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Research Article

How Flexible Work Arrangements Improve Employee Subjective Well-Being: Evidence from Chinese Programmers

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: Work-life imbalance has emerged as a critical challenge in knowledge-intensive industries, necessitating systemic interventions. Global organizations increasingly adopt flexible work arrangements (FWAs) to enhance employee satisfaction and performance. However, flexible work arrangements may be a double-edged sword; their impact on well-being requires further exploration, particularly in technology-driven professions.

Objectives: This study examines FWAs' impact on Chinese programmers' subjective well-being (SWB), aiming to:1) quantify their subjective well-being levels under flexible work arrangements policies; 2) assess the association between flexible work arrangements and subjective well-being; 3) compare differential impacts of flexible work arrangements types (e.g., flextime, telecommuting) across subjective well-being (emotional, psychological, social).

Methods: We conducted a random online survey of programmers in five core cities in China known for rapid technological innovation and development in the Internet and high-tech industries field. 625 valid survey data were used for multiple linear regression analysis to explore the relationship between flexible work arrangements and subjective well-being.

Results: The findings indicate that Chinese programmers exhibit a high level of subjective well-being (mean = 3.8). Among its dimensions, emotional well-being has the highest perceived level (mean = 3.85) compared to the social and psychological dimensions. Flexible work arrangements significantly enhance subjective well-being through compressed work hours (β = 0.086), telecommuting (β = 0.089), part-time (β = 0.252), and job-sharing (β = 0.22), whereas the effect of flexitime is not statistically significant. Overall, flexible work arrangements contribute positively to the subjective well-being of Chinese programmers, with part-time exerting the most substantial influence, followed by telecommuting.

Conclusions: Flexible work arrangements with flexible tasks and flexible locations are more conducive to the improvement of employees' subjective well-being than simple flexible time arrangements. Therefore, this study recommends that authorities and organizations prioritize employees' demands for task-oriented flexibility and location autonomy when optimizing workplaces, while preserving access to traditional office-based models. Such a balanced approach mitigates risks associated with excessive flexibility—including mental health deterioration, social isolation, and weakened organizational belongingness—by allowing self-determined transitions between structured collaboration and independent work modes.

Keywords: Flexible Work Arrangements, Subjective Well-Being, Workplace Optimization, Family-Friendly Policies, High-Tech Workforce

INTRODUCTION

Flexible work arrangements (FWAs) aim to increase freedom and flexibility in employees' professional lives by allowing them to adjust their working hours, locations, and methods based on personal needs (Gottlieb et al., 1998). Historical experience has shown that paying attention to employees' needs for work flexibility, promoting their work-life balance, and achieving two-way sustainable development of organizations and employees have become the proper

meaning of the contemporary workplace. As advocated by Merone and Whitehead (2021), organizations should fully support remote work for employees and ensure flexibility in terms of work location and working hours. In the post-pandemic era, enterprises in various countries are facing the need for more mixed work patterns and flexibility of employees. Due to the differences among enterprises, they should implement reasonable programs to promote work flexibility according to their actual conditions (Vyas, 2022). In the past year, various countries have introduced innovative policies in response to the many challenges of the modern workplace. Australia passed the “Right to Disconnect” policy, which grants employees the legal right to disconnect from work outside of working hours, this means that unless there is a valid reason, employees are not required to reply to work emails or answer work calls after work (Fair Work Ombudsman, 2024). This measure not only better protects employees' time but also promotes their work-life balance. According to Lau, Ancheta, & Asada (2024, December 6), the Tokyo Metropolitan Government has decided to implement a four-day workweek for its employees to support working mothers and encourage more families to have children. Their news report indicates that the government also allows parents with children in the lower grades of elementary school to reduce a portion of their salary in exchange for the opportunity to leave work early and better take care of their children. Through these measures, the Tokyo Metropolitan Government is striving to create a more flexible and healthy working environment for employees. FWAs can bring happiness to individuals (Medina-Garrido et al., 2017), they are also beneficial to promoting employee health and attendance (Shifrin & Michel, 2021). Moreover, FWAs have been proven to have other positive impacts on employees' well-being, including but not limited to increasing pleasure, alleviating stress, and promoting personal growth (Alsulami et al.,2023; Kortsch et al.,2022; Anderson & Kelliher,2020). How exactly do flexible work arrangements affect employees' well-being? This question is worth exploring.

