Workplace Flexibility across the Lifespan

P. MATTHIJS BAL

University of Bath, United Kingdom

PAUL G.W. JANSEN

VU University Amsterdam, the Netherlands

Correspondence should be addressed to: Matthijs Bal, University of Bath, School of Management, Bath BA2 7AY, United Kingdom. Email: p.m.bal@bath.ac.uk; +44-1225-383143.

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Abstract

As demographic changes impact the workplace, governments, organizations and workers are looking for ways to sustain optimal working lives at higher ages. Workplace flexibility has been introduced as a potential way workers can have more satisfying working lives until their retirement ages. This paper presents a critical review of the literature on workplace flexibility across the lifespan. It discusses how flexibility has been conceptualized across different disciplines, and postulates a definition that captures the joint roles of employer and employee in negotiating workplace flexibility that contributes to both employee and organization benefits. Moreover, it reviews how flexibility has been theorized and investigated in relation to older workers. The paper ends with a future research agenda for advancing understanding of how workplace flexibility may enhance working experiences of older workers, and in particular focuses on the critical investigation of uses of flexibility in relation to older workers.

Flexibility can be regarded as one the key concepts of the contemporary workplace (Bird, 2015). Organizations try to become more flexible and adaptable to ever changing economic circumstances (Volberda, 1996; Way et al., 2015), while employees are expected to be more flexible in how they approach their jobs and careers (Hill et al., 2008a). Moreover, employees are increasingly looking for more flexibility in how they balance their work with their personal lives (Allen, Johnson, Kiburz, & Shockley, 2013; Ferguson, Carlson, & Kacmar, 2015), and in how they develop their careers (Moen & Sweet, 2004). Finally, governments across the world have increasingly responded to these trends by declaring flexibility the keyword for the future workforce and workplace (Johnson, 2011). In all these instances the denotation ‘flexibility’ refers to a different object and consequently has a different meaning.

It is not surprising that the increasing popularity of the allegedly multi-interpretational term flexibility has coincided with rapid demographic changes in the workforce, including the aging of populations across the world (Kooij, 2015; Zacher, 2015). These demographic changes have caused governments, organizations, and employees to take a different position in how work and careers are both conceived and realized when life expectancy will rise to 100 years and above. However, current retirement systems are largely based on people retiring at 65 years (Wang & Shultz, 2010). One of the more immediate consequences of the aging population is that the ratio of working vs. non-working people is declining rapidly, causing more non-working people to be dependent upon a smaller number of people in jobs (Johnson, 2011). As these changes have put greater pressure on the affordability of pensions in many countries worldwide, governments have been engaging in the process of stimulating longer careers and ceasing with financially supporting early retirement. However, whereas the need for people to work beyond retirement has increased, it has yet been proven difficult to effectively address the issue of continuing working and extending retirement (Wang & Shi, 2014). Many older workers still have (private) early retirement plans, low willingness and intentions to continue working, and many older workers who lose their jobs at higher ages experience many difficulties in finding new jobs, and hence have a high probability of remaining unemployed (Johnson, 2011; Klehe, Koen, & De Pater, 2012; Wang & Shi, 2014).

One of the potential avenues for governments, organizations and employees to address these issues is through the concept of flexibility (Putnam, Myers, & Gailliard, 2014; Siegenthaler & Brenner, 2000). It has been argued that flexibility could provide a useful tool for both organizations and employees to enhance motivation, fulfilment and productivity in later life, and to ensure older workers to be able and willing to continue working (Bal, De Jong, Jansen, & Bakker, 2012). Hence, when organizations want to retain and motivate their older workers, HR-

systems have to be adapted to allow more flexibility in how employees develop their careers and how they balance work obligations with personal lives. Governments have already taken steps to adapt laws and regulations in order to enable organizations and workers to more flexibly arrange employment relationships (Platman, 2004a).

Notwithstanding the potential relevance of flexibility for older workers and late-career decisions (Wang & Shultz, 2010), there are a number of issues regarding how flexibility can be used for older workers, and the role it plays across the lifespan. First, as alluded to above, the definition of flexibility is rather vague, which limits its potential use for understanding how it operates with regards to the motivation, well-being and productivity of workers across the lifespan. The term flexibility has been used in many different fields, including organizational psychology (Allen et al., 2013; Ferguson et al., 2015), sociology (Hyman, Scholarios, & Baldry, 2005; Kalleberg, 2003; Vallas, 1999), strategic HRM (Way et al., 2015; Wright & Snell, 1998), strategy (Sanchez, 1995; Volberda, 1996), and the careers literature (Moen & Sweet, 2004). Flexibility has been used differently across these fields, and thus carries different meanings which potentially contradict each other (Putnam et al., 2014). Thus, understanding how flexibility operates across the lifespan requires an understanding of how flexibility is used in these different fields. The aim of this paper, therefore, is to review and advance understanding of workplace flexibility across the lifespan, and in particular how workplace flexibility operates in the motivation, well-being and productivity of older workers. To do so, we will discuss the various meanings and uses of the term flexibility in different literatures, and incorporate these different conceptualizations and perspectives in relation to how workplace flexibility across the lifespan has been investigated. We will first discuss the conceptualizations of workplace flexibility, and discuss both employer and employee perspectives on flexibility. We will postulate a working definition of workplace flexibility that includes both employer and employee perspectives.

Moreover, we review theories and models used to explain how flexibility operates in the workplace, and relate prominent lifespan theories of aging to the role of flexibility at work. Subsequently, we review empirical studies on the role of workplace flexibility for older workers to ascertain the current empirical knowledge pertaining to the role of workplace flexibility for older workers. Finally, we propose a future research agenda based on the review of the studies, and postulate specific recommendations for further investigation and use of workplace flexibility.

Conceptualizations of Workplace Flexibility

Before we explore the conceptualization of workplace flexibility across different literatures, it is needed to understand the meaning of flexibility in its broader sense. A dictionary definition of the term 'flexibility' concerns "the ability and/or willingness to easily modify, change or compromise" (Oxford Dictionary, 2015). These attributes refer to the psychological characteristics of what flexibility entails, while another, more physical, definition of flexibility concerns "the quality of bending easily without breaking" (Oxford Dictionary, 2015). In the current paper, and in line with most prominent definitions of workplace flexibility in the literature (e.g., De Menezes & Kelliher, 2011; Hill et al., 2008a), we will primarily focus on the former aspect of flexibility, and ignore the changes in physical and muscular flexibility that comes with age (see e.g., Seco et al., 2013). However, the latter definition includes an important aspect of flexibility that may be inherent to assumptions organizations may have regarding workplace flexibility (Kelliher & Anderson, 2010; Putnam et al., 2014), which is about the ability and willingness to bend without breaking. This may implicitly refer to employees' abilities and motivation to work more hours, conduct more tasks, and adapt easily when performing multiple roles in the organization (Way et al., 2015).

Translating flexibility to the workplace, and in particular the meaning of flexibility for workers, results in two perspectives on flexibility. On the one hand, flexibility may enable workers to reduce or rebalance workload, whereby actively external control is exercised over one's work. Workers are active shapers of their jobs, and use flexibility to align jobs with their personalities (Kooij, 2015). On the other hand, flexibility may entail the ability of workers to conduct more work, and see their job descriptions expanded, involving more working hours and more effort. Hence, workers have to employ internal control mechanisms, and according to this perspective, workers are passive recipients of work. This distinction aligns with that of Heckhausen, Wrosch, and Schulz (2010), who in their theory of lifespan development, described how people may use either primary control mechanisms (i.e., actively changing their environment) or secondary control mechanisms (i.e., reactively changing oneself) to achieve goal attainment across the lifespan. Flexibility may enable these mechanisms, through either allowing employees to adapt their jobs towards individual preferences (and thus exerting active, primary, externally-oriented control), or via demanding them to be more able to change to circumstances and conduct more work (and thus exerting passive, secondary, internally-oriented control). Here, employees are expected to bend, stretch, and accept changes and increasing work pressure as part of contemporary working lives (Putnam et al., 2014). While until the 1980s flexibility was understood as being able to bend, and return to a stable state, it has been more and more conceptualized as a state of continuous bending and adaptation to changing circumstances, without a stable point to return to (Kociatkiewicz & Kostera, 2014). Hence, flexibility is currently regarded as a permanent state attributed to organization and employee.

The key differentiation of the concept of flexibility in an HRM-perspective in relation to other concepts, such as proactivity, job crafting, and readiness to change, is that flexibility is not only an attribute of people, but can be a characteristic of the job, the workplace or the

organization as well. This has led to a wide range of uses of the term, including organizational flexibility (Sanchez, 1995), flexible work arrangements (Allen et al., 2013), and flexibility HRM (Bal & De Lange, 2015; Chang, Gong, Way, & Jia, 2013). As the term flexibility has been used among different disciplines, the chances increase that the term is stretched towards a meaning that captures many variations, which is a typical case of concept stretching, which impedes construct clarity (Suddaby, 2010). The result is that the denotation flexibility is used loosely across and within fields, such that it may be unclear what flexibility specifically entails. What does it mean to be flexible, and how does one achieve flexibility as a person, or as an organization? Who or what should be flexible? These questions pertain to the idea of flexibility as something that, whether it is a characteristic of people or of systems, can be developed, maintained, or lost. However, there is still little understanding around how this functions in the workplace, and in particular for older workers.

A more fundamental issue arises when we look at how primary control over workplace flexibility may lead to lower secondary control. Employees may enhance their working experiences using flexible work arrangements, but at the same time, this leads to a higher (self-inflicted) workload, and thus to lower internal regulation, as control over one's job and working hours decreases. This argument has been made earlier by Kelliher and Anderson (2010), who showed that employees who were using flexible work practices were more likely to experience work intensification, while a review of Putnam et al. (2014) concluded that when employees had more autonomy resulting from flexible work arrangements, they were also likely to work harder and more hours, and experience less control over their work (see also Hill et al., 2008a). We will discuss this apparent paradox in more detail below.

The origin of the concept of workplace flexibility stems from the idea of technological advancement leading to the need to more rapidly adapt to changing circumstances in the

economic environment (Hinds, 2003; Tomaney, 1990). Given the increasingly rapid advancement of technology in society and the resulting hypercompetitiveness of markets across the world (Sanchez, 1995; Volberda, 1996), organizations are more under pressure to be adaptable and proactive towards these changes. As organizations are competing with each other, it becomes an essential organizational capability (Volberda, 1996) to be able to change organizational activities within short periods of time. Hence, a stream of research within the field of strategy has emerged since the 1990s on how organizations can become more flexible (Yu, Cadeaux, & Luo, 2015). One of the key features of organizational flexibility concerns the role of '*resource flexibility'*, which should contribute to competitive advantage (Sanchez, 1995). This notion of flexibility in resources has been picked up by the strategic HRM literature, which introduced the concept of resource flexibility in (S-)HRM and flexibility HRM-practices (Wright & Snell, 1998). Being closely tied to the strategy literature, flexibility HRM was originally conceptualized as the extent to which HRM practices can be different across units or locations within the same firm in order to allow the organization to become more responsive to changes in the environment (Wright & Snell, 1998). Flexibility in resources entails the idea that employees should be flexible towards how they can contribute to organizational goals, and that includes organizational use of flexible contracts, flexible job descriptions, and flexible organizational structures (Way et al., 2015). Two notions of organizational use of flexibility can be distinguished here; qualitative flexibility refers to having employees with broad behavioral repertoires, contributing to a broader quality of organizational skills, while quantitative flexibility refers to the organizational capability to hire and fire employees easily in order to adapt to the environment. While qualitative flexibility is associated with the skills of employees, quantitative flexibility is related to the amount of employees working for an organization at a particular moment.

