

Flexible work arrangements can't be for just well-paid professionals

Young workers in low-income, entry-level jobs often have to juggle family responsibilities and could use more help.

**Irene Y.H. Ng,
Tan Zhi Han,
Nurul Fadhiah Johari
& Gerard Chung**

Shorter work week, longer parental leave, flexibility for new parents and caregivers – there is currently strong emphasis on flexi-work and work-life balance. In Singapore, a tripartite workgroup has been formed to develop flexi-work arrangements (FWAs), including flexi-time, flexi-place and flexi-workload. But in our research study on young people at work, where we oversampled lower-income young workers, we found that much of the discussion about improving flexible work hours and workplace does not apply to many young people in entry-level and low-income jobs.

WORKING UNSTABLE AND ODD HOURS

Take the case of Sarah (not her real name), a service crew member in a restaurant. A mother of two young daughters, Sarah needed to request leave from work whenever one of her children fell sick and could not go to the childcare centre. She cannot afford a foreign domestic worker. Her spouse is incarcerated. Her parents live far from her and her mother is not in good health.

"Don't you have a father or mother?" her supervisor asked upon her repeated requests to avoid weekend shifts, betraying an assumption that young workers would have familial support so that they can take on the inflexible work hours required in the food and beverage industry.

In the end, Sarah switched to food delivery, which gave her the flexibility for her caregiving needs but ultimately resulted in lower income.

While Sarah's case reveals the need for greater caregiver support to young parents, it also gives pause to our expectations that certain jobs require uncontrollable and non-standard hours.

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We need to change our mindset on the kinds of services expected, and be ready to be inconvenienced so that another's life can have a chance to be a little closer to the kinds of flexibility that the rest of society enjoys, say the writers. ST FILE PHOTO

a more insidious (and qualitative) form of time poverty.

Symptoms of this problem include regularly working night shifts or on weekends, receiving only a few days of notice when one's work schedule has to be changed, and rigid rest breaks.

Such issues disproportionately impact the young in low-wage work, where they also lack telecommuting options. It is no wonder because the jobs they have in common – such as retail service, food and parcel delivery, and healthcare – are people-facing jobs that cannot be completed remotely.

They may work the same number of hours as higher-wage earners. But they are more likely to have little or no control over when they work.

THE PROBLEM WITH BLUE-COLLARED WORK

This unpredictability and instability imposed by employers take a toll on family and social life. The inability to control one's work hours and the need to work on weekends or evenings limit the time others usually set aside to spend with family members (especially young children) and friends. It also hampers the ability of young people to invest in training and seize opportunities for upgrading to advance their career when they cannot go for training courses because they have to work shifts

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that change at the drop of a hat. Indeed, we found that working non-standard and uncontrollable hours leads to greater work-family conflict, which in turn lowers self-efficacy and increases the risk of anxiety. In other words, work-family conflict resulting from time poverty has detrimental effects on one's psychological well-being.

These findings have implications on the flexi-work policy agenda. Flexi-work arrangements typically revolve around telecommuting and varying work hours in order to accommodate workers' needs, such as enabling parents to leave work earlier to pick children up from childcare centres.

They are also often accompanied by other measures

to protect workers' well-being, such as limiting work e-mails or calls to typical work hours even when employees may exercise flexible hours by working in the evenings or on weekends.

These arrangements stand in stark contrast to the experience of half of our respondents who cannot telecommute and 18 per cent who work non-standard and uncontrollable hours – many of whom are disproportionately low-waged. They work in occupations and positions for which employers assume that the flexi-work guidelines do not even apply.

A TWO-TIER ECONOMY?

Our findings suggest a bifurcation of jobs, where the majority of working individuals who already enjoy greater autonomy and flexibility are now given even greater flexibility through the flexi-work movement.

In contrast, a minority but significant segment of workers cannot even begin to imagine working from home, working during standard hours, or having some control over their work time. The latter are often jobs on the front lines and in essential services – such as healthcare, F&B and security. Ironically, they provide round-the-clock service so that the rest of us can live more conveniently and work with greater flexibility because we can

buy a meal any time of the day or seek medical attention if a child runs a fever late at night.

Such an increasingly divergent two-tier economy is unacceptable in a Singapore striving for inclusive workplaces. A new compact around work will require bold imagination and society bearing some inconveniences.

For example, why should supermarkets or popular fast food chains be expected to open till late or 24 hours a day? Those late or overnight hours see few customers and are not efficient use of workers that are idle for large parts of the night.

Late-night services can also be handled by self-vending machines or self-checkouts with CCTV installations, thereby reducing the need for shift workers.

For jobs where shift work is unavoidable, such as in healthcare and security, while the Employment Act sets necessary conditions to limit overwork, the tripartite flexi-work arrangements workgroup has its work cut out if it is to produce guidelines for occupations usually left out of standard flexi-work arrangements.

Employers – in particular human resource departments and direct supervisors – have an important role to play in planning job allocations and schedules in ways to improve flexibility and autonomy.

Businesses tend to stretch staffing with little room for contingencies due to sudden staff movements, and admittedly, staff shortage in the service industry is an ongoing reality.

But going by the case of Sarah, staff shortage might also be a circular problem, where the need for flexibility by workers in inflexible occupations leads them to quit. Can employers exercise more "buffer hiring", so that should a worker need time off to attend to family matters, there is another employee ready to stand in?

Here, job sharing and job rotation with overlapping functions can provide much-needed reprieve to individual workers, and resultantly, lower turnover costs.

Companies, even those in the services sector, should recognise that all workers will have caregiving responsibilities at some point in their lives, and establish human resource practices that account for this fact.

Low-wage young parents, in particular, deserve to be present in their children's life as much as higher-earning parents; they also need the flexibility to attend to young children when they are ill. And ironically, while low-wage young parents all the more need additional earnings to provide for their families, non-standard and uncontrollable work hours without the option to telecommute lead to limited bandwidth for training and the attendant improvements in job prospects.

Deputy Prime Minister Lawrence Wong has repeatedly emphasised the need to help lower-wage "hands" and "heart" workers. Addressing the greater time poverty and workplace rigidities they face is an important component to improving their prospects.

We need to contend with the challenges we have posed in this article if Singapore is to be a society that unifies rather than sets dual standards and expectations, where a minority of workers are left out of what is put forth as the norm, but is not applicable to all in reality.

We need to change our mindset of the kinds of services expected, and be ready to be inconvenienced so that another's life can have a chance to be a little closer to the kinds of flexibility that the rest of society enjoys.

• Associate Professor Irene Y.H. Ng and Assistant Professor Gerard Chung are from the National University of Singapore's Department of Social Work. They are also with the NUS Social Service Research Centre, where Mr Tan Zhi Han and Ms Nurul Fadhiah Johari are research associates. The discussions in this article were presented at a symposium held on March 29, 2023.