Flexible working and happiness in the NHS

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Abstract
Purpose – This paper aims to explore the influence of flexible working on employee happiness and attitude, and the role of this within a high performance work system (HPWS).

Design/methodology/approach – A case study of flexible working within an NHS Acute Trust is presented. A qualitative study is undertaken based on 43 employee interviews across a range of directorates within the Trust.

Findings – Employees perceive that flexible working makes them “happy” and that there are attitudinal/behavioural links between this happiness, discretionary behaviour and a number of performance outcomes.

Research limitations/implications – This paper presents a single case study with a relatively small sample which uses an inductive approach based on emergent data; it explores one element of a HPWS rather than an entire employment system. Respondents were volunteers, which raises the possibility of sample bias.

Practical implications – There may be a need for organisations to focus more on employee happiness to encourage performance. HR practitioners could reflect on the impact of HR practices on happiness and which features of a job role are likely to promote happiness.

Originality/value – This paper contributes a much-needed employee perspective on the effect of HR practices, specifically that of flexible working, and explores the neglected employee attitude of happiness.

Keywords Flexible working hours, Attitudes, Individual behaviour, Performance management

Paper type Research paper
2007). Our aim in this paper is to explore this emergent theme of happiness within a HPWS theoretical framework and, in so doing, we suggest that there is a need to consider employee attitudes beyond commitment and involvement as mediating variables between HR practices and performance.

The context: the NHS, HPWS and flexible working
In line with HPWS theory, the NHS has adopted a range of HR practices as a means to enhance organizational performance (DoH, 2000). One aspect of this is the IWL Standard which requires that a range of policies and practices are in place “that enable staff to manage a healthy balance between their work and their commitments outside work” (DoH, 2000, p. 5). These policies which include flexible working have been promoted in the NHS in an attempt to improve outcomes such as recruitment, retention and employee performance.

Flexibility in this context is not about employers’ demands for flexibility in scheduling work but rather about providing the employee with control over working time (either in duration, timing or location of work). It is, in other words:

[...] the ability of individual workers to increase or decrease their working hours and to alter their work schedule (Berg et al., 2004, p. 331, emphasis in original).

Practices are likely to include part time working, career breaks, job sharing, term time working and sabbaticals (Torrington et al., 2010). These practices provide a route to flexible working via contractual variation of working hours, often focusing on time reduction mechanisms. There are also practices that focus on time arrangement rather than reduction, but nevertheless provide an employee with a contractual right to flexibility. Examples of this include compressed working weeks and flexi-time schemes.

Flexi-time is one of the most long-standing flexible working practices dating from the mid-1970s. Early research into flexi-time indicated that it improved attendance and performance (Kim and Campagna, 1981), although no clear relationships were identified between flexitime and employee attitudes such as job satisfaction, despite it being considered to improve employee control over their working environment (Hicks and Klimoski, 1981). Many of the other practices outlined above have become available only relatively recently (Berg et al., 2004) but there appears to have been limited investigation of their outcomes. Indeed, flexible working practices were initially excluded from much of the theoretical HRM/performance work (see for example Huselid, 1995) and investigations into HPWS (see, for example MacDuffie, 1995). However, more recent evidence suggests that flexible working should be included as a feature of high performance working (see for example Purcell et al., 2003; Peccei, 2004) and that such practices may moderate work intensification arising from other HPWS practices (Macky and Boxall, 2007). Specifically in the NHS, flexible working practices have been found to have a range of positive outcomes including enhanced patient care (Bloodworth et al., 2001; Lea and Bloodworth, 2003), reduced nurse turnover (Mahoney, 2000), reduced use of temporary staff hours (Wortley and Grierson-Hill, 2003) and lower sickness absence (Bloodworth et al., 2001). Alongside the growing stream of research indicating that flexible working has positive outcomes in a variety of measures of work performance, there is also some limited evidence to support positive employee outcomes, e.g. improved satisfaction among staff (Wortley and Grierson-Hill, 2003) and improved health and wellbeing of nursing staff (Lea and Bloodworth, 2003).
Current theoretical frameworks have, however, been developed from research that tends to privilege organizational over employee outcomes (Macky and Boxall, 2007; Conway and Monks, 2009). In this paper, employee perspectives of flexible working facilitate examination of the “underpinning HR processes experienced by workers and the charting of their links to employee outcomes” (Boxall and Macky, 2009, p. 5). We report elsewhere on the implementation of flexible working policies in the Trust (Hall and Atkinson, 2006). Here we focus on the emergent theme of happiness and its links via flexible working to positive employee outcomes. In so doing, we draw on and contribute to HPWS theory by arguing for the inclusion of a wider range of mediating variables, specifically the employee attitude of happiness.

