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Flexible working conditions and decreasing levels of trust

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this study is to analyse levels of generalized trust among employees who have adapted to increasing demands for flexibility in their working lives (nonstandard work) compared with employees in traditional employment (standard work).

Design/methodology/approach – Data were collected using a self-administered questionnaire distributed to randomly selected individuals in Sweden (2004, $n = 5,080$) and a workplace survey study of temporary agency workers (2008, $n = 119$). Data were analysed using chi-square tests and logistic regression analysis.

Findings – The results reveal that people in nonstandard positions display significantly lower levels of generalized trust compared to standard employees, where age, gender, and socio-economic position are constant.

Practical implications – Since trust has proved to be a prerequisite for innovativeness, and both flexibility and innovation are officially accepted solutions for the troubles of post-industrial society, the findings point to a possible paradox in the “new economy”.

Originality/value – The results of this study are unique in that they provide valuable support for the theory that flexible working conditions lead to decreasing levels of trust in society.

Keywords Flexible labour, Trust, Temporary agency work, Nonstandard work, Temporary workers

Paper type Research paper

Various terms such as “post-industrial”, “post-Fordist”, “old” versus “new economies”, and “flexible capitalism” have all been used to describe the current labour market in ways that make it clear that the market today is fundamentally different to the period referred to as the modern industrial era (Sennett, 1998; Beck, 2000). Increased globalization, economic liberalization, and new technology have resulted in reduced staffing requirements and increasing demands for various forms of organizational flexibility (Brewster *et al.*, 1997; Kalleberg, 2000; Garsten, 2008). At the same time this trend has created a workforce capable of taking on temporary jobs at short notice (Beck, 2000), and, indeed, enhanced labour market flexibility is the stated objective for much post-industrial, Western labour market policy (OECD, 2006; EC COM, 2007, p. 359).

Flexibility and strategies for flexibility

The word “flexibility”, of course, has a variety of different meanings according to the context, and is a phenomenon that can be studied on several different levels. In the present context, the term refers to organizational requirements for greater adaptability in the face of changing market conditions, as well as individual adaptation to increasing demands for flexibility. At an organizational level, Atkinson (1984) distinguishes between three types of flexibility where numerical flexibility is one. This refers to an organization’s ability to vary the number of its employees to the demands of the market. Numerical flexibility can be achieved using a number of different strategies. What all these strategies have in common, though, is that they are based on



the use of some type or other of what Kalleberg (2000, p. 341) refers to as “nonstandard work arrangements”. Nonstandard working arrangements can in turn refer to a wide array of employment practices, such as short-term work, contingent or casual work, or temporary agency work. The common denominator for these different types of employment is that they differ from the traditional notion of lifetime employment with the same employer, and that they result from organizations’ responses to increasing demands for flexibility (Kalleberg, 2000). In this study, employees in different types of short-term employ or those employed by temporary work agencies are referred to as having a nonstandard employment arrangement[1]. As such, the object here is to study those who have adapted to increasing demands for flexibility by taking nonstandard positions, compared to those in positions with conditional tenure – or in other words, in a standard employment arrangement.

Sennett (1998) describes how the increased demand for flexibility fosters a new kind of work ethic. Instead of traditional values such as commitment and self-discipline, flexible capitalism rewards individuals who take a short-term approach and quickly replace the object of their commitment (Sennett, 1998). Work in a flexible capitalist society obliges people to be willing – and able – to face constant break-ups. This entails a degree of risk-taking that makes the idea of a career somewhat different to what it used to be in the days of lifelong employment. Every fresh start does not necessarily mean progress. Career moves are as likely to be sideways as up, and most do not bring career progress of any kind, but instead are more in the nature of bets on the future (Sennett, 1998). As such, work in the new economy does not enable people to construct a stable sense of “self” on the basis of their career:

The short-term, flexible time of the new capitalism seems to preclude making a sustained narrative out of one’s labor, and subsequently, a career. Yet to fail to wrest some sense of continuity and purpose out of these conditions would be literally to fail ourselves (Sennett, 1998, p. 122).