In recent years, the impact of flexible work arrangements on employees' subjective well-being has become an important topic in the field of organizational behavior. Previous studies have provided a relatively rich theoretical and empirical foundation, but there are still the following shortcomings: on the one hand, although research on this topic surged during the COVID-19 pandemic, studies on the impact of flexible work arrangements on employee well-being in the context of China's unique work culture are relatively limited; on the other hand, there is insufficient attention to the subjective well-being of typical occupational groups involved in flexible work arrangements. Exploring the impact of flexible work arrangements on employees' subjective well-being from multiple perspectives (e.g., time, space, and workload) helps provide practical evidence for policymakers and companies to optimize the working environment and enhance employee welfare.

In China, especially in the rapidly growing tech industry, programmers often face high work pressure and rigid working hours compared to some other occupational groups. Intensive work schedules can have a severe impact on the health and lives of IT workers, leading to issues such as fatigue, depressive moods, stress, role conflicts, and certain physical illnesses related to overwork (Yu & Leka, 2022; Takahashi et al., 2024; Gandhi & Kishore, 2020; Mehta & Parijat, 2012; Zheng et al., 2023). In response to the challenges faced by employees, some employers have started offering flexible working hours and remote working options, aiming to promote employees' physical and mental well-being and work-life balance. However, the effectiveness of these family-friendly or life-friendly policies remains uncertain. Specifically, it remains an open question whether flexible work arrangements can alleviate the professional challenges faced by programmers. Its potential to positively influence programmers' well-being is still under investigation. These issues not only concern the individual welfare of programmers but also have implications for the long-term development and sustainability of companies. To investigate the effect of flexible work arrangements on subjective well-being among Chinese programmers, the article addresses the following research objective: 1) To evaluate the level of subjective well-being among programmers under flexible work arrangement policies. 2) To examine whether there is a relationship between flexible work arrangements and programmers' subjective well-being. 3) To estimate the impact of various types of flexible work arrangements on programmers' subjective well-being. The research utilizes quantitative research methods to systematically analyze survey data from Chinese programmers. The findings aim to provide practical recommendations for policymakers and companies at both theoretical and practical levels, promoting the creation of more people-centered and sustainable work environments, thereby contributing to the healthy development of China's tech industry.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Flexible work arrangements (FWAs), as a human resource management strategy, have become a hot topic in today's business community. In many existing researches, FWAs are regarded as a potential resource to help employees

balance work and life (Brega et al., 2023), which involves availability and accessibility. Availability refers to a policy that guarantees employees the right to flexible working, including flexible schedules, flexible working hours, or locations (Dulk & Yerkes, 2016). Accessibility refers to employees' beliefs about the availability of flexible work arrangements that they perceive in their work environment (Chung, 2017). Flexible work arrangements involve five typical types: flexitime, compressed hours, telecommuting, part-time, and job-sharing (Gottlieb et al., 1998, p. 12). Under a flexitime arrangement, employees can adjust their start or finish times but are still required to maintain the traditional total number of working hours (Gottlieb et al., 1998). In this case, the time boundaries remain impenetrable, thus minimizing the interference of other roles. However, time boundary flexibility is increasing, which makes it more convenient for employees to transition or switch between different roles (Rau & Hyland, 2002). This kind of arrangement has been widely adopted to enable employees to juggle the obligations of other roles amid fierce career competition, promoting work-life balance (Ahmad et al., 2013), thereby reducing stress and improving employee well-being (Shagvaliyeva & Yazdanifard, 2014). “Compressed hours refers to work fewer (or no) hours some days, and longer hours on other days (Gottlieb et al., 1998)”, a compressed workweek is a common form of this arrangement, which has a positive impact on emotion regulation, physical health and reducing absenteeism (Bambra et al., 2008; Deery et al.,2017; Paje et al., 2020). Telecommuting is defined as “a work practice that involves members of an organization substituting a portion of their typical work hours to work away from a central workplace, using technology to interact with others as needed to conduct work tasks” (Lietor et al., 2021). While this arrangement demonstrates inherent integration of spatiotemporal flexibility, empirical evidence suggests variations in organizational implementation. Notably, Rau and Hyland's (2002) study documented employers frequently instituting nuanced operational parameters, including geographically bounded telecommuting mandates or phased workplace reintegration schedules. These conditional provisions often reflect attempts to balance workforce autonomy with operational continuity. Telecommuting not only benefits employees' physical and mental health but also enables them to achieve a good work-life balance (Ferrara et al., 2022). According to Gottlieb et al., (1998), the most notable characteristic of part-time work is that employees' working hours are reduced from the traditional total hours based on the employer's needs, typically not exceeding 30 hours per week. Compared to full-time employment, although this arrangement may lead to a reduction in employees' income, studies have shown that it promotes work-life balance (Beham et al., 2019) and enhances job satisfaction (Booth & van Ours, 2013). Job sharing is not equivalent to a part-time job in the traditional sense. Compared with a full-time job, job sharing provides employees with a higher sense of security, compensation, and responsibility. Members of job sharing can balance their work and life while maintaining their knowledge and ability to work through participation in the workforce (Rogers & Finks, 2009). Similarly, Ngambi (2000) confirmed the potential of such an arrangement in enhancing employees' quality of work life.