Flexible working and happiness
In this section, we consider current research on HPWS and employee attitudes, arguing that our examination of the somewhat neglected employee perspective on HRM surfaces happiness as an employee attitude that may mediate the HRM/performance relationship.

HPWS theory and employee attitudes
Early research was preoccupied with the relationships between HRM and organizational performance. It sought to demonstrate that bundles of HR practices impacted on employee performance and resultant business performance (see for example; Delery and Doty, 1996; MacDuffie, 1995; Huselid, 1995). Research focused, not unproblematically, on defining a system of work practices that leads in some way to superior organizational performance, a HPWS (Boxall and Macky, 2009). West et al. (2002) note that relatively little of this research has been conducted in the NHS but suggest that HR practices operate to produce improved performance in the form of reduced patient mortality.

The focus of the HRM/performance debate has latterly, however, moved from a preoccupation with defining the bundles of HR practices which impact on performance to seeking to explain how HR practices impact on performance, the “black box” of HPWS (Purcell et al., 2003). HPWS theory now incorporates employee attitudes as mediating variables, the mechanisms through which HR practices influence performance. (Purcell et al., 2003; Peccei, 2004; Macky and Boxall, 2007). The focus on employee attitudes derives from their capacity to lead employees to display discretionary behaviour, which describes employees not just doing their job but going beyond contract and doing over and above the formal requirements (Fox, 1974). Unlocking this discretionary behaviour is the key to driving higher performance through encouraging employees to deliver beyond their basic job requirements (Appelbaum et al., 2000). Purcell et al. (2003) argue that the role of discretionary behaviour in driving performance again renders essential research into employee views since it is their attitudes that influence this behaviour.

Early research into employee attitudes within a HPWS focused on commitment, reflected in the widespread use of the terms “high commitment work practices” and “high commitment management” and their linkage with high performance (Paauwe and Richardson, 1997; Patterson et al., 1997). Marchington and Zagelmeyer (2005, p. 4)
note that “most studies looking at the HRM-performance linkage use some variant of
the high commitment model”. Indeed, Guest (1998) argues that the whole rationale for
introducing HRM policies is to increase levels of commitment so that other positive
outcomes can ensue. Despite this, there is not a great deal of evidence to link high
commitment and high levels of organisational performance (Benkhoff, 1997; Meyer and
Allen, 1997) and other attitudes have been argued to also mediate performance. For
example, job satisfaction (Guest et al., 2000), motivation (Guest, 1998; Paauwe and
Richardson, 1997) and trust (Macky and Boxall, 2007). Employee involvement has also
emerged as a key element within the HPWS debate (see, for example, Parkes et al.,
2007; Wood and Wall, 2007). Recent research emphasises the complexity of the debate
over these conceptual issues and, further, suggests that individual HR practices may
influence different employee attitudes (Boxall and Macky, 2009). We seek to contribute
in arguing that fuller integration of the employee perspective on HRM and its practices
may lead to inclusion of attitudes not currently incorporated within HPWS theory and
move to consider this in the following section.

Employee perspectives, happiness and performance

We argue in this paper that the preoccupation with the employee attitudes of
commitment and involvement emerges from an emphasis in extant research on
organizational outcomes of HRM, there being less research into and understanding of
the employee outcomes of HRM (Peccei, 2004; Macky and Boxall, 2007; Conway and
Monks, 2009). Worker reactions and attitudes to HRM have been somewhat neglected
(Boselie et al., 2005; Van Veldhoven, 2005), despite Kinnie et al. (2005, p. 11) arguing
that “the fulcrum of the HRM-performance causal chain is the employees’ reactions to
HR practices as experienced by them”. The path to better research thus lies in
examining the underpinning HR processes experienced by workers and charting their
links to employee outcomes (Boxall and Macky, 2009). This is what we seek to do here,
exploring employee perspectives on the HR practice of flexible working and its link to
happiness and employee performance outcomes which are themes which emerged
clearly from our data.