In such a system, individuals’ ability to develop real commitment is undermined; something which in Sennett’s (1998) words leads to a state where the “character corrodes” (Sennett, 1998, p. 147), with a subsequent decrease in trust in other people.

The aim of this study is therefore to compare levels of generalized trust between personnel groups with a traditional, non-flexible, standard employment and those working under flexible, nonstandard conditions.

What is “trust”?

The meaning of the word “trust” differs somewhat according to the discipline. However, at a very fundamental level there is a difference between trust in oneself and trust in others (Aronsson and Karlsson, 2001). At its simplest, trust in others can be defined as: “A trusts B to do X” (Cook *et al.*, 2001, p. xiv). This implies that trust is about confidence in an uncertain interaction with someone or something else (Cook *et al.*, 2001). Luhmann (1979) stresses the importance of trust as a means of reducing uncertainty: trust is only needed when we face uncertain situations, or, as Luhmann puts it, it is “the generalised expectation that the other will handle his freedom, his disturbing potential for diverse action” (Luhmann, 1979, p. 39). Since trust is about dealing with uncertainty, it is unnecessary on those occasions when we have full knowledge of the outcome of an encounter with a given other. If we know all the

different ways a situation could develop, we do not rely on trust, but confidence. Thus, trust in others is something needed in confronting an uncertain, future event (Luhmann, 1979; Seligman, 1997).

Trust in oneself can be viewed as stemming from early childhood experience, when individuals, in relation to their primary caregivers, are given (or are inoculated) with trust. In developmental psychology, self-reliance and trust can be seen as developing in parallel: as children come to trust their surroundings, and learn to trust that their needs will be met by their surroundings, they also experience a sense of security in their own abilities (Erikson, 1950). Although not necessarily incompatible with this approach, from a strictly sociological point of view trust in oneself and its role in interaction with others is slightly different. For example, Goffman (1959), in his dramaturgical model, highlights the need for actors “on stage” to be self-reliant. By this he means that an individual’s appearance in front of others can be described as if he is playing a role in a play, where as the presentation of the role amounts to the actor’s claim that the audience should approve of the role as being genuine and credible (Goffman, 1959). As such, the presentation of a role equates to a presentation of a “self” and ultimately the claim is for the audience’s approval of the actor’s identity (Goffman, 1959). The point here is that if the actor does not believe in the part played, neither does the audience. Thus, a well-functioning social interaction “on stage” requires a good measure of self-reliance in order to make the role work. In order for the actor to act the role successfully, he needs to trust both himself and the intentions of the audience. Following this reasoning, trust could be seen to be the result of social interaction, created in a dialectic process between the actor and the audience (Jerkeby, 2001). Moreover, Goffman (1959) emphasizes that the outcome of the social interaction “on stage” has consequences for the individual’s personality as well as for society at large.

If combined with Sennett’s (1998) views on structural changes in the labour market resulting in an inability to “get a life” by making a career, this notion of interpersonal trust, as influenced by the outcome of social interaction, sheds light on the process by which flexible working conditions could be said to affect people’s levels of trust. As already noted, working life in the new economy is constantly being built and rebuilt with repeated break-ups and fresh starts, so obstructing one’s work, or career, as the constituting base for one’s identity (Sennett, 1998). The case of temporary agency workers (TAWs) makes this clearer.

Perhaps it could be said that one of the most extreme forms of adaptation to demands for flexibility is to work as a TAW (Garsten, 2008). Even though it is possible, of course, to regard temporary agency work as a career in itself (Casey and Alach, 2004) research in this area has shown that being a TAW is merely regarded as a temporary solution during the search for a “real job” with permanent tenure (Isaksson and Bellaagh, 1999; Olofsdotter, 2008). For example, Feldman *et al.* (1994) depict TAWs as being dehumanised and treated as inferior, something which in the long run has a negative impact for the TAWs’ concept of “self”:

Sometimes [being a temp] is demeaning. I cannot remember how many... times I have been referred to as “just a temp,” and that has a permanent effect on your ego” (Feldman *et al.*, 1994, p. 54).

