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Flexible working schedules in SMEs: Evidence from a developing country

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Abstract

There has been a sustained interest in flexible work schedules (FWSs) because of the opportunities they offer in improving organizational efficiency and providing a more work–life balanced role for employees. Yet, less research attention has been focused on FWSs in SMEs in developing countries, which leaves much to be concerned about FWSs, its application and impacts in SMEs in developing countries especially in the context of Africa. Drawing on the theory of work adjustment and job demand-resource model and using a survey data on SMEs from Ghana, the study theorizes and tests the relationship between FWSs and SMEs perceived profitability, employees' career satisfaction and productivity. The results from the analysis indicate that FWSs in SMEs in developing countries are positively associated with (perceived) profitability, employees' career satisfaction and productivity. The implications of these findings are discussed.

KEYWORDS

career satisfaction, developing countries, flexible work schedule, perceived profitability, productivity, SMEs

1 | INTRODUCTION

Flexible working schedules (FWSs), that is, employees' control over where and when to work (Chung & Van der Lippe, 2018; Glass & Estes, 1997; Kelly, Moen, & Tranby, 2011), have gained sustained research interest over the past 20 years among scholars and practitioners. This is because the benefits of FWSs, which accommodate employees' preferences and needs, have been on the agenda of governments and employment agencies (De Menezes & Kelliher, 2011). In recent times, the outbreak of the novel Coronavirus (COVID 19) and its resultant restrictions on social distance and stay-home policies by governments across the globe have further intensified the demand for more FWSs in the workplace (Harper, 2020; Routley, 2020). While there is a growing interest in the use of FWSs, reflecting the increasing use and importance of flexibility in the workplace (Stavrou, Parry, & Anderson, 2015; Beltrán-Martín & Roca-Puig, 2013; Stavrou, 2005; Haar & Spell, 2004; Kalleberg, 2000), research to date has focused on how different FWS arrangements affect various indicators including job satisfaction, absenteeism, attrition, employee retention, burnout, and a myriad of individual and/or organizational performance measures (Dalton & Mesch, 1990; Konrad & Mangel, 2000; Perry-Smith & Blum, 2000; Stavrou, 2005; Valverde, Tregaskis, & Brewster, 2000).

Despite these research efforts, many research lacunae remain underexplored in extant literature with further research merited in a number of areas. First, the nexus between FWSs and organizational performance is yet to be established in the academic literature (De Menezes & Kelliher, 2011) even though, it has been contended that FWSs, directly and indirectly, shape the performance of individual and/or organizational. For example, comprehensive surveys on Work–Life Balance Study and Workplace Employment Relations Series (Hooker, Neathey, Casebourne, & Munro, 2007; Nadeem & Metcalf, 2007; Kersley et al., 2006), report significant increases in FWSs being offered but failed to report on how these FWSs affect performance. Second, various authors have underscored the significance of context in examining the use of FWSs, arguing that FWSs and its application and effect on individual and/or organizations may be context specific (Stavrou, 2005; Stavrou & Kilaniotis, 2010). However, how FWSs may be generally applied or remain context specific

is underexplored in extant literature (Resnick, 1997; Solomon, 1999; Stavrou & Kilaniotis, 2010). Consequently, there is a lack of understanding about whether or not organizations practising similar or different FWSs have the same results or if indeed the elements of FWS practised universally produce the same or different outputs. Additionally, a study by Stavrou and Kilaniotis (2010) emphasised the significance of contextual factors in examining the link between FWSs and organizational outcomes. The authors argued that the relationships been examined may be misleading when context-specific factors are not taken into account. Related to the gap on context is the fact that a critical analysis of prior studies shows that research work on FWSs has predominantly been focused on developed/advanced economies leaving more to be understood in the context of emerging and developing countries. Further, a careful examination of existing literature on FWSs reveals that very little is known about FWSs, its application and effect in Small and Medium Scale Enterprises (SMEs). By exploring the formation of FWSs in SMEs, we can build a deeper insight into how best to bundle FWSs to ensure maximum returns for SMEs in developing countries.