In attempting to theorise how happiness might promote performance, we returned
to the long neglected “happy/productive worker” thesis which proved not to be fruitful
when attempting to link job satisfaction with performance outcomes (Wright, 2006).
There is, however, a growing body of positive psychology literature (the study of
positive human attributes, e.g. Dockery, 2005; Warr, 2007; Wright et al., 2002) which
returns to consider happiness in workers. In this emergent body of work, happiness is
operationalised as subjective wellbeing rather than job satisfaction (Wright, 2006),
which posits a strong case for the happiness/job performance link (Cropanzano and
Wright, 2001; Warr, 2007). Sachau (2007) suggests that there is a history of research
from psychology literature making its way into HRM literature and predicts that this
will happen with positive psychology literature in the next decade. Indeed, we are
already beginning to see research emerge on the extent to which HR practices influence
wellbeing and potentially performance (see for example Peccei, 2004) and Guest (2002)
argues that such concepts need to be built into the HRM-performance relationship. Our
research develops this argument, adopting the approach from the psychology
literature which equates happiness and wellbeing and using the words
interchangeably (e.g. Seligman, 2003). We do not draw extensively on the HRM
literature as this discipline appears currently to largely align wellbeing to health. CIPD (2007, p. 4) suggests that wellbeing can promote “contentment”, which we argue below is a form of happiness, with associated business benefits. Nevertheless, the associated practices centre on improving physical and mental health in giving up smoking and diet and exercise for example. Indeed an emerging criticism of wellbeing as conceived by the HR community is that it is simply a re-branding of absence management and lacks a focus on issues likely to genuinely promote wellbeing (Torrington et al., 2010). It may be that Holman’s (2002) work on the links between job design and employee wellbeing and our own research will contribute to a broader conceptualization of wellbeing within the HR literature.

We adopt an environment-centred definition of happiness as subjective wellbeing, “the individuals’ perceptions and evaluations of their own lives in terms of their affective states” (Warr, 2007, p. 9). This environment-centred approach focuses on the impact on affective states of the principal aspects of the environment in which a person is located. Within a work environment, a narrow focus targeted on a single feature of a work role is termed facet-specific wellbeing which has been argued to be an attitude capable of influencing behavioural outcomes:

Facet-specific wellbeing, viewed primarily . . . as a targeted form of happiness, comes close to what some other commentators have viewed as an attitude, with clear expectations of conceptually related attitude-behaviour links (Warr, 2007, p. 407).

There is current research which supports this. NHS research, for example, has shown that feeling positive is significantly correlated with work performance and patient satisfaction (West, 2005). More generally Bayliss (2005, p. 48) suggests that “happiness is not only a result of things going well, it is also a cause of them” and “high spirits help us function better . . . all of which can tangibly benefit the bottom line of any work environment”. Positive emotions may thus actually lead to good functioning (Frederickson, 2005) with explicit links made between happiness and absence, retention and performance in employees (Warr, 2007). There thus seems to be a growing body of evidence linking subjective wellbeing with enhanced performance outcomes. There is, however, a need for research on the ways in which HR practices influence wellbeing in order to better understand how “wellbeing plays a central role in explanatory models of the link between HR practice and organisational performance” (Peccei, 2004, p. 3).

Our research investigates a specific work role feature, the HR practice of flexible working. It builds on a, currently limited, body of work which indicates that flexible working may promote employee happiness. For example, Berg et al. (2004) link control over working time to organisational performance through employee well being. Dockery (2005) supports this, suggesting that employee discretion over work scheduling promotes personal control which is one of the nine primary features required in a job to promote happiness (Warr, 2007). Flexible working may not, however, influence other employee attitudes. Neither will it necessarily promote happiness in all employees as an individual’s response to an environmental input depends on the personal salience of that input (Warr, 2007). Further insight into flexible working and its influence on happiness has the potential, however, to contribute to HPWS theory.
Summary
We have thus far discussed the HR practice of flexible working and argued that it is a relatively new but potentially important element of a HPWS. In outlining current HPWS theory, we have argued that the focus on commitment and involvement as dominant attitudes which mediate the HR/performance link is partial. We suggest that further investigation into employee perspectives on HR practices is required and we go on to present the employee perspective on the HR practice of flexible working in an NHS context. Our aim is so doing is to examine how, within a HPWS framework, flexible working influences the employee attitude of happiness and how happiness then influences discretionary behaviour and a range of performance outcomes. In so doing, we contribute to HPWS theory in three ways: we present data on the employee perspective on HR practices; we adopt qualitative methods to explore employee (rather than researcher) derived attitudes; and we develop understanding of flexible working and its perceived impact on performance outcomes.