Developing at the same time of the research on organizational flexibility, a stream of research appeared on flexible working schedules (Baltes, Briggs, Huff, Wright, & Neuman, 1999; De Menezes & Kelliher, 2011), which reflected the needs of many employees for non-standard working times, and more flexibility in when and where they conducted their work in order to better balance work and life issues. This created a literature on *flexible work arrangements*, which primarily focuses on the role of flexibility for employees in choosing how they work and conduct their jobs. As this literature developed largely independent from the strategic (HRM) literature, different perspectives on the meaning of flexibility were consequently developed. A notable difference with the organizational flexibility literature is that this stream of research perceives the employee as actively constructing the job through choosing when and how to work. Therefore, as Hill et al. (2008a) argued, workplace flexibility can be conceptualized from the organizational perspective, as well as from the employees' perspective. Below, we will separately discuss in more detail how these perspectives overlap and differ from each other.

A final stream of research concerns *work boundary flexibility* (Ferguson et al., 2015). This research builds on boundary theory, which postulates that people maintain boundaries between work and private life, and work boundary flexibility refers to people's ability to change these boundaries at a particular moment (Ferguson et al., 2015; Glavin & Schieman, 2012). Hence, work boundary flexibility entails the idea that an employee can express agency over when work is conducted, and thus is able to change the boundaries between work and nonwork according to the demands of a given situation. This research aligns with the notion of psychological flexibility in the sense of a mental state of being able to change one's behavior in the pursuit of goals and values (Atkins & Parker, 2012; Bond, Flaxman, & Bunce, 2008). Thus while flexible work arrangements refer to organizational practices to allow the workers to flexibly arrange work, work boundary flexibility is a more psychological approach towards flexibility as a mental state.

While this research has been silent on whether it is aimed at internal vs. external control mechanisms, the notion that employees can maintain boundaries and be flexible in how they set their boundaries assumes an active approach towards work boundary flexibility. Yet, at the same time, the question is whether employees are in control over setting their boundaries, or whether the organization may force employees in passively accepting boundary stretching.

In sum, there have been multiple conceptualizations of workplace flexibility, and these different conceptualizations may determine how workplace flexibility manifests for older workers. First, organizational perspectives focus on how organizations may become more flexible in a competitive market. Second, employee perspectives have focused on how flexibility may help workers to balance their work demands with private demands. A particular case of flexibility for workers is work boundary flexibility, which adds to understanding of workplace flexibility as a psychological mindset which can be perceived to be the opposite of cognitive rigidity (Atkins & Parker, 2012) The two main perspectives on flexibility (i.e., organizational and employee) will be included in the remainder of this paper when we consider the role of flexibility HRM for older workers. We do not specifically discuss notions of work boundary flexibility, or psychological flexibility, as we were unable to locate studies investigating these concepts in relation to older workers.

Relevant to the context of the aging workforce is the notion of flexible retirement (Johnson, 2011). The literature has until recently taken a perspective on retirement as a decision making process (Wang & Shi, 2014), which indicates that people make a motivated choice to retire at a specific moment in time, thereby gradually reducing their commitment to work and organization. However, increasingly retirement is being perceived as a process, which means that people gradually change their work roles and psychological perspectives on their work and careers (Dingemans & Henkens, 2014). Accordingly, the retirement process now involves many

more flexible forms of employment relationships, often referred to as bridge employment (Dingemans, Henkens, & Van Solinge, 2015). Bridge employment creates flexibility in how older workers transition from their work and career jobs towards full retirement, and may include a variety of work attachments, including part-time work, reduced working hours, and demotion (Wang, Zhan, Liu, & Shultz, 2008). This means that the question of flexibility across the lifespan, and in particular related to older workers, not solely pertains to aspects of the job which can be adjusted to older workers, but that complete jobs and HR-systems are adapted towards the employment of older workers. Before we will discuss the role of flexibility across the lifespan, we will first discuss in detail organizational and employee perspectives on workplace flexibility.

Employer Perspectives on Workplace Flexibility

The seminal work of Wright and Snell (1998) introduced the concept of flexibility in strategic HRM, and focused on two forms of organizational flexibility, based on the work of Sanchez (1995). Resource flexibility refers to the extent to which organizations can switch between resources, or to which resources can be used alternatively. Coordination flexibility refers to the extent to which organizations can reconfigure the structure of the resources. Wright and Snell's (1998) translation of these types of organizational flexibility towards HRM practices includes the notion of HRM practices being different across units, locations and teams, on the basis that HRM practices may have different utility depending on the context in which employees are conducting their work. Subsequent empirical research operationalized these types of flexibility in practices aimed at hiring and training employees such that they are able to conduct various roles in the organization (i.e., qualitative flexibility), and practices aimed at how quickly employees can be redeployed within an organization (i.e., quantitative flexibility; Chang et al., 2013). Other work took a person-based approach to flexibility by measuring employee skill and behavior flexibility, which focused on how broad the skills of the employees are, and how able

employees are to adapt to changing work circumstances (Beltran-Martin & Roca-Puig, 2013; Beltran-Martin, Roca-Puig, Escrig-Tena, & Bou-Llusar, 2008; Bhattacharya, Gibson, & Doty, 2005). Dissatisfied with both of these approaches to flexibility HRM, Way and colleagues (2015), including the authors of the original SHRM piece on flexibility (Wright & Snell, 1998), developed a new measure of flexibility HRM, which included an aspect which was largely ignored in these earlier studies. In addition to items measuring the extent to which HR practices can be adapted to changing circumstances and to which extent employees are able to adapt accordingly, the measure included the use of contingent workers, and the organizational ability to quickly dismiss temporary workers who are no longer needed for achievement of organizational goals (Way et al., 2015, p.1128-1129). Hence, this aspect heavily relies upon the extent to which organizations have quantitative flexibility, which is about how employment contracts are shaped, and whether workers are offered temporary or permanent contracts, the latter on the basis that they, when circumstances are changing, can be redeployed in other functions within the organization.

This addition has been important to understand the full scope of what is meant with organizational flexibility, and shows the inherent tensions which are present in the strategic HRM literature concerning flexibility in organizations. From an organizational perspective, it is important to be ready to change quickly and to adapt to changing circumstances if needed (Way et al., 2015). This is the ultimate meaning of organizational flexibility, and employee flexibility is supportive for the level of organizational flexibility (Wright & Snell, 1998). When organizations devote effort into training employees and to increase their behavioral flexibility by offering options for job sharing, job rotation and development, this may create a win-win situation, whereby organizations enhance their organizational capabilities (Volberda, 1996), and employees enhance their skills, motivation and employability (Grant & Parker, 2009). However, this

situation is only achieved when organizations offer permanent contracts to the employees, so that employees are motivated to invest in the organization, and accept task enrichment. Yet, the use of contingent workers has been central to the conceptualization of the flexible organization (Wright & Snell, 1998), and the literature on organizational flexibility has emphasized the importance of having the opportunity to flexibly hire and dismiss employees in order to stay competitive.

This notion has amongst others been criticized in the sociology literature. The strategy and strategic HRM literatures too narrowly focus on the survivors of the flexibilization of organizations, that is, the employees with permanent, fulltime, contracts who receive training and opportunities to enrich their jobs (Legge, 1995; Vallas, 1999). Increasing organizational flexibility may lead to a distinction between core workers, who profit from qualitative flexibility (e.g., training that enables task enrichment), and peripheral workers, who face the consequences of quantitative flexibility (i.e., with increasing job insecurity). There is hardly any notion of these victims of the flexible organization, who are the people who are laid off and forced into temporary contracts. As many organizations are driven by the arguments of the business case (De Menezes & Kelliher, 2011), organizations and HR-managers will be inclined to perceive workplace flexibility primarily from the perspective of the organization, and the extent to which increased flexibility contributes to organizational performance (see e.g., Martínez-Sánchez, Vela-Jiménez, Pérez-Pérez, & de-Luis-Carnicer, 2011). Hence, the question arises if organizations will still invest in arrangements for enhancement of employee flexibility when it does not (clearly) contribute to organizational goals. A study of Gardiner and Tomlinson (2009) indeed showed that organizations are more inclined to invest in flexibility for employees when it was aligned with strategic business rationales. In sum, the organizational perspective on flexibility relies heavily on the notion that flexibility of organizational structures, including HRM practices, and employees can be enhanced in order to achieve higher performance and to survive in a competitive market.

This includes both a perspective of the employees' possibilities for enhancing skill and behavioral flexibility, but also a perspective on the employee as a resource, which can be used temporarily and dismissed when no longer needed.

Employee Perspectives on Workplace Flexibility

Employee perspectives on flexibility have been developed largely independent from the literature on organizational flexibility, and hence focuses on a different aspect of flexibility. Hill et al. (2008a, p.151) define workplace flexibility from a worker perspective as the "degree to which workers are able to make choices to arrange core aspects of their professional lives". Flexibility in this meaning primarily refers to the free choice employees have to decide on how, when and where they conduct their work. Hence, in contrast to employer perspective on flexibility which tend to perceive flexibility as being instrumental to organizational goals, here flexibility is primarily being instrumental to self-set employee goals. These goals have traditionally been related to work-life balance concerns (Allen et al., 2013), as the literature on flexible work arrangements until recently has been linked to the needs of women and young parents for work arrangements that would suit meeting the demands from work as well as from home (Ferguson et al., 2015). However, recent research has expanded the view of workplace flexibility being primarily useful for women and young parents, to a perspective of flexibility as being available to all employees within an organization, who may have different reasons for using flexibility (Bal, Van Kleef, & Jansen, 2015; Hyman et al., 2005). Thus, workplace flexibility from an employee perspective concerns the free choice of employees on deciding when, where, and how work will be conducted to meet work and personal needs. The 'when' concerns the work schedules of an employee, which can be made more flexible by allowing employees to choose when they start and stop working, which days they work, and when they

take breaks. Moreover, the ‘when’ also refers to the opportunity for employees to work part-time or reduced hours during a particular period. The ‘where’ concerns the location where an employee conduct (parts of) the work, which can be from the office, from home, or from any place relevant for the employee to conduct the job. Finally, the ‘how’ concerns the distribution of tasks and responsibilities among employees, and may include the flexibility within teams to distribute tasks in line with workers’ needs and preferences.

The concept of free choice is essential here, as a decision for a flexible employment relationship which is forced upon by the employer constitutes an arrangement in which the employee has no say. It is important to distinguish between flexibility *of* the employee (employer perspective), which is primarily the case in organizational perspectives, and flexibility *for* the employee (employee perspective), which is more aligned with employee perspectives. Workplace flexibility in relation to employees therefore can be understood from the perspective of the employer being able to change rapidly to meet the organizational goal of switching between resources or reconfiguring the structure of resources, up until the point where employees bend but not break (or do break when they are on temporary contracts with high job insecurity). But, workplace flexibility can also be understood as the organization, and with it its HRM-system and practices, to be flexible and guarantee flexibility of working conditions in favor of the employee (Hill et al., 2008a). As long as free will is present in how flexibility is used in organizations, it can be regarded as contributing to the quality of work experiences. However, Putnam et al. (2014) argued that the execution of control is essential in this process. While flexibility may allow employees to have more autonomy over how they conduct their work, the control resides still outside the employee when targets are set within the hierarchy of the organization, and being imposed upon the employee. As we described in the introduction, there is a tension between the

seemingly active, external regulation that flexibility may offer to employees, while they have to internally regulate themselves in order to meet performance goals set by the organization.