To contribute to filling these gaps in the extant literature, we employed a survey data on SMEs from a developing country (i.e., Ghana, West Africa) to test how FWSs affect the perceived profitability of the SMEs, career satisfaction of employees and the productivity of the employees. Specifically, the motivation of this paper is to situate the findings in the context prior global FWSs literature, which contains limited literature on developing countries particularly in Africa.

This paper makes important contributions to the extant literature on FWSs. First, the study responds to the call for more empirical work to address the gap in the link between FWSs and some key performance indicators. To this end, the study finds that the application of FWSs in SMEs in developing countries is positively associated with (perceived) profitability, employees' career satisfaction and productivity. Second, this paper contributes to the importance of context in FWSs research by focusing on SMEs in developing African country. Thus, the findings of this paper are unique in context and apply to SMEs in developing countries. Finally, our paper makes significant contributions to the extant literature by replying to the call for an increase in research in management scholarship about Africa (George, Schillebeeckx, & Liak, 2015) because "Africa offers great potential as a context for management research, […] more empirical and conceptual work is warranted to explain the richness of the opportunities on the African continent" (George, Corbishley, Khayesi, Haas, & Tihanyi, 2016:389) as well as to comprehend and appreciate how FWSs support the growth and development of SMEs in Africa. The remaining part of the paper is organized as follows: Section 2 discusses the theoretical background and hypotheses, Section 3 considers the methodology; Section 4 focuses on results, whereas Section 5 presents the discussion and conclusion of the study.

2 | THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is anchored on the theory of Work adjustment and Job demand-resource (JD-R) model. The theory of work adjustment developed by Pierce and Newstrom (1980) is one of the most widely used theoretical frameworks (Deery, Walsh, Zatzick, & Hayes, 2016) for providing a theoretical explanation on the effect of flexible scheduling on employee attitudes and behaviour (Baltes, Briggs, Huff, Wright, & Neuman, 1999). Work adjustment has been defined as the process by which the individual or employee "interacts with and comes to terms with the work environment" (Pierce & Newstrom, 1980:120). The theory highlights the matching of individual job characteristics and needs and the role of the work atmosphere or environment in achieving the requirements of the employee (Dawis & Lofquist, 1978). It provides a conceptual connection between flexible work arrangements and employee behaviour and consequently supports the prediction that a flexible working arrangement is linked to individual behaviour in the work environment. On the other hand, the theoretical argument of the Job demand resource is grounded on the fact that working environment is associated with both physical and psychological demands which mostly have a negative bearing on employees' health and organizational performance (Demerouti, Bakker, Nachreiner, & Schaufeli, 2001; Demerouti, Le Blanc, Bakker, Schaufeli, & Hox, 2009). Such work demands may include time pressures, emotionally demanding interaction with customers, unfavourable organizational climate and working environment, which mostly depletes employee health. On the other hand, job resources encapsulate all physical, social, psychological and organizational elements of the job, which play key roles in attaining work-related goals, and cushion employees against the negative impact of job demands and also creates an atmosphere for personal growth and development (Demerouti et al., 2001; Demerouti et al., 2009). Just to mention a few, job resources include job autonomy and enrichment, social and workplace support and performance feedback. Even though the JD-R model is not directly linked to flexible work schedules and SMEs development, the model provides a conceptual nexus between these. In line with JD-R model, work in itself comes along with certain pressures and demands, which in turn have a negative bearing on employees. However, when employees have a sense of control over their working schedules, they can adjust their working times such that the negative impact of work is mostly not felt. As such, their autonomy over working times cushions them against the negative consequences of their job demands. The buffering effect of employee sense of control over the working times gives birth to positive work outcomes including improved productivity, employee career satisfaction as well as organizational profitability.