The idea of work as a constitutor of identity is an old one, and has been the subject of a number of empirical studies. In Western culture, it could be said that work is

considered to define who you are, and “Work is that which forms us” and “gives us a vehicle for personal expression” (Gini, 1998, p. 708). And even if the most important thing is to have a job in the first place (*ibid.*), autonomous and challenging types of work are the ones that are valued the most. Given the status of temporary agency work as demeaning and TAWs as less able to use their initiative (Feldman *et al.*, 1994; Forde and Slater, 2006), this implies that to succeed is the same as not being a TAW. Being a TAW, then, is the same as failure. Even if being a TAW could be considered one of the most extreme manifestations of adaptation to demands for flexibility, the sense of being flexible as an expression of failure, as something that undermines one’s self-identity and self-confidence, has been demonstrated in several other studies on different “non-standard working arrangements” (see Nollen, 1996; Henson and Just, 1996). Boyce *et al.* (2007) argue that those working under flexible conditions are stigmatized, something which in the end leads to poor self-image.

Ultimately, these various perspectives all come down to the idea that structural changes in the labour market serve to obstruct traditional, long-term career projects as a basis for individual identity. Such situations undermine people’s self-reliance and therefore their ability to develop trust in other people. With Goffman’s (1959) emphasis on how society as a whole is affected by the outcome of social interaction on the micro level, it is realistic to assume self-reliance to be a significant predictor of trust in others. It also follows that those in nonstandard working arrangements are liable to be more affected by society’s new economic circumstances: the likelihood that they will be able to found their identity on the traditional notion of a long-term career differs from those who are in standard working arrangements. Accordingly, it is reasonable to expect to find a difference in the levels of trust between people in nonstandard working arrangements and those operating under somewhat more stable conditions in standard working arrangements.

Method

To test these assumptions, levels of generalized trust were measured and compared for employees in traditional positions with indefinite tenure and those working under various nonstandard – flexible – conditions. To this end, two separate analyses – using chi-square tests and logistic regression analysis in SPSS 18.0 – were conducted: the first of data from the annual National Public Health Survey (Sample 1) by the Swedish National Institute of Public Health (FHI); the second of survey data taken from a study comparing attitudes between TAWs hired out to various client companies and ordinary personnel at those companies (Sample 2).

Sample 1

Data were collected by means of a self-administered questionnaire distributed to 20,100 randomly selected individuals in Sweden in the ages 18–84 (response rate = 61 per cent) carried out in March–June 2004 by Statistics Sweden on behalf of FHI[2]. From this initial sample, retired (or age < 65), self-employed, student, or unemployed respondents were omitted. In the data 1 respondent reported an extremely high value on the variable “working time” (762 per cent of full time), and was for that reason omitted from the data. The final *N* was 5,080 respondents.

The dependent variable “Trust” was measured using a dichotomous question: “In general, do you think that most people can be trusted?” The response scale was dichotomous, with the alternatives “yes” (= 1) and “no” (= 0). The independent

variables were age, gender (male = 1, female = 0), and self-reliance ("Have you, in recent weeks, lost faith in yourself?" – 1, "Not at all"; 2, "Not more than usual"; 3, "More than usual"; 4, "Much more than usual", where the response scale was dichotomised into "low" = 1 and "high" = 0), form of employment ("nonstandard" = 1 and "standard" = 0), respondents' working hours as per cent of full time, and socio-economic position (using SEI, the Swedish socio-economic classification system, with blue-collar workers coded as 1 = "low" and white-collar workers as 0 = "high"). The data contained information on the respondents' country of origin. This made it possible to include a dummy variable where those born in Sweden or another Nordic country were coded "1" and those born elsewhere were coded "0".