Methods
The research on which this paper is based set out to investigate the implementation of flexible working practices as part of the IWL Standard in an NHS Acute Trust. Using interviews, we conducted a much-needed qualitative, in-depth evaluation of an HR practice from an employee perspective (Van Veldhoven, 2005; McBride, 2008). Our approach to data collection did not set out to test a particular hypothesis, rather we gathered data in respect of flexible working practices and allowed meaning to emerge (Silverman, 2000). This proved a particularly effective approach in surfacing the employee attitude of happiness. It further facilitated the investigation of this attitude which was identified by employees as being important to them, in contrast to quantitative studies of HPWS which typically pre-specify employee attitudes based on current theory (Macky and Boxall, 2007). The case study setting addressed a further weakness of quantitative studies, supporting examination of how HR practices lead to improved (Purcell et al., 2003) and avoided a typical reliance on single respondents in multi-employer research projects (Boselie et al., 2005). Our qualitative approach supported theorizing on HPWS, rather than findings that are claimed to be generalisable (Eisenhardt, 1989). Academic theory of HPWS focuses on commitment and involvement as mediating variables but our qualitative approach identified the respondents’ own perceptions as to how flexible working influences employee outcomes.

Our findings result from the analysis of 43 interviews carried out across five directorates and include a range of staff levels and job types (for example, maintenance and catering staff, nurses, physiotherapists, finance and administrative staff, see Table I for further details). A number of the employees we interviewed had either supervisory or managerial responsibility for staff, but we were clear that we also wished to hear their views from the perspective of being an employee of the Trust, managed by others, as well as in their managerial role. We thus explored the impact of an HR practice on employees from both employee and manager perspectives.

All but three interviews were tape recorded and then transcribed for analysis. The interviewees were all volunteers and were identified by a liaison person in each department we visited. We agreed the range of departments to be covered through the co-ordinator of the IWL sub-committee, this co-ordinator identifying the appropriate
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Directorate</th>
<th>Number of interviews</th>
<th>Job roles</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Reference to happiness</th>
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<tr>
<td>Medical</td>
<td>9</td>
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<td>34, 45</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Direct (1), Indirect (1)</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>44, 55</td>
<td>F</td>
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<td>Nurse (5)</td>
<td>30-52</td>
<td>F (4), M (1)</td>
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<td>42-52</td>
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<td>Direct (2), Indirect (1)</td>
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<td>23-36</td>
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<td>Direct (2)</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>Dietician</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>F</td>
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<td>49</td>
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<tr>
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<td>34,37</td>
<td>M</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>28, 35</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Indirect (1), No (1)</td>
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<td>29-54</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Direct (2), Indirect (1)</td>
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<td>Maintenance manager</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Indirect</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>32-61</td>
<td>M</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>51</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Indirect</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>F (2), M (1)</td>
<td>No (3)</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>Supplies supervisor</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>F</td>
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<td>Indirect</td>
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<td>Administrator (5)</td>
<td>35-57</td>
<td>F (4), M (1)</td>
<td>Indirect (4), No (1)</td>
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</table>
liaison person. We recognize the limitations of our sample in that it may be neither
comprensive nor disinterested in the issue of flexible working. Given the inevitable
constraints on gaining access to employees, however, we argue that our sample
provides data as a sound basis for initial theorizing that may be further developed.

The interviews adopted a semi-structured approach which ensured that the issue of
flexible working was central while avoiding constraining participants in terms of the
issues that they believed to be relevant and important (Bryman, 1988). We did not
adopt researcher derived categories of the impact that flexible working policies may
have on individuals or their performance, asking rather about their perceptions of why
the Trust was implementing flexible working practices, their feelings about this and
the perceived outcomes of such practices. This format allowed employees in their own
way to explain the meaning and sense that such policies make to them and our analysis
results from the idiosyncratic explanations of our respondents.