Therefore, enhanced autonomy as a result of increasing flexibility may even contribute to work intensification (Kelliher & Anderson, 2010), as flexible work schedules and flexible workspaces may imply that there are no boundaries anymore between work and private life, thereby decreasing external regulation options (*cf.* Ferguson et al., 2015). Thus the notion of increasing boundary flexibility may lead to a situation where the boundaries of work are stretched into the private spheres of people, who may struggle with maintaining a separation of the demands of their work with their private lives, a process exacerbated by the continuous availability of digital technologies. Hence, the control over work may seem to be increasing when employees have the availability of flexible work options also pertaining to external regulation, but control is still indirectly imposed on the worker through professional and cultural work norms (Putnam et al., 2014). Moreover, the more autonomy people have over key aspects of their work, the more energy has to be spent in maintenance of boundaries (Ferguson et al., 2015), and as energy is a limited resource, it can be depleted, and thus undermining self-regulation (Allen et al., 2013).

The employer's perspective may lead to a clash with the employee perspective, when organizational flexibility is narrowly translated towards the employee through an expansion of working times (Hyman et al., 2005; Kelliher & Anderson, 2010). Another clash may arise when organizations train their employees to become flexible *within* the organization and to be able to conduct many different tasks, while employees may have specific needs towards development of their professional skills, aimed at increasing their employability *outside* the organization (Way et al., 2015). A final clash may arise when organizations strive for more flexibility through the use of contingent workers (i.e., using quantitative flexibility to shape employment relationships), who

can be dismissed at any time, while employees have preferences for more stable employment relationships. Another issue arises when this is confronted with national regulations and law concerning the protection of labor contracts. This introduces a societal perspective on flexibility, in which not only regulation and law are designed given a particular perspective on workplace flexibility, but where the meaning of flexibility is defined given a particular ideological approach (Harvey, 2005). Hence, it is necessary to further explore the ideological underpinning of the concept flexibility, as it may inform our understanding of how flexibility is used at the workplace, and in particular in relation to older workers.

An Ideological Perspective on Flexibility

The interest in workplace flexibility has not developed in a vacuum, but there are societal trends which have led to the increasing interest in organizations and employees for more flexibility. Therefore, to understand why organizations have become more interested in flexible employees, and why employees have become more interested in flexible work arrangements, an ideological perspective is needed to shape the wider context in which these developments have taken place. While Vallas (1999) points to the Fordist underpinnings of work until the 1960s and 1970s, a notable change has occurred since that era. From the 1980s onwards, rapid technological advances have demanded organizations to become more quickly adapting to changes in the environment. As product life cycles shortened, organizations could no longer rely upon stable environments, which amongst others has led to the rise of the 'flexible specialization theory' (Vallas, 1999), which in essence means that organizations are driven primarily by the environment, and thus the environment is the driver of workplace change. It was Tomaney (1990), who already pointed towards the role of work intensification as an underlying rationale for the idea of flexibility as a management concept. This entails the rationale that employees

should be flexible in skills so that they have the capacity to undertake a wide variety of tasks, while at the same time they should have unlimited flexibility as to how long they work (i.e., conducting unpaid overtime work), and thus mental capability to manage disappearing boundaries between work and nonwork. The essential question here is whether employees are in the position of refusing to be flexible, or whether they are actually forced by the organization to become completely flexible in their tasks and working times. An example is the mason on a permanent contract with a construction firm, who is fired and rehired on a contractor basis. This refers to enforced, quantitative flexibility by which market insecurity for the organization directly results in employment insecurity for the worker. Thus, workplace flexibility becomes an inherent part of the contemporary experience of work.

When flexibility is inherent to work and contemporary employment relationships, parallels can be drawn with wider societal trends, and in particular neoliberalism (Harvey, 2005), to the point where flexible work becomes a manifestation of dominant ideological paradigms in society. It is no coincidence that flexibility became more popular in the 1980s, a period of economic recession and high unemployment in many Western countries (Harvey, 2005). Organized labor movements, such as trade unions, were attacked and lost their power positions especially in the US and the UK. This provided the opportunity for many organizations to engage in more flexible contracts with their employees, a trend that has progressed ever since, including the current rise of zero-hour contracts (Gov.uk, 2015; Karl, 2015; Pessoa & Van Rheenen, 2014). However, neoliberal values, including unlimited entrepreneurial freedom and downscaling of government regulation of employee protection and security (Harvey, 2005; Seymour, 2014), could not be sold to the public without the rhetoric of flexible working arrangements for employees. Hence, greater freedom of labor was sold to the public as a virtue, with the option for individuals to more flexibly arrange their work with their personal lives, and thus to have control

over their working lives. Hence, Harvey (2005) explicitly links employer perspectives on flexibility (i.e., to use employees as mere resources which can be dismissed when no longer necessary), with employee perspectives on flexibility (i.e., the chance to set one's own working conditions), with the latter being used to convince the public of the rhetoric of flexibility as constituting the future of work and employment relationships. However, long-term analyses have shown that this rhetoric of flexibility has primarily served organizations, rather than employees, as real wages have stagnated or decreased on average over the last 30 years (Harvey, 2005; Pessoa & Van Reenen, 2014), and income inequality has increased substantially (Piketty, 2014). This economic-political analysis showed that flexibility is inherently related to neoliberal forces in society, which stress the freedom of organizations to operate, while deregulation limits the power and negotiation positions of (collective groups of) employees.

Subsequently, flexibility is not only debated at the organizational level, but has been extended towards the societal level, where the flexible economy has been coined (i.e., low hiring and firing costs of workers, and few restrictions on changing work hours; Cuñat & Melitz, 2012). The opposite of economic flexibility has been coined rigidity (Cuñat & Melitz, 2012), and with it the negative connotation associated to the term *rigid*, as not being able to change. The question is where responsibility for employment security resides when workers in the flexible economy do not have job security anymore. Workers have to become 'employable' (Van der Heijde & Van der Heijden, 2006), but it is unclear whether employability is a right for employees (and thus a responsibility for organization or government to provide it), or a demand on employees, and thus the responsibility of workers themselves to become and remain employable. In the current economy, the latter seems to be the case (Bauman, 2013; Seymour, 2014).

Flexibility as inherently neoliberal value has even been extended to the level of the human being, and it is proposed that the norm of the flexible society and human being is now apparent

(Bauman, 2013; Hinds, 2003). People, and certainly people at work, are expected in a neoliberal paradigm, to be ultimately flexible, to be able to adapt continuously to ever changing circumstances, to be self-reliant and to ensure one is not unemployed (Harvey, 2005; Morgan, 2015; Seymour, 2014). Flexibility becomes a characteristic of the new human being who is able to survive in a neoliberal society which is stripped of government protection, such as employment benefits and free education and health care (Morgan, 2015). This is mirrored in that flexibility takes no account of the losers, the have-nots, and the people with no chance of permanent and stable contracts (Bal & Lub, 2015; Bauman, 2013). It is not surprising how research within the domain of HRM has focused on such related constructs as proactivity (Grant & Parker, 2009), job crafting (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001), employability (Van der Heijde & Van der Heijden, 2006), active shaping (De Lange et al., 2010), boundaryless careers (Arthur, Khapova, & Wilderom, 2005), effectuation (Sarasvathy, 2001), life designing (Savickas et al., 2006), and idiosyncratic deals (Rousseau, 2005) in explaining how the contemporary worker has needed to become self-reliant in obtaining favorable working conditions. Flexibility fits within this picture, and to this extent has become a manifestation of neoliberalism at the workplace (Karl, 2015).

Flexibility, due to its conceptual ambiguity and vagueness, has been used rhetorically to sell increased organizational flexibility at the expense of the individual worker, but at the same time allow employees to more flexibly arrange their working conditions, as long as it contributes to or does not impede organizational performance (Gardiner & Tomlinson, 2009). According to Harvey (2005; Vallas, 1999), organizational flexibility is implicitly exchanged for opportunities for flexibility for employees. However, in this exchange, organizational flexibility entails greater job insecurity for noncore workers, and the risks of unemployment for the employee, and thus it comes at the expense of the employee (Harvey, 2005). This is important given the outlook of this

paper on flexibility across the lifespan, since, as we will see, this implicit exchange returns when we review the research on flexibility for older workers.

As this paper's main focus is on the role of flexibility across the lifespan, we will now discuss theories and models explaining how flexibility is perceived by employees. As studies in the field of strategic HRM which have focused on flexibility, primarily rely upon organizational representatives, such as directors or HR-managers (Way et al., 2015), they insufficiently describe how flexibility affects the work experiences of employees, and in particular older workers. We therefore review the literature on how employees experience workplace flexibility to understand how flexibility relates to the lifespan. To do so, we will be postulating a working definition of workplace flexibility that includes the explicit integration and negotiation of employer and worker interests.

Workplace Flexibility for Workers

Workplace flexibility for workers entails the possibility to engage in decision making concerning when, where, and how they work (Hill et al., 2008a). These decisions are made striving for agreement between employee and organization (Bal et al., 2012). When employees engage in self-initiated shaping of their own working conditions, such as deciding when they start working and when they leave, it is denoted job crafting (Tims & Bakker, 2012). Workplace flexibility for workers occurs when organization and employee agree on whether employees have the space to arrange and decide on their working schedules, location and tasks. Mutual agreement forms an essential part of how flexibility manifests in the workplace. Therefore, workplace flexibility is conceptually more closely related to idiosyncratic deals than job crafting as it aims to align employee perceptions of how they can apply flexibility in their work with organizational perceptions (Bal & Jansen, 2015).

A crucial distinction is between *availability* and *use* of workplace flexibility (Allen et al., 2013). While availability indicates whether the organization provides access to flexible work options to some or all of the employees in the firm, actual use refers to whether employees benefit from an arrangement. Availability is closely related to legal frameworks and regulation, as it determines whether workers have some entitlement towards the access of workplace flexibility, such as part-time working or flexible work schedules (Johnson, 2011). When flexibility is only available to some employees, such as women, and not others, this may be perceived to be discrimination, and therefore, may have detrimental effects for motivation and effectiveness of the program (Atkinson & Sandiford, 2015). Moreover, unequal access of flexibility to employees implies an establishment of a bureaucracy (Putnam et al., 2014), in which decisions have to be made as to who is entitled to a certain flexible work arrangement and who is not. Unequal access may have negative effects as people may feel unfairly treated when they do not have access (Greenberg, Roberge, Ho, & Rousseau, 2004). This is important for older workers, as traditionally, access to workplace flexibility for older workers has been regulated through certain ages (e.g., 50 or 55 years) at which a worker is entitled to flexibility, such as reduced working hours or exemption from working night shifts (Bal et al., 2012; Dingemans et al., 2015). Hence, a crucial aspect of availability concerns the extent to which options are available to all employees or to a limited group of workers.

Moreover, there may also be a gap between whether workplace flexibility arrangements are available to an employee, and whether the employees is actually using it. While some options may be available but not valued by the employee (such as teleworking; Bailey & Kurland, 2002), it may also be organizational cultures that hinder or facilitate use of flexibility (Bal et al., 2012). Yang and Zheng (2011) referred to de-coupling, when organizations adopt flexibility programs as formal policies, but where, due to cultures that inhibit actual use of flexible work options,

employees in reality do not use these flexibility arrangements. The study of Yang and Zheng (2011) showed that when organizations adopt flexibility, but when employees cannot really use it, employees felt to be performing worst in their jobs as compared to when employees could use them, or when the employees could not use them as the organization did not offer them. This shows that consistency between having flexibility available and actual implementation of flexibility is important for employees, as otherwise this may be perceived as a psychological contract breach (Morrison & Robinson, 1997).

