees and their manager or HR department (De Menezes & Kelliher, 2011). This means that the company has trained its employees to "*work without others*" (Linhart, 2009, 2024). To some extent, the Covid pandemic accentuated this trend, normalising the efficient and agile 'new model worker' and thus establishing it as a desirable social norm. It has now become common practice for individuals to view their relationship with work in terms of family norms and to expect the organisation of work to adapt to their personal organisation (Laurent et al., 2022). These flexible arrangements, especially remote working, are an integral part of our lifestyles, which means that they are partly exempt from organisational regulation (Taskin, 2024).

The business case for flexible working arrangements opens an unexplored moral case, one which questions what an organisation is (basically, a community of workers vs. a platform connecting individuals) and reflects on the anthropology (how people are considered)—the two concepts being inextricably linked.

Theoretically, questioning the moral case for flexible working arrangements means questioning the social order to which these arrangements contribute, thereby looking first at the community (e.g., the organization or the society) rather than the individual worker, in a dynamic in which both are shaped. The business case for flexible working arrangements raises the fundamental question of the ability of organisations and individuals to work together, to form a community and an organisation. By adopting a conventionalist perspective (Gomez, 1997, 2011; Gomez & Jones, 2000), we show that the business case for flexible working produces a tension, within organisations, between the rules of the game in force in our late modernity (Rosa, 2010) and the desirable functioning of the organisation; between the ideal of individual freedom of choice and the need to form a community; between flexible working arrangements as a way of life and as an organisational practice.

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Critically, the ability to form a community and develop solidarity at work is part of the moral case for flexible working arrangements, because it calls into question the conception of modernity at work – and the production of conventional practices and discourse in relation to it, as well as the anthropology behind it (Aktouf, 1992).

In the first part of this chapter, we review the logic behind the development of flexibility. We then present the elements of the moral case for the flexible working arrangements – i.e., the absence of anthropology and individualisation and psychologization within an ideal of Modernity. Next, we consider the notion of *effort convention*, introduced by Gomez (1996), to comprehend the moral case for remote working and the ideal produced by the implementation of flexible arrangements. Finally, we discuss the dissonance between two conventional ways of looking at organisations and the action of organising. We thereby conclude by identifying the conditions for a communitarianisation of work as a way to fortify the moral case for the flexible working arrangements.

<a> FROM FLEXIBLE EMPLOYMENT AND WORK TO THE FLEXIBLE SOCIETY, THE ORIGINS OF THE MORAL CASE FOR FLEXIBLE WORKING ARRANGEMENTS

The logic of flexibility is the successor to the bureaucratic and planning logics of the 1900s to 1970s, during which the supply (of products, services and organisational rules) guided production (Marglin, 1976). The crises of economy (i.e., exhaustion of productivity gains and reduction in household consumption), organisation (i.e., inflation of bureaucratic rules and hierarchical levels) and labour (i.e., redundancies and *industrial* action) that characterised the early 1970s signalled the end of thirty glorious years and the development of so-called quantitative flexibility.

While the concept of flexibility refers to the capacity of organisations to adapt under the dual constraints of uncertainty and urgency (Atkinson, 1984), it is also often used to “*describe new*

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modes of organisation, which differ from the Fordist model of economic regulation and the Taylorian model of work organisation" (Vendramin & Valenduc, 2002, p. 30). The notion of flexibility is also used to mark a break with what appears rigid and planned (e.g., hierarchy, rules, time clocks, etc.).

From then on, the logic of bureaucracy was challenged by the emerging logic of flexibility - primarily quantitative - imposed by the economic crises. This logic takes the form of contractual practices of flexibility affecting employment status; financial flexibility practices modifying working hours and forms of remuneration; productive flexibility practices modifying the scope of activities and calling on external service providers; and, finally, functional flexibility practices affecting the organisation of work within the company (Goussdwaard & de Nanteuil, 2000). Until the early 2000s, the underlying rationale was to adapt to the economic context and seek sustainable economic performance. It was about adapting to the market to allow the company to survive and grow. In this view, workers are seen as resources to be mobilised as efficiently as possible (Snell & Morris, 2022). This is the first element of the moral case for flexible working arrangements. A second element is the creation of a personified ideal of the flexible arrangement. We can in fact see that this structural flexibility is becoming individual flexibility – a skill, and a characterisation of workers' behaviour. So, in a volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous world – to use an adage popular with management professionals – it is no longer just companies that need to organise themselves flexibly, but also individuals who need to become as agile as production methods (Rubery et al., 2016; Taskin & Schots, 2005).