Subjective well-being is “individuals' perceptions and evaluations of their own lives in terms of their affective states and their psychological and social functioning.” (Keyes, 2002). The description of subjective well-being in Keyes (2002) emphasizes the social interaction of individuals, it mentions that subjective well-being consists of emotional well-being, psychological well-being, and social well-being. Emotional well-being is about how an individual evaluates some of his or her experiences in life (Diener et al., 1999). It is a set of symptoms of the degree to which an individual responds to positive feelings, and in academia, people measure an individual's level of emotional well-being using structured scales that measure the presence of positive emotions (e.g., feeling energetic), the absence of negative emotions (e.g., not feeling sad), and a general evaluation of life (Keyes, 2002). The essence of emotional well-being is an individual's positive view of life and happy emotional experience (Keyes et al., 2010), and the accumulated happiness in life is conducive to countering possible negative emotions (Al-Ghazali & Afsar, 2022). Psychological well-being means that individuals have a high love and recognition of themselves, feel warm and trust when interacting with people, can recognize their growth and progress, have a clear goal for life, be able to actively create a good environment to better achieve their needs, and make their own decisions on some things (Keyes, 2002). Social well-being reflects the close connection between the individual and society, covering the individual's positive perception and evaluation of their life functioning (Keyes, 2002), as well as high-quality behavior demonstrated in social interactions and active participation in community activities (Shapiro & Keyes, 2008).

According to existing research, flexible work arrangements have mixed effects on employee well-being. Some studies warn people to be extremely vigilant about the potential pitfalls flexible work arrangements may bring (Brooks et al.,2020; Brauner et al., 2020; Schmidt, 2022; Spieler et al., 2017), however, most research tend to support the benefits. A research found that younger employees have a stronger acceptance of new technologies and flexible work

models, they also have a greater advantage in the practical application of new technologies and tools, which makes them more inclined towards flexible work arrangements compared to older employees (Califf et al., 2020). In contrast, people with family obligations are more likely to expect flexibility at work (Arredondo-Trapero et al., 2022), which increases employees' commitment to family affairs (Chung & Booker, 2023). Almer and Kaplan (2002) indicated in a study that employees in a flexible work environment exhibit higher levels of happiness, lower levels of burnout and stress, and greater loyalty to their employer. Similar or even greater positive effects can be observed through various types of arrangements. Commonly observed forms consist of remote work (Baruch & Nicholson,1997; Moen et al., 2011; Anderson et al., 2014; Wardenaar et al.,2010), compressed workweeks (Afshari et al.,2023), part-time employment (Booth &van Ours, 2009; Gash et al., 2012), job sharing (Hayman, 2014; Watton & Stables, 2017), all provide substantial evidence supporting these benefits.

Based on the theoretical framework, we propose the following hypotheses:

H1. Flexitime has a positive association with the subjective well-being of Chinese programmers.

