Flexible working times: towards a new employment relationship?

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(Stream FLEXIBILITY)

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

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

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