Another dimension relevant for workplace flexibility is the type of flexibility. Allen et al. (2013), in their meta-analysis, distinguished between flex-time and flex-space. On the one hand, workplace flexibility offers employees to adapt their working times. Adaptations of working times may occur at daily level, or may be arranged at an institutional level. Daily flexibility allows employees to choose when they start their working days and when they finish it (De Menezes & Kelliher, 2011), and more elaborate forms of workplace flexibility may allow employees to abolish working times, and be evaluated solely on output and performance targets (Ten Brummelhuis, Bakker, Hetland, & Keulemans, 2012). A more institutionalized approach to flexible working schedules is the opportunity to work part-time or reduced working hours. This allows a contractual agreement where the expectation of fulltime employment ceases to exist, and where part-time employment is regarded as a ‘normal’ work arrangement. Part-time employment is increasing in popularity, and despite stereotypical perceptions of lower commitment, research has shown little evidence of systematic differences between part-time and fulltime workers (Thorsteinson, 2003). Furthermore, Bal and De Lange (2015) distinguished between regular and irregular flexibility, with the former referring to flexibility at a structural, daily level (such as changes in working times, and reduced working hours), and the latter referring to irregular breaks from work, such as sabbaticals or working only part of the year (e.g., seasonal work). Hence,

another important aspect of flex-time is whether it is related to employees' daily work schedules, or whether it concerns the more irregular breaks in which one can pursue alternative activities. While Bal and De Lange (2015) did not find many differences in the relationships of regular and irregular flexibility HRM in relation to employee engagement and job performance, future research might investigate the differential relationships of these aspects.

Another type of flexibility concerns flex-space (Allen et al., 2013). Flexibility in work locations allow employees to decide where they conduct their work. While there may be constraints within many jobs as to where tasks are completed (e.g., a border control employee has a very specific location for execution of the job), especially white-collar office workers may become more independent of the physical locations of offices to complete their work. Discretion over where to conduct work allows them to cope with work demands through completion of work at home, and thereby avoiding traffic jams, and possible interference with school times of children (Bailey & Kurland, 2002; De Menezes & Kelliher, 2011).

Finally, a type of workplace flexibility for older workers concerns early retirement and bridge employment options (Dingemans et al., 2015; Wang & Shi, 2014). Early retirement options offer employees the flexibility of ceasing working lives earlier than state pension age, while bridge employment options allow them to achieve a more flexible transition from fulltime work towards fulltime retirement through for instance reduced working hours, demotion, or the opportunity to work in another career until one's retirement (Armstrong-Stassen, 2008b). Recent research also investigated how older workers have more specific wishes as to how they arrange the transition from fulltime employment into full retirement, and found that in general four ways people may want to transition from work to employment: gradually reducing working hours, not changing anything until retirement, changing the content of one's job, and changing the context of one's job (such as working for another organization; Polat, Bal, & Jansen, 2012).

Theories and Models of Workplace Flexibility

The primary theoretical underpinning of workplace flexibility for workers concerns the rebalancing of work with private life (Baltes et al., 1999). Baltes and colleagues (1999) explain this on the basis of the work adjustment model. Through more flexibility in how workers approach their working schedules and location, they may achieve greater correspondence between the requirements of a job on the one hand and their needs on the other hand. Hence, workplace flexibility is postulated to produce a greater fit between a person and the job (Bal et al., 2012; Moen, Kelly, & Huang, 2008). In addition, options for flexibility may be regarded as job characteristics, which in their own right may have a motivational effect as they provide employees with a sense of autonomy and control (Baltes et al., 1999; Moen et al., 2008). Flexibility, according to these models, is inherently positive for employees, as it contributes to a better work-life balance (Allen et al., 2013). However, flexibility may also be related to lower dedication to one's career, and attributions by others that one is not committed to the organization (Leslie, Manchester, Park, & Mehng, 2012; Rogier & Padgett, 2004). Hence, this shows the inherent contrast that may arise from flexibility arrangements between the employee, who is able to obtain more flexibility, and the employer, who questions the employees' commitment to the organization when flexibility is perceived to be negotiated to obtain a better work-life balance. Moreover, people with a low growth-need strength may have lower needs for autonomy (Baltes et al., 1999), and therefore flexibility may be less desirable for them. Especially older workers may have worked in fixed, regulated workplaces without flexibility, and therefore flexibility may have less initial attractiveness for older workers (Posthuma & Campion, 2009).

A theoretical perspective that explains the employer's perceptions on workplace flexibility for workers has been presented by institutional theory (Masuda et al., 2012), which postulates

that organizations must adapt to pressures from the environment, such as cultural expectations. For instance, in cultures where gender equality is high, organizations will be more likely to offer flexible work arrangements (Lyness & Kropf, 2005). Hence, organizations do not solely use workplace flexibility in a self-enhancing way, that is, as the extent to which organizations can switch between resources or reconfigure the structure of resources. Instead, because organizations experience pressure from the environment, they also comply to the employee's perception of workplace flexibility as the degree to which the worker can decide when, where, and how work will be conducted to meet work and personal needs. In addition, neoinstutional theory (McNamara, Pitt-Catsouphes, Brown, & Matz-Costa 2012) explains that even though organizations may be pressured to incorporate workplace flexibility as perceived by workers, they may be more hesitant or resistant to fully implement these systems, which explains de-coupling (Yang & Zheng, 2011), and the divergence between employers' and employees' perspectives on flexibility. As flexibility may be costly for organizations, they may refrain from implementing policies to enable employees to fully use flexibility at work.

As a result of this, McNamara et al. (2012) argued that many workers will obtain flexibility options through informal agreements rather than existing formal policies for workplace flexibility. Accordingly, research on informal agreements between employee and organization has increased substantially over the years (Liao, Wayne, & Rousseau, 2015; Rousseau, 2005). The central theoretical proposition of this research is that workers are not just passive recipients of working conditions, but active shapers of work and jobs (Bal et al., 2012; Kooij, 2015). Hence, employees proactively negotiate flexibility arrangements with their employer, outside and beyond existing regulations. Adding to the work adjustment model, this line of research shows that especially individualized agreements may create a stronger fit between a person and the job. A more institutionalized version of this notion has been offered in the work of Bal and colleagues,

who showed that organizations that offer individualized career customization programs (Bal et al., 2015), or individualized HRM (Bal & Dorenbosch, 2015), may contribute to both employee outcomes (such as work engagement), and organizational outcomes (such as performance growth and reduction of sickness absence) by seeking a compromise between employees' and employers' perspectives of workplace flexibility. In sum, recent scientific approaches tend to stress the individualized nature of flexibility arrangements between employee and organization. This adds to the distinction between formal availability within an organization and employee use of workplace flexibility, such that the availability of flexibility is not a necessary requirement for employees to be able to use flexibility, as they might have individually negotiated it with the employer (Bal et al., 2012), or might have engaged in unauthorized crafting their job in a flexible way (Kooij, 2015).

Just as use does not imply prior availability, availability does not per se result in actual use. Research shows that the effects of the mere availability of HRM practices on outcomes to be psychologically-theoretically different from actual use. The impact of availability has traditionally been explained using signaling theory (Casper & Harris, 2008). This theory explains that in the absence of clear messages from the employer, employees use signals sent by the organization to interpret its benevolence towards the employees. When organizations have flexibility available, employees may interpret this favorably, and so perceive availability as a signal from the organization that it cares about the employees and wants to motivate and retain them. As employees feel more highly valued by their employer, they commit themselves and become more highly engaged in their work (Bal & De Lange, 2015). Moreover, social exchange theory (Blau, 1964) explains why actual use of flexibility relates to outcomes. When employees have the opportunity to actually use flexibility in their work, they perceive the relationships with their employer to be strengthened, as the employer in allowing more flexibility shows concern for

the long-term well-being of the employee. The benevolent nature of the employer, shown in the willingness to grant flexibility to the employee, forms a stimulus for the social exchange relationship between them (Bal et al., 2015).

Outcomes of Workplace Flexibility for Workers

There have been multiple literature reviews on the outcomes of employee perspectives on flexible work arrangements over the last decades. The early meta-analysis of Baltes et al., (1999) showed that the relationships between flexible work schedules and productivity, job satisfaction and reduced absenteeism were positive, while flexibility in reduced work hours was positively related to employee performance, job satisfaction, and schedule satisfaction. Notwithstanding these initial positive results stemming from research in the 1980s and 1990s, the systematic review of De Menezes and Kelliher (2011) revealed a more nuanced picture and concluded that the 'business case' for flexible working was lacking, as they found no systematic positive relationships between employee perspectives of workplace flexibility and organizational performance, albeit some indication for a reduction of sickness absenteeism following workplace flexibility. Moreover, they found that the link between flexible working and employee performance was unclear, and this relationship might be mediated as well as moderated by several factors, including job satisfaction as a mediator, and experiences with the use of flexibility as a potential moderator.

Allen and colleagues (2013) conducted a meta-analysis on the relationship between employee perceptions of workplace flexibility and work family conflict, and concluded that while flexibility was related to lower work-to-home interference, it was unrelated to home-to-work interference. Hence, decreases of work-family conflict may be one of the primary aims of why employees use flexibility (Bailey & Kurland, 2002). Along similar lines, a study by Hornung,

Rousseau and Glaser (2008) showed that individualized flexibility deals for employees were related to lower work-family conflict. However, as the review of De Menezes and Kelliher (2011) showed, the relations of employee perceptions of workplace flexibility with outcomes tend to be inconsistent and mixed across studies. There are a range of factors that may explain this inconsistency, including work climate, the role of the supervisor, and attributions.

Factors Influencing the Impact of Flexibility

Putnam and colleagues (2014) explained that organizational climate may play an important role in relation to the effectiveness of workplace flexibility. Supportive work climates are crucially important in the extent to which employees are able to obtain flexibility, as well as to which they may successfully transfer negotiated arrangements to the workplace (Bal et al., 2012). As the research of Lai and colleagues (2009) has shown, the role of coworkers is important in the successful transfer of idiosyncratic deals to the workplace. When coworkers accept a negotiated flexibility deal, the deal will be more likely to be perceived as fair, such that the focal employee can manifest the deal in the workplace (Greenberg et al., 2004). Moreover, based on the same line of reasoning, Bal et al. (2012) argued and showed that i-deals will be more strongly related to motivation to continue working beyond retirement when there is a supportive climate for older workers, focusing on the continuous development and not on disengagement of workers when they become older. Hence, the literature on idiosyncratic deals informs the flexibility literature by showing the crucial role of organizational climate in influencing the degree to which employees perceive to be able to implement flexibility in their jobs.

Moreover, closely related to climate is the role of the supervisor. A study of Bal and colleagues (2015) showed that the effects of career customization, an institutionalized form of flexible career trajectories, on employees' work engagement and subsequent career success, was dependent upon whether the employees felt that their manager was supportive of the career

customization program. This shows the role of managers in successfully translating flexibility programs towards employees (Leisink & Knies, 2011). When managers are unsupportive of flexibility use, workers will feel a threshold towards using it, as they might fear negative consequences for instance for performance appraisals. Accordingly, the meta-analysis of Kossek and colleagues (2011) showed that supervisory support was an important predictor of work-family support and subsequent reductions in work-family conflicts. Putnam et al. (2014), therefore, recommended flexibility to become part of the psychological contract between employees and their organizations, in which both parties look for agreements on how, when, and where work is conducted (Morrison & Robinson, 1997; Rousseau, 1995). This aligns with our earlier mentioned conceptualization of workplace flexibility as the negotiation between employee and organization. Establishing such a psychological contract requires the notion of flexibility as a right for employees, creating legitimacy for the existence of workplace flexibility for employees. This implies support in an institutional context, such as government regulation on workplace flexibility for employees, and added by collective labor agreements, and HR-policies.