Analysis was undertaken by close reading of transcripts and coding using NVivo
software to identify and explore themes. Working initially independently, we both
identified happiness as an emergent and significant theme and continued with a deep
interrogation of the data to explore this further. We adopted an iterative process of
analysis and returning to literature to develop our understanding of the ways in which
happiness might be relevant to and impact on performance (Silverman, 2000). In our
analysis, we coded happiness in two ways. First, where happiness in respect of flexible
working was explicitly referred to, it was coded as “Direct”. Second, where happiness
in respect of flexible working was implied, it was coded as “Indirect”. In inferring
employee happiness, we drew on Warr’s (2007) conceptualization of happiness as a
continuum from active states such as delight, elation or pleasure through to more
passive states such as contentment, comfort and calm. The use of this continuum
helped to address the common difficulty of the blurring of positive states (CIPD, 2006).
We present below data in relation to direct and indirect references to happiness
(Table I). We further present employee perceptions of the influence of happiness on
discretionary behaviour and the outcomes of performance, retention, recruitment and
absence, outcomes that were identified as of relevance by the respondents themselves
(Table II).

Our findings reflect the respondents’ perceptions as to the impact and outcomes of
flexible working and identify the employee attitude of happiness as being of relevance.
This attitude is currently neglected in academic HPWS theory and our qualitative
examination of employee perspectives thus has the potential to add to current
understanding. We recognize that our approach may be open to critique in that it deals
only with perceptions, there being no “hard data” to determine whether perceived
performance outcomes have actually occurred. Our findings are, however, exploratory

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Happiness (34 references, direct and indirect)</th>
<th>Discretionary behaviour</th>
<th>Performance outcomes</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>Recruitment</td>
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<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>8</td>
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and may be used as a basis for theorizing and underpinning further research in this field of study.

Findings

As we have noted, an individual’s response to an environmental input depends on its salience to them (Warr, 2007). Flexible working appeared both to be highly salient to our respondents and to influence their attitudes, 13 of them to directly linking flexible working to happiness, while a further 21 did so indirectly. Out of 43 respondents, 34 thus made unprompted some link between the HR practice of flexible working and the employee attitude of happiness (Table I). We do not claim any statistical significance for this finding, but suggest that it demonstrates a considerable emphasis on this attitude. It is worth noting that no respondents indicated that flexible working influenced attitudes such as commitment (Guest, 1998), job satisfaction (Purcell et al., 2003) or involvement (Wood and Wall, 2007), despite their prominence in current literature. The nature of our data was not such that we could identify patterns as to particular groups or types of respondent for whom flexible working was linked to happiness, other than it was referred to by only a limited number of respondents from the Estates Directorate.

We further developed our analysis by considering employee perceptions of the influence of happiness on discretionary behaviour and performance outcomes (Table II). In all, there were 18 references to happiness promoting discretionary behaviour which supports extant research on attitudinal/behavioural relationships (Purcell et al., 2003). In line with Peccei’s (2004) view that wellbeing influences performance, respondents linked happiness to performance outcomes in 21 examples, some suggesting multiple links. Outcomes were identified by respondents themselves but reflected issues of significance in the extant literature, for example, improved recruitment (eight, Hall and Atkinson, 2006), retention (three, Mahoney, 2000), employee performance (eight, Kim and Campagna, 1981) and reduced absence (two, Bloodworth et al., 2001). Again these numbers have no statistical import but do reflect significant emphasis by respondents on happiness and its influence on behaviours and outcomes.

We report these findings as follows:

- Perceptions of happiness generated by flexible working.
- Links between flexible working, happiness and discretionary behaviour.
- Perceptions of the links between flexible working, happiness and performance outcomes.

The findings below relate to all forms of work flexibility and we do not here distinguish between formal and informal approaches which we address in other papers, for example Hall and Atkinson (2006).

Flexible working and happiness

Our starting point was to explore employee perceptions of the Trust’s reasons for implementing flexible working practices, their views on the effect of HR practices being crucial (Kinnie et al., 2005). A total of 34 respondents, over three quarters of our sample, perceived that the Trust wished to promote happiness via work flexibility (Table I). Of these, 13 made direct links between flexible working and happiness. The following are typical examples:
I would have thought that it [improving flexibility] was so that they could keep their staff, staff happiness, improving people's working lives and making sure they are happy at work (Physiotherapist 1).