H2. Compressed hours positively influence programmers' subjective well-being.

H3. Telecommuting is significantly correlated with higher levels of subjective well-being.

H4. Part-time demonstrate a beneficial effect on subjective well-being.

H5. Job-sharing practices contribute positively to programmers' subjective well-being.

METHODOLOGY

A. Variables Measurement

Independent variables

The independent variables encompass five elements of flexible work arrangements: flexitime (FLME), compressed hours (COHS), telecommuting (TELE), part-time (PAME), and job-sharing (JOSH). The measurement of flexitime is adapted from the work of Azar et al. (2018) and Albion (2004). Compressed hours is measured based on Stirpe and Zarraga-Oberty (2017) and Albion (2004). For telecommuting, the references included Van Steenbergen et al. (2018) and Albion (2004). The measurement of part-time relies on Albion (2004), whereas job-sharing is adapted from Stirpe and Zarraga-Oberty (2017). Most of the measurement instruments for these variables are either directly adopted or adapted from previous studies, but some of the items are designed by the researcher, and all employ a five-point Likert scale. The Cronbach's alpha coefficient for the flexible work arrangements scale was as high as 0.9, and its five subscales have also been validated with good reliability.

Dependent variable

The dependent variable is subjective well-being, and its assessment drew upon Petrillo et al. (2015) and Keyes (2002), both using a five-point Likert scale. The subjective well-being scale includes items related to emotional well-being (EMWB), psychological well-being (PSWB), and social well-being (SOWB). The overall scale demonstrated good reliability with a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.89. The detailed measurement methods are summarized in the table below.

B. Data Collection

Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, Shenzhen, and Hangzhou are all first-tier cities in China, where the Internet industry and high-tech industries are developing rapidly, the demand for technology developers is high, and the number of programmers is larger. Therefore, from March to April 2024, we conducted an online questionnaire survey for Chinese programmers employed in the above regions. In order to ensure the privacy and security of participants, anonymous answers are implemented. A total of 625 valid responses were collected and used to support subsequent analysis.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A. The Perceived Level of Subjective Well-being

To present the average scores of variables more intuitively, the scores are divided into five intervals, each corresponding to a specific level: $1 \leq S \leq 1.8$ represents "Quite Low," $1.8 < S \leq 2.6$ represents "Low," $2.6 < S \leq 3.4$

represents "Medium," 3.4 < S≤4.2 represents "High," and 4.2 < S≤5 represents "Quite High." According to the scale data, programmers generally exhibit a high level of perceived subjective well-being. The mean score of programmers' subjective well-being is 3.8, with the mean scores of individual dimensions ranging from 3.66 to 3.854, indicating that they exhibit a high level of satisfaction across the emotional, psychological, and social dimensions. A detailed analysis is provided as follows:

1) On average, programmers scored 3.854 in emotional well-being, which is the highest score among all dimensions. This may be due to competitive salaries, chances for career growth, and a work environment full of innovation. Moreover, flexible work arrangements such as remote work and flexible hours enable programmers to better balance their professional and personal lives, reduce stress, and increase personal time. A strong social support network, including positive interactions with colleagues and management, can also enhance positive emotions and buffer the negative impact of work-related stress.

2) The score for the social well-being dimension ranks second (3.774), reflecting their positive experiences in social integration, acceptance, contribution, achievement, and societal recognition. Many programmers feel a strong connection to society and their communities, believing that their work in technology—particularly in areas such as innovation, programming, and software development—helps solve real-world problems, enhances productivity, and improves the quality of life. This sense of social value and belonging enhances their social well-being. In team collaboration, programmers are generally able to establish mutual trust, and many persons hold positive attitudes toward their colleagues. This trust and cooperation contribute to maintaining efficient and harmonious interactions within the team. It may also reflect the tendency of Chinese programmers to be optimistic about the future of society, with a positive outlook on life and confidence in the potential of society providing motivation for their work and personal lives, further contributing to their social well-being. Furthermore, programmers generally perceive societal operations and organizational structures as more efficient and transparent than before, especially in terms of the openness and fairness of information flow and decision-making processes.