However, including workplace flexibility for employees as part of the psychological contract, does not have to imply that managers are supportive of flexibility use by employees. In fact, research has shown that the attributions supervisors make are predictive of how well use of flexibility arrangements contributes to employee commitment and career success (Leslie et al., 2012). In their study, Leslie and colleagues (2012) found that when managers attributed flexibility use of their subordinates to productivity motives (i.e., employees use flexibility to become more productive and efficient), rather than personal life motives (i.e., employees use flexibility to accommodate nonwork activities), employees were perceived to be more highly committed to the organization, and hence achieved more career success. Thus, and in line with the earlier described employer perspective on workplace flexibility, supervisors may have

positive perceptions of flexibility primarily when it is established according to productivity motives, rather than family-oriented motives. These attributions made by supervisors as well as other stakeholders within and outside the organization are likely to determine the outcome of use of flexibility by workers. We expect this to be also important in relation to older workers' use of flexibility, which we now will discuss.

Workplace Flexibility across the Lifespan

Workplace flexibility has been linked to the aging workforce for some time as a way older workers can be motivated, retained, and made to maintain productivity at higher ages (Rau & Adams, 2005; Siegenthaler & Brenner, 2000). This represents a shift from the research on flexible work schedules which until then primarily focused on availability and use for women and young parents (Brewer, 2000). However, as life expectancy is increasing and retirement ages are slowly being increased across the world, organizations will consist of workers of a wide range of ages, and with them bringing their own more diverse needs and wishes as to how the employment relationship should be formed and developed (Kunze, Boehm, & Bruch 2013). In response to these changes, there have been recent attempts to integrate gerontological theories with workplace theories to understand how the aging process affects people at work (Kooij, De Lange, Jansen, & Dikkers, 2008). There are two gerontological theories which are directly relevant to the flexibility across the lifespan topic, and beyond these theories, new theories have been developed to address directly the role of older workers in organizations. Specifically, SOC-theory (Baltes & Baltes, 1990) explains why older people have different needs compared to younger people, while the theory of aged heterogeneity (Nelson & Dannefer, 1992) explains why people become more different from their age-related peers when they become older. Moreover, the theory of work motivation across the lifespan explains how older workers are motivated differently in their work

than younger workers (Kanfer, Beier, & Ackerman, 2013; Kanfer & Ackerman, 2004). Bridge employment theory (Wang & Shi, 2014) can be used to understand how older workers obtain flexible careers, and finally, we will also use the theory of successful aging to assess underlying notions of aging in relation to flexibility (Kooij, 2015; Zacher, 2015),

Selectivity, Optimization, and Compensation Theory

The SOC-model of aging (Baltes & Baltes, 1990) postulates that with the aging process, people experience both losses and gains. For instance, as people become older, they generally decline in physical health and capabilities while they also perceive gains in experience and wisdom. To successfully cope with these losses and gains, people engage generally in three different strategies, *selection*, *optimization*, and *compensation* (Baltes, 1997). People select fewer goals in life, by prioritizing what they deem as important. They will also abandon goals which are no longer attainable when they become older. Moreover, they optimize efforts and achievements within those fewer, selected, goals. For instance, people try to accumulate and gain resources in order to achieve successfully the remaining goals they have set (Zacher & Frese, 2011). Finally, people compensate for losses by employing alternative means to achieve goals. For instance, people may take more breaks from work. Hence, the SOC-model argues that people use different strategies to cope with the changes they experience as a result of the aging process. The SOC-model has been used as well to explain changes in people's motivation and goal attainment (Ebner, Freund, & Baltes, 2006; Freund, 2006), as well as how these strategies link to work attitudes and behaviors (Bal, Kooij, & De Jong, 2013; Yeung & Fung, 2009; Zacher & Frese, 2011). Translated to the notion of workplace flexibility, the SOC-model may provide a first indication of why people, as they become older, value more flexibility at work. As people experience work-related losses, such as the physical capabilities to conduct work, or the perseverance of working long hours, workplace flexibility may provide older workers the tools to

employ SOC-strategies to cope with these losses. Accordingly, a study by Bal et al. (2013) indeed found that HRM practices aimed at workplace flexibility, such as reduced working, contributed to higher employee engagement and commitment among workers who were focused on selection and compensation strategies at work. Thus, the SOC-model presents a first indication of how workplace flexibility may contribute to older workers' motivation at work, as the latter facilitates them in adjusting SOC-strategies with how they fulfill their work roles. However, the literature on SOC-strategies remains rather silent on the specific ages at which specific strategies become important to people. An explanation of why this is theoretically irrelevant is presented by the theory of aged heterogeneity (Bal & Jansen, 2015; Nelson & Dannefer, 1992).

The Theory of Aged Heterogeneity

Nelson and Dannefer (1992) reviewed empirical gerontological studies, and concluded that in 65% of the studies a pattern of increasing variability with age was observed. These observations were found across physical, cognitive and personality domains, and has led to the introduction of the notion of increasing heterogeneity with age in gerontological research as well as HRM research (Kooij et al., 2008). Subsequent work extended this perspective, and concluded that with increasing age, people become more different from their age-related peers (Dannefer, 2003). This idea has also been integrated implicitly in theory on aging at work, which assumes that older workers may have large variations in their physical, psychological, and other capabilities (Kooij et al., 2008). While younger workers may be more alike in what they expect from their work, and what their work capabilities are, older workers tend to be more different from each other in those respects. This aligns with the popular idea that some people are able and willing to work into their 90s, while others are burnt out, and no longer motivated at 50

(Posthuma & Campion, 2009). Thus, as older workers are very different from each other, it is insufficient to take a one-size-fits-all approach towards the management of employment relationships with older workers. This idea was developed by Bal et al. (2012), who proposed that to enhance motivation to continue working, a flexible, individualized approach is needed towards workers. Bal and Jansen (2015) developed this idea further theoretically, and explained how idiosyncratic deals may be especially important for older workers in retaining them in the workforce and enabling them to continue working at higher ages. Thus, flexibility is postulated to benefit in particular older workers theoretically, as increasing heterogeneity will be associated with increasing heterogeneous work-related needs as workers become older. Employee workplace flexibility in the sense of the choice to decide when, where and how work is conducted, may allow older workers to obtain a fit between their personal situation (i.e., the extent to which they still value work and are able to conduct work) and the demands that result from their jobs. In addition to these theories which may explain the utility of flexibility for older workers, there are also specific theories of aging at work which may inform how flexibility operates for older workers.

The Theory of Work Motivation across the Lifespan

One of the key issues regarding the retention of older people in the workforce pertains to their motivation to work and their motivation in their work (Kanfer et al., 2013; Kanfer & Ackerman, 2004). The theoretical work of Kanfer and colleagues (2004, 2013) was among the first in the field of organizational behavior and HRM to criticize the simplicity of the association between aging and decline, and introduced a theory based on four patterns related to the aging process: loss, growth, reorganization, and exchange. While people generally experience a loss in fluid intellectual abilities, they also experience growth in crystallized intellectual abilities (i.e.,

experiential knowledge). In addition to these (classic) changes associated with age, they also pointed towards the role of reorganization of goals, including a shift from knowledge-related goals towards emotional goals when people become older and experience time as running out (Kanfer & Ackerman, 2004; Kooij, Bal, & Kanfer, 2014). Moreover, people also may perceive an exchange of primacy of motives during the aging process, that is, some motives (such as achievement striving) are exchanged for other motives during late adulthood (such as generativity). Despite the broadness of the framework (Kanfer et al., 2013), the general lesson is that workplace flexibility as a concept has much potential to be integrated with theoretical frameworks on aging at work. The changes that people experience, such as losses and reorganization of goals, fit within the idea that increasing flexibility may contribute to the motivation of workers at higher ages. Flexibility, therefore, may contribute to both motivation to work (i.e., motivation to remain employed at higher ages), and motivation at work (i.e., motivation within a specific job), as long as flexibility aligns with the changes that people experience over time. In particular during the later stages of one's career and approaching retirement age, flexibility may be influential in how people experience their work. Accordingly, bridge employment theory (Dingemans et al., 2015) offers a framework of understanding choices and needs at these later stages during one's career.

Bridge Employment Theory

While not a specific theory as to how and why people engage in bridge employment, bridge employment can be regarded as a specific form of workplace flexibility for older workers. Bridge employment departs from the view that retirement is not so much a decision about at what moment a person desires to cease working, but a *process* which leads to a final situation where someone fully withdraws from work (Feldman & Beehr, 2011). During this process, people may

decide not to transition from fulltime employment into fulltime retirement instantly, but to gradually shift, and to engage in some type of alternative employment (Shultz, 2003). Notwithstanding that some workers are forced into bridge employment as they lack the financial means to retire early and may be laid off from their career jobs (Shultz, 2003), bridge employment may offer a flexible way how people transition from full employment into retirement. Bridge employment may include working beyond state pension age, and is traditionally differentiated in career and non-career bridge employment (Gobeski & Beehr, 2005; Wang et al., 2008). Research shows that the likelihood that people will be working in career bridge jobs vs. non-career bridge jobs is predicted by different variables, such as job satisfaction, availability of job characteristics, and having skills in a certain domain that are specifically career-related (Gobeski & Beehr, 2005; Wang et al., 2008). Beyond these studies on predictors of bridge employment, it can be argued that retirement is now increasingly perceived not as a single point in time related to state pension age, but as a process in which people gradually withdraw from work. During this process, people may be focused on flexibility in their work as well on more flexible careers (Moen & Sweet, 2004; Platman, 2004a); both allow people to create a more flexible relationship between themselves and their work and jobs. While there is hardly any explicit mentioning in the bridge employment literature regarding the role of flexibility, it can be considered a specific form of workplace flexibility for older workers in that they can decide when, where, and how work will be conducted to meet work and personal needs during late career stages. Such needs refer to the extent to which they are willing and able to engage in working within their career jobs, or whether they have needs and wishes to pursue alternatives, such as an accountant who starts working in childcare (Gobeski & Beehr, 2005). In sum, the previously mentioned theories all point towards the essential role that workplace flexibility (for employees) plays for the motivation and retention of older workers. A final perspective which

will be discussed is that of successful aging, and in particular critical notions towards concepts of successful and productive aging.

A Critical Perspective on Successful Aging

One of the areas within the research on aging at work which has integrated some flexibility notion has been the work on ‘successful aging’ (Kooij, 2015; Zacher, 2015). This concept has been developed in the 1980s, and recent attempts have been made to conceptualize the notion of successful aging at work, which is broadly defined as relative positive deviations in employees’ age-related trajectories of work outcomes, such as well-being or performance, as compared to other employees of the same age (Zacher, 2015, p. 6). The work of Kooij (2015; Kooij, Tims, & Kanfer, 2015) focuses in particular on the role of job crafting in how older workers may shape their jobs more in line with their needs and abilities. Older workers may engage in a wide range of proactive behaviors, through which they may achieve higher fit with their jobs and careers, and thereby age successfully. In line with their work, it could be postulated that proactive behaviors among older workers could be aligned with the opportunity to obtain workplace flexibility, such that older workers may age successfully, and thereby are motivated to continue working and maintain their well-being at higher ages. The successful aging theory thus proposes that it is not only through workplace flexibility that people may achieve fit with their work as it allows them to age successfully, but also that older people may be more inclined to engage in proactive behaviors that lead them to have more flexibility in their work (for instance through job crafting), and as a result achieve successful aging (e.g., maintaining performance and engagement). Hence, the theory of successful aging presupposes active regulation by older workers of their work, and proactive behavior to create more flexible jobs.