Sample 2

The first step of this study was to establish contact with Almega, the Swedish staffing industries' trade association, which in turn mediated contact with two temporary work agencies (TWAs). Given the strong competition in the TWA market, the agencies were then asked to contact potential respondents among their client companies to invite them to participate in the study. The result was that three companies that had hired staff from the TWAs agreed to participate in the study. In two of these companies a questionnaire was distributed in the form of a web survey to e-mail addresses provided by the TWAs and client companies; in the third company surveyed, the same questionnaire in the form of a traditional paper questionnaire was distributed during staff meetings. The final sample is thus a clustering of several steps (multi-stage) with the study carried out at three client companies in May–June 2008. Ages were 18–65. Out of a total of 271 questionnaires, 137 questionnaires were returned (a response rate of 51 per cent). The companies were a call centre for incoming customer service calls ($n = 38$); a manufacturer of equipment for the telecom industry ($n = 46$); and a company associated with the mechanical manufacturing industry ($n = 53$). Since in the initial sample the TWAs and client companies provided information on the respondents' gender, it was possible to compare the gender distribution of the non-response group with the final sample. The difference between the groups was less than 1 per cent and therefore not statistically significant.

Employees in managerial positions ($n = 15$), client company employees without indefinite tenure ($n = 1$), and students working part time ($n = 2$) were excluded from the analysis. The final number of respondents in each category of staff was TAWs $n = 65$ and client companies' regular staff $n = 54$.

The dependent variable "Trust" was measured using a question taken from the Swedish National Public Health Survey: "In general, do you think that most people can be trusted?" The response scale was dichotomous, with the alternatives "yes" (= 1) and "no" (= 0). The independent variables were: age, gender (male = 1 and female = 0), working time, and form of employment (TAWs = 1 and standard = 0). The working-time variable was dichotomous, with those working less than 35 hours a week classified as working part time (= 1) and those working more than 35 hours a week classified as working full time (= 0).

Results

First, the assumption that flexible working conditions lead to lower levels of generalized trust and self-confidence were analysed using chi-square tests, based on

Sample 1, comparing individuals having flexible (nonstandard) respectively non-flexible (standard) working arrangements.

Table I lends some support to the assumption that flexible working arrangements lead to decreased levels of trust in other people. The difference in levels of generalized trust between those with indefinite tenure and those with flexible working arrangements is 9 percentage points.

As shown in Table II, the idea that flexible working arrangements result in lower levels of self-confidence is supported by the results. The difference between the two groups is 5 percentage points.

In the next step of the analysis, levels of generalized trust were analysed in a logistic regression analysis. In international comparisons, Sweden and other Nordic countries are characterized by relatively high levels of generalized trust in other people. This has led to the Nordic countries being referred to as “high trusting societies” (Uslaner, 2007). Previous research has also shown that minority groups often have lower levels of generalized trust. The explanation is thought to be that, based on previous negative experiences of social interaction, social groups who have been the victim of discrimination have lower expectations of future interaction. Past discrimination may thus be expected to affect trust in other people. For this reason, ethnic minorities and women are expected to have less generalized trust (Alesina and Ferrara, 2002; Paxton, 2007), and ethnic minorities in high-trust Swedish society might reasonably be expected to have less trust than those of Swedish or Nordic origin. Previous research has also found a correlation with socio-economic resources such as income and education, so that under-privileged groups, for example, display lower levels of generalized trust. It has been hypothesized that people with greater resources and a higher socio-economic status have more positive experiences of interacting with other people and institutions (Rothstein, 2005; Rothstein and Uslaner, 2005). The literature also correlates age and trust. One recurring pattern is that younger people have less trust than their elders. According to Putnam (2000), such a pattern is explained by older generations having experienced hard times in the past, when people were forced to cooperate and trust one another in order to survive. Such explanations, in which trust distribution over age is explained only as a cohort or periodic effect, have been questioned, however. For example, Robinson and Jackson (2001) found that trust

		Nonstandard (%)	Standard (%)
Trust	Yes	82	73 *

Note: *Significant at *p* 0.001

Table I.
Sample 1, chi-square test for difference in levels of generalized trust between nonstandards and standards