3 | CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND HYPOTHESES DEVELOPMENT

3.1 | Flexible work schedules, perceived profitability, career satisfaction and employees' productivity

Various scholars have analysed the relationship between flexible work schedule and firm performance in both the practitioner and academic

literature with different findings (De Menezes & Kelliher, 2011). While these differences in the findings may, at least in part, be associated with the miscellany in research approaches, still, the empirical finding has failed to provide established support for this relationship. For example, a series of studies have examined and found support for a positive relationship between flexible work arrangement and profitability of the firm. The main argument here is that flexible work schedule, if well-implemented results in increased employee morale, commitment, and engagement to the firm (Cranfield School of Management, 2008; De Menezes & Kelliher, 2011; Dex & Smith, 2002; Grover & Crocker, 1995; Harris & Foster, 2005; Maxwell, Rankine, Bell, & MacVicar, 2007; Meyer, Mukerjee, & Sestero, 2001; Thompson, Beauvais, & Lyness, 1999; Sands & Harper, 2007), reduced absenteeism and tardiness (Krausz & Freibach, 1983) and increases the ability to hire outstanding employees (Foster Thompson & Aspinwall, 2009; Lewis, Smithson, Cooper, & Dyer, 2001; Maxwell et al., 2007) which ultimately result in better firm performance (most often captured as profitability).

Focusing on the relationship between flexible work schedules and career (job) satisfaction, scholars have theorized and found support for a positive relationship. For instance, a study by Almer and Kaplan (2002) which compared flexible workers and non-flexible workers in accounting firm reported that flexible working arrangements are positively associated with employees' career satisfaction. Hooker et al. (2007) in The Third Work–Life Balance Employee Survey also concluded that flexible workers were more likely to be very satisfied with their jobs than non-flexible workers. A similar survey by Cranfield School of Management (2008) reported that employee whose work had flexible work schedules reported higher levels of job satisfaction than employees whose work did not involve any of such flexible arrangement in the organization. Scandura and Lankau (1997) who research focused on flexible work schedule among women observed that women who perceived to have been offered flexible work arrangement reported higher levels of job satisfaction, irrespective of whether they utilized the arrangement. Allen (2001) in his family-supportive work environments study found that the availability of FWSs alone had a minimal effect on job attitudes, however, the employees' perception of the firm being family-supportive had a positive impact on organizational commitment and job satisfaction. These findings were confirmed by Forsyth and Polzer-Debruyne (2007) in their survey of New Zealanian 1,187 employees from 23 organizations.

Regarding the question of whether FWSs predict employee productivity, several papers have hypothesized and found support for various results. For example, one of the earlier works on flexible work schedules concluded that schedule flexibility could aid an organization improve its effectiveness and productivity (Ronen and Primps (1980). A review by Ronen (1986) disclosed that the use of flexible work arrangement is positively related to organizational effectiveness and productivity, as well as impacting positively on employees' attitudes. Greene (1984) in comparison of three workplaces could not establish differences in productivity increase between a workplace with flexible work arrangements and another without such an arrangement. This positive association between flexible working schedule and productivity was also confirmed by Chow and Keng-Howe (2006) and Shepard III, Clifton, and Kruse (1996).

While these findings have contributed significantly to the literature on FWSs, a careful analysis of the literature suggests that the nexus between FWSs and individual/organizational outcomes is yet to be established in the academic literature (De Menezes & Kelliher, 2011). Moreover, most of these studies on FWSs have focused on large firms in developed/advanced countries. This still leaves more to be understood about FWSs in the context of SMEs in developing countries. Against this background and the various arguments presented in the extant literature, we propose and test the following hypotheses in the context of SMEs in a developing country, Ghana.

Hypothesis 1 Flexible working schedules positively affect perceived profitability.

Hypothesis 2 Flexible working schedules positively affect career satisfaction.

Hypothesis 3 Flexible working schedules positively affect the productivity of the employee.