<a>THE ABSENCE OF ANTHROPOLOGY

The rhetoric of flexibility is that of optimising the use of resources in the light of fluctuating constraints. In terms of employment, this perspective has produced several models, including

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one that distinguishes between core workers (with permanent full-time contracts) and peripheral workers (with insecure contracts). This model was developed by Atkinson (1984) and translates the ideal of adaptability into flexible working arrangements relating to employment status. Adapting to the volume of activity is done at the expense of workers on the periphery, who are seen as an adjustment variable. From an economic and operational point of view, there is nothing shocking here: the theories of agency and resources justify a rhetoric of performance. However, beyond the rhetoric lies a semantics that reflects a perspective first presented as amoral (people are considered as resources of a productive system, beyond any morality), then immoral (reducing people to the status of resources, tools or variables is not acceptable, from a moral point of view) (see e.g., Holweg, 2007).

Human Resources Management (HRM) is a discipline that has been built around this amorality, focusing its models and practices on optimising the use of (human) resources, and therefore avoiding any moral considerations. As a support function, HRM defines policies and practices that enable the effective management of (human) resources around a central mission of providing - in terms of quality and quantity - the human resources needed to achieve the company's strategy (Caers, 2021). Flexible working arrangements are born in HR departments to serve this operational mission. Karen Legge (1995, 2005) dared to question the moral case for HRM and its practices, denouncing in particular the hegemony of explanatory models borrowed from organisational behaviour and reinforcing the deception of a discipline that considers people as resources to be measured (e.g., satisfaction rate, level of well-being, personality, etc.) without any moral considerations.

Explicitly exploring the morality of Human Resource Management and seeking to know how its underlying anthropology views the human being, Taskin and Ndayambaje (2018) conducted a phenomenological analysis of the nine most widely distributed HRM textbooks in English- and French-language business schools. In philosophy, there are a dozen different

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conceptions of the human being (several examples include the relational, existentialist, substantialist and political conceptions). This work shows that a single conception of the human being is conveyed by these various works: that of " *the resource that must be exploited to the full in order to contribute to the company's economic performance* " (, p. 293). HRM is therefore not neutral, as it conveys a particular conception of the human being (i.e., that of a resource), thereby justifying the criticisms levelled above. The authors make two other observations specific to the discipline and the works analysed. Firstly, one human being is not equal to another human being: the exercise of managerial authority places the employee in a position of submission or subjection in relation to the manager, which also reflects an instrumental conception of the 'man at work'. Secondly, the content (i.e., theories and models) of these various manuals is similar, indicating a standardisation of knowledge and a lack of diversity in the way HRM is conceived – except through its traditional functions such as recruitment, selection, assessment, training and development, remuneration, and flexibility, etc.

Implemented as part of traditional HRM policies, flexible working arrangements are *a priori* part of a resource allocation perspective. Empowering an anthropology – i.e., a way of considering the human person without reducing him or her to the status of a resource – would therefore make it possible to move away from the business case (individual flexibility vs. individual performance) and enrich the flexible working arrangements with a humanist and solidarity-based approach (Melé, 2016; Taskin, 2022).

<a> INDIVIDUALISATION AND PSYCHOLOGISATION

The second element of the moral case for the flexible working arrangements lies in the personification of flexibility. The injunction to be flexible and the emphasis on the individual and their attitudes help to shape an ideal of the flexible worker, which calls into question the

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morality of such arrangements. This moral questioning is also about individualisation and psychologization.

The individualisation of company management is a fundamental trend that has been gradually taking hold since the 1980s (see Taskin and Devos, 2005). Individualisation is characterised first by *"the fact that each person's situation (their job, pay, career, etc.) is a function of individual elements, elements attached to the person (talent, performance, merit, motivation, competence, even luck...) (...) and by the fact that each person is largely responsible for his or her present or future situation"* (Galambaud, 2001, p.276, our translation). The implementation of empowerment practices has justified the development of individualised human resource management - i.e., management centred on individual performance, objectives, skills, rewards, etc. These management practices have been accompanied and embodied by specific terminology such as 'personal happiness', 'satisfaction', 'well-being', 'motivation' or 'involvement' – words which, according to Hofstede (1980), Maugeri (2013) and Sievers (1990), refer to a North American liberal conception of society. Competition between individuals is organised by management systems which set individual performance standards and assess the results achieved. This system, sometimes associated with the capitalist system (De Gaulejac, 2015), is described as violent, as it generates suffering and occupational illness (Dujarier, 2015).