		Nonstandard (%)	Standard (%)
Self-reliance	Yes	94	89 *

Note: *Significant at *p* 0.001

Table II.
Sample 1, chi-square test for difference in levels of self-confidence between nonstandards and standards

increased for ages 18-40, even when controlling for periodic and cohort effects. At the same time, they concluded that the cohort effect that Putnam emphasizes remains. This means that levels of generalized trust – among Americans – follow a pattern whereby older cohorts have more trust than younger cohorts. At the same time, though, young people have less trust than older ones within the various cohorts. One suggested explanation is that older people have a greater level of education and are involved in more complex social relationships that require trust in other people (Robinson and Jackson, 2001). In light of these considerations, age, gender, socio-economic status, and ethnicity were included in the following analysis, based again on Sample 1[3].

In addition to the Chi-square tests, the results of the logistic regression presented in Table III give further support to the idea that flexibility leads to lower levels of trust in others, even when controlling for age, gender, socio-economic position, and self-reliance. The dependent variables response scale is “yes” = 1 and “no” = 0. The results presented in Table III thus indicate that the odds that someone in a nonstandard working arrangement will have trust in others is 9.2 per cent lower than someone in a standard working arrangement (see Pampel, 2000, p. 23 for the mathematical formula for the percentage difference). They also tell us that self-reliance is a significant predictor of trust in others. The odds that people with low self-reliance will have trust in others are 54.9 per cent lower than for people with “high” self-reliance. It thus seems as though Sennett’s (1998) notion of flexibility leading to lower levels of trust in others is supported by the results of this analysis. It can also be seen that findings from previous research on gender, socio-economic position, and ethnicity are borne out here, while age, however, has no significant impact on the outcome.

Although these results are interesting, there is reason to be cautious when making any further generalizations: in Sweden, TAWs are often contracted to a TWA with full benefits and are subject to collective agreements. Thus, there is a chance that some temps in the data may have responded that they are “standard employees”, even though in reality they are constantly switching between different workplaces and so face the constant break-ups described by Sennett (1998). Accordingly, there is a risk that possible “low-trusters” have responded in the manner of “high-trusters”. In order to overcome these problems, the analysis was complemented with a direct comparison of levels of generalized trust between TAWs and their permanent colleagues in the client companies, based on Sample 2.

The result from the comparison of temps with client companies’ regular staff in Sample 2 give further support to the findings in the first analysis: the difference in

Table III.
Sample 1, Logistic regression for “trust” regressed on age, gender, socio-economic position, self-reliance, ethnicity, working time and form of employment

	<i>B</i>	S.E.	Exp(B)	
Age	0.017*	0.001	1.017	
Gender (male vs female)	0.007	0.003	1.007	
Socio-economic position (lower vs higher)	-0.801*	0.003	0.449	
Self-reliance (low vs high)	-0.797*	0.006	0.451	
Origin (Scandinavian vs rest of the world)	1.108*	0.005	3.028	
Working time (percentage of full-time)	0.006*	0.001	1.006	
Form of employment (nonstandard vs standard)	-0.096*	0.005	0.908	
Nagelkerke R^2				0.095

Note: *Significant at p 0.001

levels of trust is still statistically significant at the 0.05 level after controlling for age, gender, and working hours. To be a temp – to have a nonstandard working arrangement – means that there is a decrease in the odds that one will have trust in most other people. The odds that a temp will trust others are 56.3 per cent lower than the odds that a standard employee to trust others. Again, age has no effect on the odds of trusting others: the odds for someone born in or after 1965 are 69.7 per cent lower than the odds for someone born before 1965. However, Table IV also indicates that neither gender nor working time has any significant influence on the level of trust, unlike the results for the population-based study presented in Table III.

Taking all the results together, it seems as if Sennett's (1998) notion of flexibility leading to a decrease of trust is correct. Since little empirical evidence for Sennett's ideas has been forthcoming – it has even been argued that Sennett himself lacks empirical justification for his assertions (Kovalainen, 2000) and that the notion of “new-capitalism” is incorrect (Doogan, 2009) – these results are significant.