3) The average score for psychological well-being is the lowest at 3.66, but it still lies in the "high" category overall. This indicates that programmers have a certain degree of self-awareness and are conscious of their growth and progress. Perhaps they've made substantial progress in their skills, which leads to a sense of fulfillment and confidence. The modern technology industry is increasingly emphasizing teamwork and supportive work environments, which are also important sources of programmers' psychological well-being. The relatively high psychological well-being score of programmers may also indicate that they have clear life goals and can proactively create favorable work environments to meet personal needs.

B. Multiple Linear Regression Analysis of the Relationship between Flexible Work Arrangements and Subjective Well-being

This study employed Pearson correlation coefficients to examine whether there is an association between flexible work arrangements and subjective well-being, as well as to determine the direction (positive or negative) and strength of the relationship. The Pearson correlation coefficient ranges from -1 to 1, where 1 indicates a perfect positive correlation, -1 indicates a perfect negative correlation, and 0 indicates no correlation. Advanced statistical tools were utilized, and the Pearson correlation coefficients for the variables were obtained, as presented in Table 4.1. The result shows that the Pearson correlation coefficients for all variables range between 0.149 and 0.561, indicating significant positive correlations among the variables. The relatively low correlation coefficients between the dimensions of flexible work arrangements provide preliminary evidence suggesting that there is no multicollinearity among the observed variables, such as flexitime and telecommuting.

Table 1: Pearson Correlation Coefficients between the Variables

Variable	FLME	COHS	TELE	PAME	JOSH	EMWB	PSWB	SOWB
FLME	1		.					
COHS	.349**	1						
TELE	.436**	.346**	1					
PAME	.317**	.409**	.456**	1				
JOSH	.385**	.378**	.370**	.335**	1			
EMWB	.191**	.278**	.277**	.340**	.355**	1		

PSWB	.253**	.310**	.362**	.434**	.357**	.561**	1	
SOWB	.194**	.168**	.149**	.212**	.209**	.449**	.377**	1

Note: The correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (two-tailed).

Based on the results of the Pearson correlation analysis, multiple regression analysis was conducted to further explore the potential causal relationship between flexible work arrangements and subjective well-being. In the analysis, this study uses flexitime, compressed hours, telecommuting, part-time, and job-sharing as the independent variables, with subjective well-being as the dependent variable. The results of the regression analysis are presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Multiple Linear Regression Analysis of the Relationship between FWAs and SWB

Independent	**β**	**t**	**P**	**VIF**	**R^2**	**Adjusted R^2**
Intercept	2.015	15.535	0.000		0.254	0.248
Flexitime	0.034	0.832	0.405	1.374		
Compressed Hours	0.086	2.135	0.033	1.359		
Telecommuting	0.089	2.109	0.035	1.487		
Part-time	0.252	6.103	0.000	1.415		
Job-sharing	0.22	5.479	0.000	1.341		

According to the results of multiple linear regression, except for the flexitime, the influence of other dimensions is statistically significant. Part-time had the strongest effect on the subjective well-being of Chinese programmers (β=0.252), followed by job sharing (β=0.22) and telecommuting (β= 0.089). The effect of compressed hours was relatively limited (β=0.086). These results reveal that the impact of flexible work arrangements on the subjective well-being of Chinese programmers exhibits significant variations, reflecting the core occupational characteristics and psychological needs of this professional group. Specifically, part-time emerges as the most effective strategy for enhancing well-being, as it alleviates sustained work pressure, diversifies career development pathways, and enforces cognitive breaks to prevent over-immersion. Job-sharing demonstrates unique psychological benefits by distributing responsibility to reduce individual anxiety, fostering skill confidence through knowledge exchange, and accommodating attention management needs via asynchronous collaboration. In contrast, while telecommuting improves employee's well-being through environmental autonomy, its limited positive effect highlights the counterbalancing impacts of hidden social costs and collaboration uncertainties. Compressed hours show minimal influence due to their inability to address task continuity and psychological "unfinishedness." Flexitime did not show the theoretically expected employee gain effect in this study scenario. This gap between theory and practice may stem from the phenomenon of "hidden overwork" caused by the infiltration of work-life boundaries, which negates the initial advantages of institutional design.