4 | METHODS

4.1 | Setting and sample characteristics

The data used for this study were gathered from SMEs in Adenta Municipality of the Greater Accra Region of Ghana. A total of 183 employees, who responded to the survey instruments, were drawn from SMEs from seven different industries, allowing us to test our hypotheses in a wide variety of SMEs. The participating SMEs ranged from agriculture to construction, from manufacturing to services and from real estate to transport and ICT. We employed a structured questionnaire to collect data on employees' experiences towards flexible work arrangements. Following extant literature (Giannikis & Mihail, 2011), we designed our survey instrument by combining the Flexible Work Options Questionnaire designed by Albion (2004) and that of Charron and Lowe (2005). Each of the items for capturing our variables was rated on a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly agree to 5 = strongly disagree). Also, information on demographic profiles of the respondent (age, gender, educational level, marital status, the grade of employment duration of service) was captured by the instrument. A sample of SMEs was conveniently chosen from Adenta Municipality of Greater Accra Region. After securing permission to carry out the survey, the survey instrument was hand-delivered by the researchers to directly gather the data from the participants. In the end, a total of 221 questionnaires were received, of which 183 were valid for analysis (due to missing data). Details of the background characteristic of the SMEs and employees employed in the study are presented in Tables 1 and 2.

TABLE 1 Demographic characteristics of respondents

Demographic characteristics	N	%
Age		
Below 21	22	12.0
21–30	106	57.9
31–40	33	18.0
41–50	15	8.2
51 and more	7	3.8
Gender		
Male	97	53.0
Female	86	47.0
Educational level		
Post-graduate	8	4.4
Degree	39	21.3
Diploma	39	21.3
SHS	71	38.8
JHS	26	14.2
Marital status		
Single	133	72.7
Married	45	24.6
Divorced	2	1.1
Widowed	3	1.6
Grade of employment		
Lower	41	22.4
Middle	97	53.0
Executive	45	24.6
Duration of service		
0–3	101	55.2
4–6	40	21.9
7–9	18	9.8
10–12	16	8.7
13 and more	8	4.4

TABLE 2 SMEs background

Company characteristics	N	%
Industry		
Agriculture	3	1.6
Manufacturing	9	4.9
Construction	6	3.3
Real estate	8	4.4
Transport and communication	15	8.2
Trade	139	76.0
Government services	3	1.6
Number of employees		
1–50	177	96.7
51–100	6	3.3
Year of operating		
1–5	106	57.9
6–10	37	20.2
11–15	25	13.7
16–20	6	3.3
21 and more	8	4.4
Error	1	.5
Branches		
1	74	40.4
2–5	89	48.6
6–9	12	6.6
10 or more	8	4.4

5 | RESULTS

Table 3 provides information on the descriptive statistics, the correlation matrix and the Cronbach alpha values for the variables used in the analysis. The correlations among explanatory variables are relatively low, indicating that the issue of multicollinearity should not affect the models. This is confirmed by the analysis of variance inflation factor (VIF). The VIF values (largest VIF = 1.09, mean VIF = 1.05) fall within the range of acceptable limit of 10 (Neter, Wasserman, & Kutner, 1989), suggesting that multicollinearity is unlikely to have affected our results. Also, Cronbach alpha values computed on the scale of the items used for capturing our variables were found to be above 0.70 (see Table 3), suggesting that the scale is internally consistent (Nunnally, 1978).

We tested our hypotheses with robust OLS regression. Table 4 shows the results of the robust OLS regression models for the proposed relationship between flexible work schedules and perceived profitability (Hypothesis 1). Model 1 (i.e., the full sample) in Table 4 shows the results of hypothesis 1. We find support for a positive significant relationship between flexible work arrangement and perceived profitability of SMEs (β = 0.277, p > .001). In Models 2 and 3, we sub-divided our sample into SMEs who practiced somewhat flexible arrangement and those who do not practice any sort of flexible arrangement. Interestingly, in Model 2 (which represents SMEs practising FWSs), we observed that flexible work schedules significantly predict perceived profitability (β = 0.193, p > .05). On the contrary, no significant relationship was obtained for SMEs with no FWSs.

Table 5 shows the output of the analysis of our second hypothesis. That is, FWSs positively predict career satisfaction of employees of SMEs (Hypothesis 2). Model 4 (in Table 5) that shows our full sample confirms our prediction that employees in SMEs with flexible arrangements at work are satisfied with their career (job) (β = 0.208, p > .001). In the sub-samples of SMEs which practice Flexi-work and those which did not, employees are satisfied with their careers as shown in Model 5 (β = 0.104, p > .10) and Model 6 (β = 0.364, p > .001), respectively.