Conclusions

The results run counter to previous studies on trust differences between contingent and non-contingent employees (see de Gilder, 2003), perhaps unsurprisingly as those studies mainly focus on trust in the employer and not levels of generalized trust towards other human beings. As the present study shows, individuals with flexible working conditions also have a significantly lower level of generalized trust towards other people, holding age, gender, and socio-economic position constant. These results, partly based on a sample representative of the entire Swedish workforce, are unique examples of quantitative empirical investigations of the thesis that flexibility leads to decreasing levels of trust.

Bearing in mind the pronounced emphasis on innovation in the EU's labour market policies (EC COM, 2010) and the importance of interpersonal trust to the functioning of companies (Kramer and Tyler, 1996) – especially in commercial innovation (Usoro *et al.*, 2007; Khazanchi *et al.*, 2007; Dovey, 2009; Nielsen and Nielsen, 2009) – the study's findings pose something of a paradox when it comes to the labour market in post-industrial society: increasing demands for flexibility, officially presented as a survival strategy for post-industrial societies, may in fact lead to the loss of the trust that is so crucial for innovativeness.

This notion is supported by studies in economics. Kleinknecht (1998) argues that labour market flexibility leads to a decrease in innovation, and Michie and Sheehan (2003) find a negative correlation between “low road” practices (the use of short-term and temporary employment contracts) and innovation. Thus, the results

	<i>B</i>	S.E.	Exp(B)
Age (born from 1965 vs others)	– 1.193 *	0.603	0.303
Gender (male vs female)	– 0.489	0.455	0.613
Working time (part-time vs full-time)	1.177	0.850	3.244
Form of employment (TAW vs standard)	– 0.827 *	0.420	0.437
Nagelkerke R^2			0.132

Note: *Significant at p 0.05

Table IV.
Sample 2, logistic regression for “trust” regressed on age, gender, working time and employee-category

of the present study, by highlighting the connections between flexibility and a decrease in levels of trust and between trust and company innovation, serve to explain empirical results arrived at elsewhere; they offer a fuller understanding of the management of staff working in different forms of flexible employment, and point to the need for a thorough study of the use of flexible forms of employment, interpersonal trust at the organizational level, and its impact on companies' innovativeness.

Although the results are of great interest and, considering the increasing level of flexibility in society, provide us with a valuable insight into the possible order of things to come, some caution is advisable in drawing wider conclusions: the data on which the results are based (presented in Table IV) are the product of a multi-stage sample – a clustered sample arrived at in several steps. Since each step in the selection is associated with a loss of precision in the estimates, there is a risk that some variables will be correlated with the clusters from which they originated (Fowler, 1993). It is in their favour that the results presented in Tables I-III are based on a population-based random sample, representative of the entire Swedish workforce, yet even so, they should necessarily be treated as an indication of the nature of a phenomenon that is in need of further research. For example, it would be fruitful to study different countries' use of flexible employment practices, levels of trust, and their associated levels of innovativeness.

Even if the results are interesting, they should not come as much of a surprise. In his classic work on solidarity in society, Durkheim (1997) states that for organic solidarity to exist there must be some kind of continuity in the organization of work. Otherwise "solidarity would be hardly more than virtual, and the mutual obligations would have to be negotiated anew in their entirety for each individual case" (Durkheim, 1997, p. 301) In Durkheim's view, the outcome of too great a level of specialization is dysfunction, meaning that organic solidarity cannot develop properly and leading neither to mechanic nor organic solidarity but to a state of anomie. To follow Seligman (1997), the Durkheimian concept of solidarity is to be considered a form of trust, and, accordingly, striving for flexibility may be described as an anomic division of labour.

Notes

1. For more detailed definitions of "short-term" employment and "temporary agency work", see Kalleberg (2000).
2. Full details of the study and the use of its data are available in Statistics Sweden's technical report (FHI, 2004).
3. In "Sample 2" all of the respondents were blue-collar workers and are assumed to have been in the same socio-economic position.

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