There are two problems with the conceptualization of successful aging with respect to the role of flexibility. Following Zacher's (2015) definition, someone's successful aging is defined not just as maintaining health and quality of life at higher age, but successful aging is particularly defined in comparison to others (i.e., other older workers). As aging is associated with declines and losses, it is the positive deviations in these losses as compared to other aging people at work that constitutes successful aging (Zacher, 2015). Successful aging is not alone in this conceptualization, as similar streams of research have been developed on healthy aging (Beckingham & Watt, 1995), sustainable aging (De Lange, Kooij, & Van der Heijden, 2015), and productive aging (Morrow-Howell, Hinterlong, & Sherraden, 2001). Notable in these conceptualizations is that the terminology around success and productivity impose a normative view on the aging process. Successful and productive aging impose the norm that workers have to be engaged in work at higher ages, no matter one's personal circumstances. Accordingly, there is an increasing tendency to focus on the proactive roles that older workers play or should play when negotiating and creating favorable work conditions for successful ageing (Kooij, 2015; Kooij et al., 2015). Older workers *need* to become proactive in order to be able to competitively retain their jobs, engage in work, and perform well, and thus to age successfully. Since the number of jobs remains limited, and despite obvious individual differences in abilities and aging patterns (Nelson & Dannefer, 1992), older workers are essentially competing with one another. When an older worker is unable to engage in work, for instance because of physical declines, this is consequently perceived to be failure as the norm of successful aging is to remain active and engaged in work. Hence, while active aging may constitute a healthy way of approaching the aging process, it is extrapolated to become the societal norm for every older worker (Dillaway & Byrnes, 2009).

Beyond this normative view, the responsibility for successful aging is increasingly individualized. Research on coverage of the aging process in popular media (Rozanova, 2010) has revealed how successful aging is perceived to be a personal choice, carrying individual responsibility, and the continued engagement in work as a manifestation of one's successes in life and work. There is little acknowledgement of the role of different circumstances, luck, and genetic predispositions in maintaining health and productivity at higher ages, thereby individualizing and drawing individual responsibility towards the aging process. The next step is to personally blame individuals who do not age successfully, and therefore could be stripped away from benefits, such as unemployment, pension, and health care benefits (Dillaway & Byrnes, 2009). Extending this logic, the increase of the state retirement age across many countries (Johnson, 2011), is translated into a personal responsibility of older people to ensure that they remain employed, as pension benefits will only be rewarded at higher ages. A problem arises with this individualization of responsibility for successful aging, as it undermines the organizational responsibility, or duty of care, to ensure the employability and workability of older workers (Schumann, 2001). It is not surprising that an image has been established of the greedy older worker who is no longer willing to work (Dillaway & Byrnes, 2009), as it shifts away the focus on the role of governments and organizations in providing societal and organizational preconditions for the employability of older workers (and thus the responsibility to ensure workplace flexibility). Ultimately, it is the joint responsibility of government, organization, and worker to ensure employability and workability through for instance lifelong learning, sustainable employment, and possibly the use of workplace flexibility across the lifespan.

Yet, it has been proven difficult to extend working lives of older workers in a way that sustains well-being of workers (Dingemans & Henkens, 2014; Johnson, 2011). Older workers may use suboptimal strategies to stay employed and search jobs at higher ages and may lack up-

to-date skills and knowledge to remain employed (Klehe et al., 2012). Moreover, the critical literature on aging also points towards the underlying power relations that establish societal and organizational norms about aging and the role of individual responsibility and proactivity. These norms shift a focus of aging of the workforce as one of the 'normal' processes within organizations towards perceiving older workers as a problem, who have to be incentivized to work and continue working, while at the same time shifting the responsibility for this to each older worker individually (Katz & Calasanti, 2015). These societal and organizational norms regarding successful aging align with employer perspectives on workplace flexibility, as it primarily focuses on how organizations may become more adaptable to changes in the environment by having the opportunity to hire and dismiss workers freely along with the needs of the company (Way et al., 2015; Wright & Snell, 1998). Hence, there is a need to formulate a perspective on 'successful' aging without its emphasis of a solely individual responsibility for workplace flexibility, and in which workplace flexibility therefore is conceptualized aligning with a less one-sided, employer-oriented perspective on aging at work. To do so, we will first review the available empirical work on workplace flexibility for older workers, and evaluate the outcomes of existing studies in light of the previous discussions.

A Review of Empirical Studies on Workplace Flexibility for Older Workers

To obtain an overview of the current state of knowledge and understanding of how workplace flexibility specifically unfolds for older workers, we reviewed all published empirical work that examined the relationships between the two constructs. We performed a systematic review, in which we searched for any study looking at workplace flexibility and older workers. We entered key words into search engines, such as Ebscohost and Google Scholar, and looked for any study that investigated flexibility or flexible working or flexible arrangements. We also went

through the reference lists of earlier review papers (Allen et al., 2013; Baltes et al., 1999; De Menezes & Kelliher, 2011; Putnam et al., 2014). We omitted any study that did not investigate workplace flexibility but rather work-family conflict (Shacklock, Brunetto, & Nelson, 2009). We also excluded papers which did not focus on flexibility options, but we did include studies on individualized flexibility options (Bal et al., 2012, 2015). After searching the papers, we distinguished them into studies that investigated employee perceptions of flexibility and employer perception of flexibility. All of these studies were aimed at investigation of how workplace flexibility for employees was predicted by a range of factors (such as employee age), or how it affects work outcomes (such as work engagement). One study included both perceptions (Atkinson & Sandiford, 2015), but after reading the paper, we deemed it more appropriate to categorize this paper as employer-perception. Table 1 presents an overview of the studies on employee perceptions, while Table 2 presents an overview of the studies from the employer perceptions on workplace flexibility for older workers. We found eleven studies from the employee perspective, and six from the employer perspective. The tables show the study designs, the context of the sample, the measure of workplace flexibility, the findings of the studies, and the implications for understanding of workplace flexibility for older workers.

Table 1: Overview of Studies on Employee Perspectives on Flexibility HRM

Authors	Study Design	Study Context	Flexibility HRM Measure	Findings	Implications
Armstrong-Stassen (2008a)	Study 1: Cross-sectional survey	284 Canadian employees over 50 (171 in career jobs, 113 in bridge jobs).	Availability of flexible work options (FWOs)	Employees in bridge jobs perceived higher availability of FWOs than employees in career jobs, except for unpaid leave, which was rated higher by employees in career jobs.	Generally FWOs are more likely to be available to employees in bridge jobs than in career jobs.
Armstrong-Stassen (2008b)	Cross-sectional survey	609 Canadians over 50 (198 in career jobs, 90 in post-retirement jobs, and 321 retirees)	Importance and availability of flexible work options	People in post-retirement jobs rated flexible work options as more important to stay in the workforce compared to people in career jobs. People in post-retirement jobs reported higher availability of flexible work options compared to people in career jobs.	FWOs are more important for people in post-retirement jobs to remain in the workforce, and perceive FWOs to be more available than people in career jobs.
Bal et al. (2012)	Cross-sectional survey	1083 employees in Dutch health care organizations	Flexibility i-deals	Age is negatively related to flexibility i-deals. Flexibility i-deals are positively related to motivation to continue working beyond retirement.	Older workers negotiate fewer flexibility i-deals, while these flexibility i-deals are important in relation to the motivation to continue working.
Bal & De Lange (2015)	Study 1: longitudinal survey Study 2: cross-national survey	Study 1: 695 US employees Study 2: 2,158 employees in 11 countries across the world	Study 1: Irregular and regular flexibility HRM availability and use Study 2: Flexibility HRM availability and use	Study 1: Employee engagement mediates the relationships between availability of flexibility and job performance. Flexibility is more strongly related to engagement among younger workers, while availability of irregular flexibility and use of regular flexibility are more strongly related to job performance among older workers. Study 2: Employee engagement mediates the relationships between availability of flexibility and job performance. Use of flexibility was more strongly related to engagement among younger workers.	Availability of flexibility is directly related to employee engagement and job performance. While use of flexibility is more important to enhance younger workers' engagement, it is more important for older workers to retain their job performance.
Bal et al. (2015)	Longitudinal survey	496 Dutch employees (403 in common career	Mass career customization use	MCC use is more strongly related to work engagement and subsequently salary and bonuses for older workers, but	Career customization is beneficial for older workers' work engagement and remuneration, but only when they feel supported by

		trajectory, 93 in customized careers)		only when the manager supports MCC use.	the manager to use career customization.
Cebulla et al. (2007)	Cross-sectional survey	5,512 UK employees (pre-state pension age and post-state pension age workers)	Availability and use of flexible work options	Both pre- and post-state pension age workers have limited up-take of FWOs. Older workers were more likely to work in organizations that offer FWOs	There is a limited use of flexible work options, and older workers are more inclined to work in organizations where they are available.
Golden (2008)	Panel survey	51,358 US employees	Availability of flexible work schedule	Age is negatively related to availability of flexible work schedules.	Older workers tend to perceive lower availability of flexible work schedules.
Hill et al. (2008b)	Cross-sectional survey	41,118 US employees	Use and value of flexibility options	Gender differences in the use of flexibility are highest with young children, where women are more likely to use flexibility. These differences disappear in later life stages (with older children). Women tend to value flexibility higher than men, across the lifespan.	Gender differences exist across the lifespan in how much employees use and value flexibility options, with women generally using more flexibility and valuing flexibility higher.
Pitt-Catsouphes & Matz-Costa (2008)	Cross-sectional survey	49,209 US employees	Flexibility fit	Flexibility fit is more strongly related to employee engagement among older workers.	Older workers become more highly engaged when they have flexibility fit than younger workers.
Rau & Adams (2005)	Vignette Study	120 US university retirees with a desire to work	Flexible work schedule availability in a job ad	Organizational attractiveness was higher for retirees when job ads included the possibility for flexible work schedules, especially when there are opportunities for mentoring and when there are equal employment opportunities.	Flexibility is an important requirement for retirees to consider applying for a job.
Van Solinge & Henkens (2014)	Cross-sectional survey	1,450 workers above 50 in four large Dutch organizations	Availability of workplace flexibility (schedule and working from home)	Availability of workplace flexibility does not relate significantly to retirement intention or actual retirement.	Compared to other predictors, flexibility did not predict retirement intentions or actual retirement.

Note. When no sector is mentioned, respondents work in several different sectors.

Table 2: Overview of Studies on Employer Perspectives on Flexibility HRM

Authors	Study Design	Study Context	Flexibility HRM Measure	Findings	Implications
Atkinson & Sandiford (2015)	Owner and employee interviews	46 UK owner-manager and workers in small firms	Existence and availability of flexible work arrangements	Flexibility is opportunistically used by organizations in recruitment. Older workers need and value flexibility, and obtain these in small firms primarily via i-deals.	While flexibility is important for older workers, employers are hesitant to formally introduce it, and prefer i-deals.
Bal & Dorenbosch (2015)	Employer survey	4,591 Dutch organization representatives	Individualized HRM availability and use (work schedules)	Sickness absence and employee turnover were lower among organizations with a high percentage of older workers who used individualized work schedules.	In organizations with many older workers, individualized work schedules may decrease sickness absence and employee turnover.
Beck (2013)	Employer interviews	32 UK interviews, of which 19 employers	Flexibility	Flexibility may be important to retain older workers, to cut costs, and to avoid costly redundancy payouts. Flexibility is also important to balance content of a job with abilities.	Employer support flexibility when they perceive to benefit from having a flexible workforce.
Earl & Taylor (2015)	Employer interviews	97 Australian HR directors and managers	Availability and use of flexible working policies for older women workers	Workplace flexibility may enhance work-life balance and engagement of older workers. Flexibility, however, is also related to lower income and loss of status for older workers.	The benefits of flexibility outweigh the costs for older workers.
Matz-Costa & Pitt-Catsouphes (2010)	Employer survey	578 US organizational representatives	Availability of flexible work options	Percentage of workforce older than 55 was unrelated to availability of flexible work options	Organizations with many older workers are not offering more flexible work options.
Sweet et al. (2014b)	Employer survey	545 US HR-representatives	Availability of flexible move work arrangements, reduced work arrangements, and pause work arrangements	Proportion of older workers is not related to availability of flexibility to most or all employees.	Organizations do not respond with higher availability of flexibility when the proportion of older workers is higher.