In Table 6, we report the output of the analysis for our third hypothesis, which predicts that flexible work schedules positively affect the productivity of employees in SMEs (Hypothesis 3). We

TABLE 3 Descriptive statistics and correlations

	Mean	Sd	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Cronbach alpha
1. Perceived profitability	2.716	1.265	1.000							0.941
2. Career satisfaction	2.505	0.945	0.390***	1.000						0.885
3. Employees productivity	2.266	0.952	0.428***	0.435***	1.000					0.827
4. Flexiwork	7.989	1.464	0.322***	0.336***	0.347***	1.000				0.929
5. Size	1.175	0.933	−0.055	0.106	−0.096	0.042	1.000			—
6. Age	1.809	1.327	−0.075	−0.178*	−0.048	−0.080	0.143+	1.000		—
7. Branches	1.749	0.765	−0.040	0.095	−0.039	−0.047	0.108	0.256***	1.000	—

Note: $N = 183$.
Note: $^{+}p < .10$, $^{*}p < .05$, $^{**}p < .01$, $^{***}p < .001$.

TABLE 4 Robust OLS regression: Relationship between flexible working schedule and perceived profitability

Variables	Model 1 (Full sample)	Model 2 (Practiced FWSs)	Model 3 (No FWSs)
Flexiwork	0.277***	0.193*	0.150
	(0.060)	(0.075)	(0.220)
Size	−0.085	−0.053	−0.046
	(0.068)	(0.125)	(0.084)
Age	−0.036	−0.082	0.018
	(0.068)	(0.090)	(0.069)
Branches	−0.014	−0.158	0.557**
	(0.119)	(0.127)	(0.196)
_cons	0.691	1.546*	1.048
	(0.536)	(0.604)	(2.105)
No. of observation	183	137	46
R-square	0.110	0.073	0.106
p-value	6.368	4.054	2.981
F-test	0.000	0.004	0.030

Note: Standard errors in parentheses.
Note: $^{+}p < .10$, $^{*}p < .05$, $^{**}p < .01$, $^{***}p < .001$.

TABLE 5 Robust OLS regression: Relationship between flexible working schedule and career satisfaction

Variables	Model 4 (full sample)	Model 5 (practice FWSs)	Model 6 (no FWSs)
Flexiwork	0.208***	0.104+	0.364***
	(0.048)	(0.055)	(0.081)
Size	0.107*	0.119	0.124*
	(0.052)	(0.076)	(0.055)
Age	−0.147***	−0.088	−0.197***
	(0.038)	(0.059)	(0.038)
Branches	0.187+	−0.043	0.907***
	(0.103)	(0.093)	(0.162)
_cons	0.658	1.671***	−1.815**
	(0.406)	(0.421)	(0.649)
No. of observation	183	137	46
R-square	0.170	0.047	0.429
F-test	8.737	1.585	18.126
p-value	.000	.182	.000

Note: Standard errors in parentheses.
Note: $^{+}p < .10$, $^{*}p < .05$, $^{**}p < .01$, $^{***}p < .001$.

TABLE 6 Robust OLS regression: Relationship between flexible working schedule and employees' productivity

	Model 7 (full sample)	Model 8 (practice FWSs)	Model 9 (no FWSs)
Flexiwork	0.228***	0.049	0.233
	(0.056)	(0.047)	(0.142)
Size	−0.111*	−0.193**	−0.098
	(0.055)	(0.067)	(0.073)
Age	−0.001	0.063	−0.048
	(0.039)	(0.048)	(0.060)
Branches	−0.012	−0.165+	0.566*
	(0.109)	(0.086)	(0.212)
_cons	0.600	2.058***	0.028
	(0.478)	(0.405)	(1.338)
No. of observation	183	137	46
R-square	0.132	0.086	0.142
p-value	5.178	20.079	3.295
F-test	0.001	0.000	0.020

Note: Standard errors in parentheses.
Note: $^{+}p < .10$, $^{*}p < .05$, $^{**}p < .01$, $^{***}p < .001$.

found support for this hypothesis as indicated in Model 7 (β = 0.228, $p > .001$). This relationship was not significant when we divided the data into subsample of those who practice flexi-work and those who did not as shown in Models 8 and 9.