Faced with these facts, management encourages workers - who are solely responsible for their own performance and exhaustion - to take care of themselves, get to know themselves and develop personally in order to feel better (Linhart, 2024). This phenomenon, known as "psychologisation," refers to *"individualisation, against a backdrop of the ideal of personal accomplishment, the product of a combination of empowerment and insecurity"* (Lhuillier, 2021, p. 59), which considers organisational ills as the result of individual difficulties (such as

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burn-out, exhaustion, malaise, disengagement, or demotivation) for which individuals alone are responsible. Ehrenberg (2005) calls this the "totemisation of the self.

The field of organisational behaviour and organisational psychology supports this functionalist reading of flexible working arrangements. The work-psychologists place the focus on individual needs (such as competence, social relations, autonomy, etc.), while management practices are the instruments to meet these needs. This view in effect produces concepts and instruments that fail to consider the moral issues they raise. For example, the concept of the psychological contract, which has been proposed to characterise the reciprocal expectations between an employee and employer, remains of great interest to management researchers and consultants. This may come as a surprise due to its numerous limitations. For example, it does not enable an analysis of work situations (such as workload, ways of organising work, etc.); it conceals the direct issues at stake (e.g., participation, dissatisfaction, etc.); it becomes an end in itself and is a contemporary example of the psychologization denounced by Lhuilier (2021); and finally, it avoids a more socio-political approach to the employment relationship by reducing the employment contract to an arrangement between two parties, assumed to be equal, thus concealing any existing power imbalance. .

Initially, this dual movement towards individualisation and psychologization served the business case for flexible working arrangements and enabled management to increase company performance through individualised practices and psychological support to overcome the individual weaknesses of workers, first through the consequences of these management methods (invisibility and isolation), and second by the employees who reappropriate the managerial rhetoric employed.

Invisibilisation

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This individualised management of people has resulted in two forms of invisibility: first, of work and of the workers themselves (Gomez, 2019; Supiot, 2021); and second, of people and bodies. , Among other effects, this has produced a wave of isolation never before seen in Western countries (Hertz, 2021).

The first form of invisibilisation is largely attributable to the "financialization of management" described by Pierre-Yves Gomez (2019). In the name of professional company management and following the process of financialization of the economy that led to the financial crisis of 2007-2008, management is multiplying the number of indicators to assess company performance. Strategic objectives are translated into operational objectives, which are then broken down by business units down to individual employee level (see e.g., de Menezes & Escrig, 2019). *Key Performance Indicators* punctuate the life of a company, from half-year to half-year, from year to year. A cold, disembodied performance management system provides reporting that takes up more than 30% of managers' working time and contributes to making the real work of employees and the workers themselves invisible. The power of numbers (Salais et al., 2022) is such that the systems are self-sustaining and employees end up directing their efforts to feeding this "spreadsheet company," sometimes at the cost of falsifying data whose meaning they do not perceive. The question of meaning reveals a moral consideration that escapes the functionalist logic of the business case as outlined to this point.

** Instrumentalisation**

Employees are not fooled by a system that crushes them or whose meaning they do not understand. Numerous studies of flexible working arrangements have highlighted the acts of resistance – through objects, space, and disengagement – by employees who have found themselves invisibilised (Hirst, 2011; Ajzen & Taskin, 2021; Sewell & Taskin, 2015). Indeed,

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the experience of flexible arrangements leads employees to adopt certain behaviours that are justified on moral grounds. Taskin et al. (2023) show that the implementation of new ways of working is seen as a desire to remove people from the workplace. Practising what the authors call "resistance through objects," employees are demanding the right to exist physically in the company as individuals, but also the right to be considered and taken into account in the organisation's project. Instrumentalization here takes the form of the socio-material avatars provided by these flexible arrangements, but it can also take a completely different form. A growing body of research shows that employees are instrumentalising their relationship with work, in response to what they see as the instrumentalization of their work. The post-Covid period has highlighted the demand to formalise work expectations (the deliverable) and working conditions, particularly in terms of remote and hybrid working, as part of a negotiation process.