Employee Perceptions on Workplace Flexibility for Older Workers

Of the eleven studies we traced on employees' perspectives on workplace flexibility for older workers, ten were based on cross-sectional or longitudinal survey studies of employees, and one was based on a vignette study among older workers (Rau & Adams, 2005). Most studies measured employee perceptions of availability of flexibility options, while some others measured actual use of flexibility at work, including flexibility i-deals (Bal et al., 2012), and use of flexible careers (Bal et al., 2015). Two studies measured importance or value of flexibility for older workers (Armstrong-Stassen, 2008b; Hill et al., 2008b), and the vignette study measured availability of flexible work schedules in a job ad. Finally, Pitt-Catsouphes and Matz-Costa (2008) measured flexibility fit, which indicated the extent to which workers felt they had the level of flexibility in their work that they needed. Table 1 shows the findings and implications of each single study.

Summarizing the results from these eleven studies, there are four general implications for understanding of workplace flexibility for older workers. Generally, studies show that workplace flexibility is less available to older workers. The panel study of Golden (2008) among a large sample of US employees revealed a negative relationship between age and having access to flexible work schedules. Moreover, the study of Bal et al. (2012) shows a negative correlation between age and flexibility i-deals, indicating that older workers are less likely to negotiate i-deals concerning flexibility at work. However, research also shows that older workers in bridge jobs have higher access to flexible work options than older workers in career jobs (Armstrong-Stassen, 2008a,b). This is striking given that the attractiveness of jobs increases when flexibility is part of the job, as the vignette study among retirees showed (Rau & Adams, 2005). Moreover, Armstrong-Stassen (2008b) showed that flexibility is important for people in bridge jobs to

remain employed and not to retire. The study of Hill et al. (2008b) contributed to these findings by showing that in particular older women value flexibility, more than older men at work.

Furthermore, the studies generally showed positive relationships between flexibility and a range of employee outcomes. The study of Bal et al. (2012) showed that flexibility i-deals related to motivation to continue working beyond retirement, while the study of Bal and De Lange (2015) showed that flexibility was related to higher employee engagement and performance. Bal et al. (2015) found that use of flexible careers was related to higher employee engagement and subsequent career success, while Pitt-Catsouphes and Matz-Costa (2008) showed that flexibility fit was positively related to employee engagement. We found one exception, with the study of Van Solinge and Henkens (2014) not showing evidence that flexibility related to retirement intentions or actual retirement, while other job characteristics and personal circumstances (such as retirement income) were predictive of one's retirement intentions and actual retirement decision. Thus, this indicates that while workplace flexibility may contribute to older workers' positive work attitudes and behaviors, there is limited evidence that this leads to an actual postponing of retirement. The studies do, however, show that the relationships of flexibility with the outcomes (e.g., engagement, performance) are generally stronger for older workers. Bal and De Lange (2015) found stronger relationships for older workers between flexibility use and job performance, Bal et al. (2015) found that flexible careers were more strongly related to employee engagement among older workers (given that the manager supports flexible careers), and Pitt-Catsouphes and Matz-Costa (2008) found that flexibility fit was more strongly related to employee engagement among older workers. Hence, these studies tend to support that older workers may benefit more than younger workers from workplace flexibility in maintaining their engagement and performance in the job.

Finally, the studies show the potential relevance of the idea of fit in relation to flexibility. The study of Rau and Adams (2005) showed that organizational attractiveness was highest for older workers when there was flexibility available, but also options for mentoring and equal employment opportunities. Moreover, Pitt-Catsouphes and Matz-Costa (2008) showed that flexibility fit was predictive of employee engagement, indicating that it was not only having access to flexibility that is important, but the extent to which it fits with personal needs. Thus, when flexibility is aligned with other organizational practices and personal needs of employees, it is more strongly related to potentially relevant outcomes. In sum, the employee studies on workplace flexibility for older workers show that flexibility is generally less available to older workers, while it may predict important outcomes, and may even be more strongly predictive of outcomes for older workers, especially when there is fit with other characteristics in the organization.

Employer Perceptions on Workplace Flexibility for Older Workers

Six studies were found that focused on employers' views on how workplace flexibility could be implemented for older workers. These studies aimed at investigating the organizational need for implementation of workplace flexibility for workers. Three were survey studies, and the other three were interview studies. The survey studies measured availability and use of flexibility practices, while in the interview studies, flexibility was included in a broader way, encompassing an HR-practice available in the organization. There are a number of general implications resulting from these studies. First, the studies by Matz-Costa and Pitt-Catsouphes (2010), and Sweet, Pitt-Catsouphes, Besen and Golden (2014b) show that organizations with higher proportions of older workers are not more likely to offer flexibility options to workers. This is consistent with the findings from the employee perspective studies, which reported lower perceived availability of

flexibility with age. Second, and also confirming the findings from the employees' studies, Bal and Dorenbosch (2015) found that especially organizations with many older workers had lower sickness absence and employee turnover when they used individualized flexible work schedules. This shows that flexibility may especially be beneficial in organizations with many older workers.

The studies also showed a picture of organizations using flexible work options in recruitment practices to attract a wider range of applicants (Atkinson & Sandiford, 2015). Hence, workplace flexibility for older workers was used to achieve organizational goals (i.e., improving performance through better applicants). While in the interview studies, there was general agreement of the value of flexibility for older workers (Atkinson & Sandiford, 2015; Beck, 2013; Earl & Taylor, 2015), it was also recognized that formal practices were difficult to implement, and therefore organizations primarily used informal flexibility i-deals rather than implementing formal practices. The disadvantage of informal practices is the risk of arbitrariness in making decisions, and the potential lack of understanding or willingness among less proactive older workers to negotiate informal agreements. Moreover, the use of flexibility by older workers was often related to *reductions* in income and retirement benefits as well as loss of status within the organization, which contributes to the idea of the use of flexibility to maintain organizational performance (Earl & Taylor, 2015). Finally, flexibility was also used by organization to cut costs, especially during the economic crisis (Beck, 2013), and therefore may also be used to force older workers into workload reductions, such that they would not have to be dismissed, but they would be affected through the loss of income and other benefits.

In sum, the limited amount of employer studies show that on the one hand, employers recognize the benefits of flexibility for older workers and workplace flexibility may have positive consequences for organizational outcomes, such as sickness absence and turnover (Bal &

Dorenbosch, 2015). Yet, on the other hand, organizations have not responded with increasing the availability of flexibility for older workers (Matz-Costa & Pitt-Catsouphes, 2010; Sweet et al., 2014b), and there even is a tendency to use flexibility as rhetoric to be more attractive to applicants and to be more responsive to environmental changes by forcing people into flexible work schedules. This is largely in line with the earlier described theoretical perspectives on workplace flexibility from an employer's perspective (Way et al., 2015).

Comparison between Employee and Employer Perspectives

Notwithstanding the differences in study designs that have been used to study employee and employer perspectives and the higher number of studies focusing on employee perceptions, there are a number of notable similarities and differences between the two sets of studies. First, the studies on employee perceptions are aligned with the described theories on work-related aging processes, which postulate that with the aging process, people become increasingly different and hence place higher value in individualizing working conditions, and obtaining more flexibility at work. The results of these studies show that older workers value flexibility, and when they have access or use it, become more highly engaged and productive. These studies tend to stress the positive aspects of flexibility for older workers. The employer studies are more nuanced and show the difficulties that arise in the different interests of employers and employees concerning the role of flexibility at work, and the reality where employers are only offering flexibility when it aligns with business interests. This underlines the employer view based on the strategic HRM perspective which postulates that flexibility offers a useful way for organizations to stay competitive in an ever-changing market (Volberda, 1996; Wright & Snell, 1998). When flexible work arrangements contribute to employees' engagement and performance (Bal & De Lange, 2015), they may contribute to organizational performance as well (Bal & Dorenbosch,

2015), thereby providing a 'business case' for flexibility (De Menezes & Kelliher, 2011). Thus, even though flexibility may be beneficial for older workers in terms of maintaining their health and engagement, it is largely used across these studies to ascertain how older workers may contribute to organizational goals. Hence, flexibility is an instrument for organizations to find a way towards viability, competitiveness and performance, while flexibility is being described for workers as a way to retain engagement, particularly at higher age (Cebulla, Butt, & Lyon, 2007).

While older workers value flexibility as it increases their external regulation (or primary control mechanisms; Heckhausen et al., 2010), employers tend to emphasize the importance of flexibility of older workers to be able to contribute to organizational goals. Notable is that across the reviewed studies, there is little acknowledgement of the interests of the *other* party; neither do older workers generally acknowledge the organizational or societal need to continue working, while organizations generally do not take into account the importance of employment for older workers, or the need to adapt jobs towards the abilities and needs of older workers. This aligns with the earlier mentioned difference between organizational qualitative and quantitative flexibility (Wright & Snell, 1998). While there may be a societal need for workers to extend their working lives as life expectancy continues to increase (Johnson, 2011), organizational responses have largely focused on increasing quantitative flexibility (i.e., through easily hiring and firing employees). With the societal need for extending working lives, and the potential role of workplace flexibility, currently the focus on qualitative flexibility (i.e., internal training and development, task enrichment) remains underemphasized, and is undermined by the dominance of quantitative flexibility. The consequence is that ageing workers increasingly become less engaged in lifelong learning, which ultimately results in lower levels of human resources development across society, as workers are primarily engaged in retaining jobs rather than developing themselves in / across organizations (Brewer, 2000).

Conclusions and Future Research

In this paper, we have critically reviewed conceptualizations of and research on workplace flexibility for older workers. Our review points towards a number of crucial issues pertaining to the conceptualization, measurement, and use of the term workplace flexibility across and within different disciplines. Moreover, as our review shows, the majority of studies are similar in that they focus on the positive aspects of flexibility in its relationships with outcomes such as employee engagement and performance. Many studies neglect the more critical aspects of workplace flexibility and aging, such as the tensions that arise between the interests of older workers and those of organizations. Moreover, studies also ignore the potential ideological connotations which have been associated with these concepts. The disadvantage of this is that research on flexibility can be used to legitimize a certain perspective on the responsibility of ensuring flexibility of workers (Bauman, 2013). To advance theory and understanding of these issues, we discuss a number of areas for future research.

Conceptualizations of Workplace Flexibility

First, we have observed a use and conceptualization of the term flexibility which is fundamentally different across disciplines. Generally, two conceptualizations can be distinguished, with a focus on either organizational (employer) flexibility as in adaptive to changes in the environment (Way et al., 2015) or flexibility for employees as in having leeway to change one's schedules, work locations, and ways one conduct the job (Hill et al., 2008a). While there is no fundamental problem with having different perspectives on a particular phenomenon (Suddaby, 2010), a tension arises when these views conflict and lead to contradictory findings. This is notable in research on flexibility for older workers, with a body of research pointing

towards the potential positive roles (employee) flexibility for older workers may have (Siegenthaler & Brenner, 2001), while another body of literature shows the instrumental role of (employer) flexibility for organizational goals (Atkinson & Sandiford, 2015; Beck, 2013). The important notion here is that these conflicting conceptualizations should be taken into account when studying the role of workplace flexibility for older workers.