6 | DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

In this article, the issue of having FWSs in SMEs in a developing economy has been examined. Specifically, drawing on the work adjustment and job demand-resource models, the study analyses how flexible work arrangements in SMEs determines the perceived profitability, career satisfaction and productivity of employees in Ghana. While various scholars have contributed to the literature on FWSs (See a review by De Menezes & Kelliher, 2011), a critical analysis of these papers indicates that less research attention has been focused on SMEs in developing countries leaving much to be understood about the role of flexi-work arrangements in SMEs in developing economies especially in the context of Africa. Hence, this study contributes to this important gap in several ways.

First, the results show that there is a positive significant relationship between FWSs and perceived profitability in SMEs. This implies that SMEs with better flexible work arrangements are more likely to have a high profit. This finding supports extant studies. For instance, Meyer et al. (2001) reported that remote working from home positively impact on profitability. Sands and Harper (2007) in a similar study also showed that remote working is positively related to return on assets and equities.

Second, we contribute to the extant literature on flexible work arrangement and career (job) satisfaction by finding support for our second hypothesis: FWS positively predicts career satisfaction. This suggests that employees who have a flexible working schedule (in the form of telework, flexitime, part-time work, telecommute, homework, remote work) have a more positive outlook about their career which is more likely to translate into superior performance. Again, this result agrees with prior literature that flexible work schedules affect employee career satisfaction. (Almer & Kaplan, 2002; Hooker et al., 2007; Scandura & Lankau, 1997).

Third, we find support to contribute to studies analysing the link between flexible work arrangement and employees' productivity. Our findings show that employees of SMEs with flexible working have high productivity, which confirms established findings in the literature. For example, a study by Mahajan and Foggin (2006) reported that the use of FWSs resulted in the rise of productivity up to 20% in British Telecom. Also, Stavrou (2005) showed that remote working was related to perceptions of improved performance.

In summary, the positive association between having FWSs and perceived profitability, career satisfaction and employees' productivity are consistent as predicted in our hypothesis and are in line with the findings of several previous studies. However, these findings are important in the context of SMEs in developing countries since this study is one of the few studies examining flexible work arrangements in SMEs in developing economies.

Our findings have important managerial implication. The results suggest that paying attention to a flexible work schedule can provide important organizational benefits (Deery et al., 2016). Flexible work schedules that are congruent with the needs and expectations of employees can help relieve the "time bind" which confront employees in combining their personal, family and work activities (Tausig & Fenwick, 2001). This sends an important signal to managers concerning an invaluable role that FWSs present in stimulating positive organizational outcomes. Allowing employees choice and control over their working schedules and/or arrangements may have a noticeable impact on how they consider their employment relationship. Consequently, this may translate into greater career/job satisfaction and commitment, which are ultimately associated with greater productivity and performance gains.

This paper has some limitations that could benefit from further research. First, all our variables were measured with the same instrument and at the same time. This raises concerns about the possibility of the different causal ordering of our relationships. Nevertheless, there exists theoretical backing for our expectations that the proposed relationships will be in the directions as hypothesized (Jackson & Maslach, 1982; Maslach & Leiter, 2008; Pierce & Newstrom, 1980, 1982). Moving forward, we suggest future studies to consider longitudinal data, which we believe would, however, provide better clarity and future researchers the opportunity to make stronger causal inferences (Finkel, 1995). Second, there is evidence in extant literature that women are more involved in home/family responsibilities than men (Boyar, Maertz, & Pearson, 2005; Vaananan et al., 2005), suggesting that the outcome of our analysis will be stronger in women than in the male. However, this present paper could not capture this important issue and therefore, we recommend that further studies could capture how gender moderates the established relationships particularly in SMEs in developing countries. Third, our performance variable was measured by performance ratings indicated by the respondent, which are purely subject to accurate recall and reporting. The question is how the result would be if actual performance indicators are used (rather than these subjective indicators)?

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