CONCLUSION

This paper examines the relationship between flexible work arrangements and subjective well-being through the analysis of data from 625 programmers in five major cities. The findings reveal that flexible work arrangements generally have a positive impact on programmers' subjective well-being, although the specific effects vary depending on the type of arrangement and individual characteristics. Different types of flexible work arrangements have varying effects on the subjective well-being of Chinese programmers, with part-time and job sharing being the most effective, followed by telecommuting. This suggests that task flexibility and location flexibility are more likely to create high-quality experiences for employees than pure time flexibility strategies (e.g., compressed work weeks and flexible working hours), for example, more time and convenience to deal with personal life, less stress, and work anxiety. It is worth noting that among the dimensions of subjective well-being affected by flexible work arrangements, the positive perception of emotional well-being is the strongest, while the perceptions of social connection and psychological aspects are relatively weak. This indicates that managers need to be wary of the risks that may be brought by excessive flexibility, such as lower team belonging and decreased self-efficacy. Therefore, the optimization

of future workplaces should pay more attention to employees' demands for workload and workspace flexibility, implement a work system centered on task and location flexibility, and at the same time, retain other work arrangements options, such as traditional office models, to avoid the damage that may be caused by excessive flexibility.

Based on the results of the empirical research, we propose the following countermeasures to promote workplace optimization and employee well-being promotion actions in public administration and relevant enterprises:

As policy makers, labor departments should establish clear guidelines for flexible work arrangements to protect employees' basic rights, such as ensuring fair compensation, rest periods, and career development opportunities. These guidelines should ensure that all employees have equitable access to flexible work arrangements. This approach can help prevent the abuse of flexible work arrangements and protect employees from unfair treatment due to changes in their work locations. Furthermore, to encourage more enterprises to implement employee-friendly or family-friendly work policies, governments can promote this process by offering tax incentives or subsidies. This is particularly relevant in high-pressure industries where companies often face fast-paced work environments and employee burnout. Providing financial support can incentivize companies to adopt flexible work arrangements, thereby improving employees' work experiences and overall well-being.

Companies should provide reliable tools and technological support to enable employees to effectively engage in remote work. These tools should include efficient online communication platforms, collaboration software, and document-sharing tools, all of which help the employees complete tasks smoothly and stay connected with their teams even when not working in the office. Additionally, when implementing job-sharing arrangements, it is crucial to ensure that employees can communicate effectively and collaborate seamlessly. It is also necessary for companies to establish clear work arrangements policies. For remote work in particular, clear regulations can help both employees and managers better understand their roles and expectations, avoiding ambiguity in the workplace. For example, policies should specify which employees are eligible for remote work, which tasks are suitable for remote completion, and the criteria for performance evaluation and work schedules. These clear guidelines enhance the effectiveness of remote work arrangements, ensuring smooth operations. It is important to note that each employee's personal and professional needs may vary. Therefore, employers should allow their employees to choose work arrangements that best fit their individual circumstances. Some employees may prefer full-time remote work, while others may opt for flexible working hours or locations. Such personalized arrangements not only increase employee satisfaction but also help organizations attract and retain top talent. To maximize the effectiveness of flexible work arrangements, both managers and employees should receive relevant training. Training may cover topics such as time management, effective collaboration in virtual environments, and how to address potential technological or communication challenges in remote work. Through such training, employees will become more proficient in flexible work, while managers will be better equipped to support their teams and ensure that tasks are completed efficiently.

The current study primarily focuses on the programmer population in five major cities in China. Although this sample is somewhat representative, its limitation lies in being confined to specific geographic and professional groups. To enhance the generalizability of the research findings, future studies should consider expanding the sample to include a more diverse occupational populations and geographic regions. This would not only increase the external validity of the research but also provide a more comprehensive perspective on employee well-being in different contexts. Secondly, future studies should consider adding qualitative research methods. The present study mainly adopts quantitative methods; however, qualitative approaches such as interviews or case studies could offer a deeper understanding of how flexible work arrangements influence employee well-being. Qualitative research can reveal subtle emotions and complex situations that quantitative data may not capture, thereby providing richer explanations for the relationship between flexible work arrangements and employee well-being.

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