Beyond the logic of the business case, we must determine the subject of the resistance. In the end, it does not concern the number of days of remote working or the practical arrangements available for it, for example. Rather, it's about a lack of consideration that employees perceive in the implementation of these arrangements. It also targets the modern concept of the ideal worker fluid, nomadic, responsive and connected. For example, in their 2017 study of the new ways of working performed as in a Belgian service organisation, Donis and Taskin observed breadcrumbs, jackets, postcards, and stacks of files left on workspaces in order to reappropriate the now impersonal workspace, reflecting resistance to the ideal of the "new model worker" conveyed by the new management. The employees interviewed expressed a strong moral objection to this way of managing the company and organising work.

In other words, the introduction of flexible practices conveys a new ideal, known as the 'new model worker' or 'ideal worker,' according to which a flexible worker is expected to be available, responsive, committed, etc. (Hancock & Spicer, 2010; Ajzen et al., 2024). We are

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well past the neo-managerial imaginary described by Boltanski and Thévenot (1991) and updated by Jégou (2023), since it is not an imaginary concept shaped and promoted by management but has become an imposed social norm expected from an employee.

<a> THE AGREEMENT FOR ACCESS TO THE MORAL CASE

Normal expectations from a company's "good management" have, therefore, become an individualised system of managing performance, skills, remuneration, etc. by means of "objective" indicators. This in turn has implicitly normalised the expectation that employees take individual responsibility for their employability and their professional and personal development. The 'new model worker' embodies this system of desirable norms from the company's point of view.

The question of how to regulate human activities lies at the heart of the conventionalist approach - for which it is impossible to separate, either conceptually or practically, the individual from the system of rules in which he or she evolves. Convention theory emerged in the late 1960s, initially by economists studying situations characterised by high uncertainty and risk (Lewis, 1969; Favereau, 1989; Orléan, 1989). New situations and those characterised by extreme uncertainty are unique in that they do not allow actors to assign a probability to the consequences of their actions. This perspective is now being taken up by a growing number of social science researchers (Boltanski & Thévenot, 1991; Gomez, 1996; Wilkinson, 1997; Beckert, 2002; O'Reilly, Tiziana & Roche, 2014; Gkeredakis, 2014).

The central assumption of CT is that agreement between individuals, even when limited to the contract of a market exchange, is not possible without a prior common framework (also called a 'common world' in reference to the work of Boltanski and Thévenot, 1991), which requires a constitutive convention. Extending the purely economic framework of these initial developments, the convention can be defined as a system of reciprocal beliefs concerning

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skills and behaviour, which is taken for granted and provides the players with a common reference, thus producing an externalised collective representation that forms the basis of individual expectations (Orléan, 1989; Taskin & Gomez, 2015).

For CT, agreements or disagreements between economic actors cannot be reduced to the hypothesis of bounded rationality or their capacity for interpretation, as postulated by the *contractualist approach* (Favereau, 1989, 1996). CT considers that there is a radical uncertainty prior to any decision and any standard, regarding its validity (Keynes, 1936; Orléan 1989). Without a previously shared belief by the actors in the common foundations for interpretation, there is no common implicit grammar (Rowan, 1982) and therefore can be no norms. Prior to the competition on the rules, there is a competition on the meaning of the rules. In the case of flexible working arrangements, this may involve anthropology (homo economicus/resource vs. the human and reflexive person) and the moral foundations of action (individual performance and satisfaction vs. community).

Gomez (1996, 2011) argues that conventions arise systematically as a result of the incompleteness of individual rationality, which cannot be exercised without relying on an implicit collective belief prior to any individual interpretation. Broad categories of conventions can then be identified, such as those relating to the ability to evaluate objects or the level of effort at work (Gomez, 1994), but the diversity of conventions is as great as that of situations of uncertainty involving players. That then gives rise to a need to operationalise the 'convention' by synthesising a set of discourses (statement) and inscriptions in practices (material device), which link together and weave a convincing frame of reference to make individuals' choices reasonable (Gomez & Jones, 2000). For example, in the study of remote working in public administrations, the accountability statement was based on open workspaces, the abolition of the time clock, and other factors (Taskin, 2012).