The point to be made here is that employer and employee perspectives on flexibility cannot be seen as separate dimensions which are unrelated to each other. They have been developed and are influencing the employment relationship in a joint process, where the rise of employer flexibility, and in particular the opportunity to put employees in uncertain, insecure contracts, was legitimized with the promise of more flexibility for workers (Harvey, 2005; Seymour, 2014). Therefore, their rise has occurred simultaneously, and research on workplace flexibility should take this into account as well. Research on how flexible work arrangements may contribute to working lives of older workers, should not neglect that this flexibility co-occurs with a rise in employment insecurity for older workers, and increasing difficulties with finding new jobs when unemployed (Klehe et al., 2012). Consequently, researchers should not one-sidedly focus on the positive aspects of flexible work options for older workers, but instead realize that flexibility should not only be studied as an isolated phenomenon of within-individual psychological processes. Instead, we plea for a broad employer-employee exchange perspective with investigation of different types of institutional (governmental, organizational, labor unions) pressures towards the establishment of the employment relationship and the role of flexibility in it. Taking this one step further may inspire researchers not only to take into account the exchange of flexibility between parties, but also to investigate alternatives, such as organizations where flexibility is positioned as a central principle, such as organizational democracies or volunteering organizations where employees are empowered to self-organize and have the flexibility needed to

successfully conduct their work (Stohl & Cheney, 2001). This means that flexibility is not positioned as an outcome which is instrumental in organizational goals (and thus contributing to employee and organizational performance), but valued as an outcome as such since it is experienced as contributing to meaningful work.

Workplace Flexibility across the Lifespan

There is a need for more critical perspectives on both fields of workplace flexibility and aging at work (Putnam et al., 2014; Rozanova, 2010). As explained above, workplace flexibility may be a double-edged sword for older workers, as it may provide them with opportunities to regulate age-related changes in a flexible, adaptable way, but at the same time, it may be a manifestation of the individualized responsibility to take care of one's career, and a refusal of organizations to manage careers of older workers, or to create jobs which are suitable for older workers. At the same time, literatures on aging have relied intensely on notions of successful or productive aging (Kooij, 2015; Zacher, 2015), and the need for older people to remain active and employed during late adulthood. Again, these literatures have stressed the individual responsibility of people to remain employed, but also the 'norm' that one should be active and proactive when one becomes older, and attributing blame to individuals who are unable to be productive at higher age, or to age successfully in line with the (Western) societal norms of self-directedness, independence, and activity (Katz & Calasanti, 2015). Future research therefore should take a critical approach, acknowledging the multi-faceted aspects of workplace flexibility and aging, and refrain from imposing normative views of successful aging on research (and research designs). Caution is therefore needed in researching flexibility for older workers, as different perspectives may offer different theoretical frameworks for understanding how workplace flexibility manifests for older workers. In particular it is imperative that in future

research the conditioning roles of government and organizations for an optimal tradeoff between employer/employee flexibility, should be investigated.

More specifically, a more integrative model of workplace flexibility includes flexibility at three levels. At the societal level, governments have to ensure social security to enable a more flexible workforce (Johnson, 2011), which includes social benefits, and investments for people to return to work if unemployed due to flexibilization of contracts. At the organizational level, employers should ensure work security, which may replace job security, and includes an exchange relationship consisting of guaranteed work for employee investment in development and learning. This indicates a willingness of organizations to engage in qualitative flexibility rather than quantitative flexibility, and thus aims at developing employees to be more flexible and employable. Finally, at the personal level, workers need to cooperate in building qualitative flexibility, through engaging in development activities, lifelong learning, which then may contribute to higher psychological flexibility (Atkins & Parker, 2012) and employability (Van der Heijde & Van der Heijden, 2006).

Another issue at the organizational level pertains to whether organizations should implement age-specific practices (Kunze et al., 2013). Age-specific flexibility practices may include workload reductions from a certain age (such as above 50), which have been popular in many countries (Johnson, 2011). However, these possible flexibility practices are costly, and may benefit older workers at the expense of younger workers. For instance, when older workers are exempt from nightshifts (e.g., in health care), this may lead to younger workers having to conduct more nightshifts, and thus potentially offloading the burden of less desirable working conditions to others. In addition, age-specific practices may lead to perceptions of entitlement, as regardless of individual needs, people may feel that they are entitled to a practice when they reach a specific age (Bal & Jansen, 2015). As research has shown, even though of similar ages, people may differ

substantially in terms of how willing, able and motivated they are at work (Kanfer et al., 2013; Kooij et al., 2008). Therefore, age-specific practices may be irrelevant when there is no perceived general age-related need for a practice. Hence, governments and organizations are increasingly reducing age-related practices, such as exempts, additional leave, and early retirement benefits, but these may not be replaced with other relevant, general, uniform, institutionalized practices. Instead, and as research has shown, organizations are increasingly refraining from implementing formal flexibility practices (Atkinson & Sandiford, 2015), and hence rely more on idiosyncratic deals (Bal & Jansen, 2015; Rousseau, 2005). This may be at odds with the findings from the review, which shows that older workers generally receive less flexibility, while it may contribute more strongly to their work attitudes and behaviors. A straightforward recommendation for employers is to increase availability of flexibility for older workers when there is a need or desire to retain older workers in the workforce and organizations. Employer perspectives, which not solely focus on organizational flexibility through contingent workers, may also contribute to this by offering skill-enhancing practices to older workers, which may contribute to both organizational adaptiveness as worker adaptiveness. Yet, our review shows that older workers are also less likely to negotiate individualized flexibility arrangements, which may be an avenue for organizations to focus on in the future, and provide more equal access among workers to individualized deals (Bal & Lub, 2015).

The switch from formal practices to idiosyncratic deals raises some important questions for future research. The interplay between formal flexibility practices and flexibility i-deals is in need of further investigation, as formal practices may generally be easier for employees to obtain than to negotiate idiosyncratic deals (Bal & Lub, 2015). Some older workers may have powerful positions in organizations, and therefore may easily obtain flexibility arrangements, while other older workers lack those powers, and thus will not be able to have flexibility in their work.

However, workplace flexibility, as we defined it earlier in the paper, results from the negotiation between employee and organization, and thus should be negotiated with mutual benefits in mind (Rousseau, 2005). Only through more explicit alignment of both employee and organizational interests, nepotism and cronyism can be avoided (Bal & Lub, 2015), and therefore may serve both employees, organizations, and other stakeholders (such as society and government).

Dynamics of Workplace Flexibility

Following the tendency to individualize workplace flexibility negotiations, another question should be raised, which concerns the stability and fluctuations of flexibility arrangements. Bal and De Lange (2015) introduced the idea of regular vs. irregular flexibility, which referred to arrangements where people may have flexibility in their daily job activities, or whether they have the opportunity to have flexibility irregularly, such as sabbaticals or unpaid leave. Hence, flexibility may have different relevance as it is implemented in daily activities or whether it extends to larger conceptualizations of the employment relationship. In the latter case, there is a necessary involvement of institutions such as governments, to ensure the structure of these practices. A related issue concerns whether arrangements are stable or fluctuating. For instance, when someone has negotiated a flexible work schedule, for how long is this agreement valid? Does workplace flexibility change when organizations are changing? This is especially in the context of workplace flexibility for older workers, as flexibility agreements made in the past may have limited relevance when workers become older. Moreover, there is now also evidence that employers are less likely to promote use of flexible work arrangements to workers in times of economic uncertainty (Sweet, Besen, Pitt-Catsouphes, & McNamara, 2014a). However, research tends to assume workplace flexibility as being rather static, as an aspect of the job and organization that does not change. It is therefore important to investigate how employees'

perceptions of their jobs change when they start using flexibility, and when flexibility is taken away from them. Hence, it is important to further study how people experience receiving, having and losing flexibility at work to fully understand how it operates in the workplace. Taking a step further leads to the notion of flexible careers (Bal et al., 2015; Moen & Sweet, 2004), in which people move away from the traditional career trajectories within organizations (such as the up-or-out system in many consulting firms), towards a variety of forms (e.g., in and out, grow or go, or life-time employment) in which people make decisions about how they develop their careers within and across organizations (see also the notion of boundaryless careers; Arthur et al., 2005). Bridge employment in this expanded view on the flexible career is integrated towards a hyper-flexible career form in which people over their careers make decisions on how they fit work with the other aspects in their lives, such as eldercare and volunteer work (Bal & Jansen, 2015; Polat et al., 2012). However, flexible careers should also be investigated critically, as flexible careers may be associated with greater freedom from organizational constraints, but at the same time they also come with greater responsibility for workers to take care of their own knowledge-building, experience obsolescence, income, and well-being (Platman, 2004b). In sum, the flexibility literature is in need of a more dynamic perspective on how workplace flexibility operates over longer time for both workers and employers. As flexibility is potentially increasingly negotiated in idiosyncratic ways, this may offer organizations and employees the opportunity to better align mutual needs and benefits, such that traditional practices which may have had limited relevance as aging entails so many interindividual differences. At the same time, older workers may become pressured to individually obtain flexibility, which may be easier for the more proactive and employable employees, potentially creating another inequality between the ‘haves’ and the ‘have-nots’. Future research may shed more light on these issues.

Methodological Challenges

The flexibility literature across the lifespan also needs to address some methodological issues pertaining to how flexibility is measured and operationalized. A traditional way of measuring flexibility for workers is by asking whether practices are available and whether workers take advantage of these practices (Allen et al., 2013). In line with our definition, measurement should try to integrate both employee and employer perspectives on flexibility, and include the negotiation of flexibility in its conceptualization and measurement. However, an important issue for measurement of workplace flexibility also pertains to what it means for workers to use a practice. To what extent do people decide on a daily level where and when they conduct their work, and how they conduct it, or is flexibility more about the perception of workers that they are in control, and that they have the ability to do so? Moreover, to which extent do people then fluctuate their daily rhythms, or are they more likely to stick to certain routines? In other words, is workplace flexibility about the daily decisions concerning how work is conducted, or is it about the employees' perceptions that they in control over their work schedules? Likewise, research may inform whether there is alignment or contradiction in the views from the employer or manager vs. the views from the employee. Research of Yang and Zheng (2011) already showed that de-coupling, where organizations claim they implement flexibility but in reality refrain from it, was associated with lower perceptions of performance. Future research may also show whether and how managers agree with their employees in the flexibility arrangements, and ascertain whether employee perceptions of flexibility actually concern idiosyncratic deals (with mutual agreement) or job crafting (i.e., unauthorized shaping of one's job).

Furthermore, flexibility in its own right may be valued by employees, as it signals the employers' willingness to create a basis around which work and life are organized. Therefore,

workplace flexibility may be investigated as an outcome of a process where organizations and workers negotiate and find agreement in the ways work is distributed, conducted and managed, through which conceptualizations of the flexible organization (Sanchez, 1995) may be aligned with worker needs and preferences (Putnam et al., 2014). In this case, employee workplace flexibility would be a constitutive element of the total rewards bundle. It is important that in future research both conceptualizations are taken into account, especially when researching the relevance and fluctuations of workplace flexibility for workers given the current uncertain economic circumstances (Sweet et al., 2014a).

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