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Conventional theory has taken a particular interest in labour analysis, with Gomez (1996) using the notion of effort convention as the implicit grammar of labour relations in a given management situation. A great deal of work has been done in management literature (and practice) on the dissonance that arises from a misinterpretation of the expectations of players who refer to different working conventions. In the issue opened up by remote working, CT suggests that the success or failure of such practices does not depend solely on the rules that are discussed and agreed to. It presupposes implicit beliefs about "a job well done," which may or may not be disrupted by the distancing of workers. If we ignore this hidden dimension, we run the risk, as in the processes revealed by psychoanalysis, of witnessing the return of the repressed (Taskin & Gomez, 2015).

What reveals a convention is a situation of blockage, often linked to its unfamiliarity and the fact that a process of rationalisation is underway, aimed at using conventionalist benchmarks (i.e., formal rules, tacit practices, discourse, and observations) to find out what behaviour is expected in such a situation. Taskin and Gomez (2015) explained the failure of remote working in a public administration setting by the dissonance created between a flexible work practice and the norms of visibility and presence that make up the expected normal. They showed that remote working could be set up if, in a teleworking situation, conventional reference points (visibility and presence) could be rebuilt, particularly through hyper connectivity. In the case of this organisation, it was possible to introduce remote working because it did not break with the existing rules of the game.

There are two reasons for drawing on convention theory. First, as an organisational theory, it enables us to understand normative (including moral) blockages and keeps (organisational) work as the level of analysis. Second, it postulates the circularity of norm production and gives organisational players the ability to act on conventional norms - what Gomez & Jones (2000) call the dynamics of conventions. In other words, Modernity does not impose itself on

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us; we shape it. The flexible working arrangements are therefore part of a certain conception of Modernity that promotes individualism, but in return they shape that Modernity. In this sense, it is therefore possible to influence the conventional benchmarks against which we infer the morality (or immorality) of flexible working arrangements.

<a> THE MORAL CASE FOR FLEXIBLE WORKING ARRANGEMENTS: TOWARDS A NEW ANTHROPOLOGICALLY GROUNDED MODERNITY?

It is difficult to think about the morality of flexible working arrangements because we take them for granted. However, studies of work and organisations cannot afford to do without a moral reflection on our Time (Perezts, 2021). This is one of the contributions of critical management studies, which draw on philosophy in particular to offer frameworks for reflection that enable morality and ethics to be rehabilitated, including in the study of new forms of work organisation. This is a perilous undertaking. To take up individualisation in the (critical) study of flexible working arrangements is tantamount to expecting a fish to be aware of the water in which it is moving, so much so does one seem to go hand in hand with the other.

Why is this not self-evident? Because these flexible arrangements are part of a taken-for-granted vision of modernity, made of shared offices, workspaces structured by activity, remote working, digital nomadism, empowerment and self-management. At the heart of this vision lies individualism, since Modernity was born with the advent of the individual. For example, human rights are intrinsically individualistic and assumes all men are born equal in rights. The philosopher Mark Hunyadi (2023) proposes that the advent of the individual will as a faculty of choice is a sign of contemporary individualism. In Aristotelian morality, ethics and politics were matters for the community and there was no reference to individual freedom. Moral behaviour was considered to be behaviour that conformed to the dictates of reason. In

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contemporary convention, the supreme ideal is the individual will, rather than reason, which has become instrumental – i.e., it serves the goals set by the will. The modern faculty par excellence is the will to choice and freedom, autonomy being the highest value in this system of norms (Hunyadi, 2023). This state of affairs is the fruit of Western history, which has constitutionalised individual rights (guaranteed by law) and valued individual well-being, comfort and convenience. The individual is a libidinal being who seeks to satisfy his needs (Toqueville). Hunyadi (2023) adds that the second age of the individual is one in which technology replaces the human, and trust replaces security.

The moral question of our time then becomes how do we create social order with individuals, in a context where social relationships are mediated and moderated by technology? The development of flexible working arrangements is fully in line with this dynamic and feeds this questioning. Contracts appear to be the *conventional* answer to this question: faced with calculating individuals seeking to maximise their personal well-being, and therefore capable of adopting opportunistic behaviour, the contract has become the only means of creating a collective. The flexible working arrangements business case teaches us that the number days of remote working is defined in an agreement, performance targets are contractually agreed, periods of availability can be defined, and work tools act as monitoring tools, among other lessons.

Using conventional theory to shed light on the moral case for the flexible working arrangements has the advantage of implying extreme uncertainty prior to any decision and questioning the validity of any standard, on the grounds that none can exist without a belief previously shared by the players on common bases for interpretation. This has two direct implications. First, before any decision is taken on flexible working arrangements, there must be agreement on whether they are right for the company and the business. We have shown that, in the majority of cases, there is agreement on the merits of flexible working

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arrangements from an instrumental or functionalist point of view (more individual flexibility for more organisational flexibility). This scenario sidesteps all moral considerations. Yet, research into flexible working arrangements shows the extent to which, under certain conditions, they atomise work collectives, dehumanise workers, and make work and workers invisible. A practice of flexibility therefore calls into question the moral foundations of work and company management, and a purely functionalist reading of management – including flexible working arrangements – seems foolish (Alvesson & Spicer, 2012). This may justify a review of the previous tacit agreement on the standards prefiguring the agreement on the implementation of these flexible working arrangements.

This conventionalist interpretation helps us to understand the development of alternative methods of managing work and organisations (t.q. *Common-good HRM* or *Humane Management*) as the affirmation of alternative rules aimed at making the working community the norm of a new Modernity – competing with the norm associated with classical Modernity, that of the *individualist*.

<a> CONCLUSION: FLEXIBLE WORKING ARRANGEMENTS AS A MEANS OF RE-ENGINEERING THE COMPANY

Unwittingly, the development of flexible working arrangements has created a 'new model worker' whose image and behaviour embody an individualistic ideal of flexible working. The flexible working arrangements business case has created a largely implicit and unquestioned moral case. However, the circularity of norms (meaning the context influences actions, which in turn influence the context) is at the heart of approaches as diverse as neo-institutionalism (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983), structuration (Giddens, 1984) and theories of convention (Lewis, 1969; Boltanski & Thévenot, 1991; Gomez & Jones, 2000).

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In this chapter, we have described the flexible working arrangements moral case in two ways.

First, we have shown that the hegemony of the business case obscures an awareness of how people at work are considered in these practices and models - i.e., as a resource or an adjustment variable. Second, we show that, even from a functionalist point of view, flexible working arrangements can produce isolation, invisibilisation, ill-being (exhaustion) or dehumanisation, calling into question the morality of flexibilising work. In order to grasp this moral case, the convention - seen as a system of reciprocal beliefs about skills and behaviours that are taken for granted and which provide the players with a common reference point - has made it possible to access the ideal or the norm on the basis of which individuals' behaviour conforms (what is normal to expect). This ideal is that of Modernity, of emphasising individualism and psychologization, to use the terms of Hunyadi (2023) and Lhuillier (2021) respectively. The flexible working arrangements business case allowed employees to achieve the stereotype of a 'new model worker' who is available and committed, but they are now rationalising this expectation of organisational flexibility in terms of what it is becoming the normal expectation in an individualistic modern world: a demand for personal comfort and a balance between private and professional life. Pushed to its extreme, the individualistic ideal atomises collectives beyond any organisational desire, but out of a libidinal and individualistic desire.

The main contribution of the convention perspective lies in its consideration of these belief systems as the social production of collective representations shaped by people's ordinary behaviours. Faced with the fragmentation of collectives, the challenges of working together, and the lack of meaning found in an individualised world of work, the moral responsibility of the company becomes to assert a community standard, consecrating the transition from a 'new model worker' to a 'new model of organising,' so to speak. This paves the way for a stimulating research agenda.

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Flexible working arrangements are diverse and reflect many different realities (Kelliher & de Menezes, 2019). One common factor is that they contribute to shape an ideal in which individuals are connected to work, without sharing what is the very essence of a company: social ties, a shared history, and an attachment to a broader community. As the company is a major political player in our societies, these transformations - including their capacity to shape not only expected individual behaviour but also social relations in the broadest sense - deserve the attention of the scientific community. New research themes are thus being added to our agenda, based on the study of transformations in work, organisations and management, starting with that of work communities, rehumanization and re-collectivisation. These are themes that call for multi-disciplinary approaches combining management, sociology, history and economics in the logic of organization studies and critical management studies. Finally, the picture described in this chapter is not unidirectional: the company is not inevitably heading towards the break-up of its collective. There is an urgent need for the scientific community to study the resistance which is being organised and which is leading employees, for example, to claim their right to re-appropriate the company's collective project.

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