I think that they want to genuinely want to improve working hours and keep people happy. I think a hospital has always been a friendly place to work and if you did want to adjust your hours . . . I've never know a situation where they've refused (Administrator 1).

Respondents thus suggested that flexible working was of salience to them and that it happiness was their response (Warr, 2007). This seems to support the presumed relationship between HR practices and attitudes (Purcell et al., 2003). Respondents perceived that the Trust adopted flexible working to promote their happiness at in the broad work context, rather than simply with the job:

I suppose an upside of it [flexible working] is that it makes the department quite happy because . . . well you're happy in your work anyway, but you're also working the hours that suits your lifestyle really (Physiotherapist 2).

This respondent reflects a frequently expressed view that flexible working does not address job satisfaction specifically as “you are happy in your work anyway”, supporting, for example, Hicks and Klimoski (1981) who could not identify a relationship between job satisfaction and flexi-time systems. Rather it serves to support a more general sense of wellbeing around working context and lifestyle. She also suggests that happiness as a result of flexibility can arise at departmental rather than simply individual level and thus have a wide benefit.

While 13 respondents referred directly to happiness, 21 did so indirectly. Active states of happiness were cited, alongside more passive states such as contentment, comfort and calm (Warr, 2007). In terms of active states such as pleasure, a number of respondents illustrated how flexible working might specifically promote happiness. This emerged from a sense that the Trust cared about them, for example:

I think that at the end of the day, if as an employee you feel valued as an individual and that your home life is of great importance and I think if you feel that people do try and help out, albeit that they can’t wave a magic wand and sort it out, but I think if you know you can go to your employer and discuss things [working patterns] you will feel a lot happier in your role (Nurse 3).

[We have] a good manager and the whole team works flexibly . . . and has a very good relationship. The team spirit and morale is usually pretty high (Occupational Therapist 3).

An administrator further suggested that flexible working promotes happiness “. . . because it improves relations with employees.” Flexibility thus drives positive states through feeling valued and well treated (Wortley and Grierson-Hill, 2003).

Passive states of happiness were also frequently cited. Respondents typically referred to the role of flexible working in inducing contentment and calm (Warr, 2007), especially when related to reduction in work life stress (Macky and Boxall, 2007). The following examples reflect widely held respondent views:

It [flexible working] allows people to sort of, not necessarily [look after] children, but being able to do things with their family, their friends if need be. I think it is important to keep us all sane really (Finance Manager 2).
To me it’s peace of mind . . . I have not had to use it, but it’s more peace of mind that if I needed to use it [flexible working] it’s there. I can phone in and say, “I am not going to be in till 10 o’clock today” (Dietician).

Thus having control over the working environment and being able to manage domestic and work commitments appeared to be important to respondents. This has been a key theme in previous research on both features of jobs that promote happiness (Warr, 2007) and the role of flexible working in influencing wellbeing (Berg et al., 2004; Hicks and Klimoski, 1981). Our data appears to suggest that flexible working influenced the employee attitude of happiness. Its emergent nature means that we are not able to say whether other HR practices influence happiness, or whether flexible working influences other employee attitudes, albeit these did not emerge unprompted. We would support Boxall and Macky (2009) who argue that further research is required to identify which HR practices may influence which attitudes.

Flexible working, happiness and discretionary behaviour

We then moved on to explore the impact of flexible working on employees. Respondents were asked to describe the impact of flexible working on themselves and clear attitudinal/behavioural links emerged (Appelbaum et al., 2000). A total of 18 employees (Table II) indicated that the offer of flexibility made them respond by being more flexible themselves or generally giving more, i.e. engaging in discretionary behaviour (Purcell et al., 2003):

I think it’s got to be a two-way street. You can’t just expect to have everything just handed to you on a plate. You know, you have got to be prepared to give as much as you take (Ward Manager 2 (but speaking as an employee of the Trust)).

I am always on the end of the phone . . . I don’t mind if he phones me up at 10 p.m. because I know that if I go and ask him for a couple of hours [off], he will say okay (Maintenance Technician 2).

Over one-third of the sample identified a “give and take approach” and recognised that they should and want to give something back in return for the flexibility that they are granted. Employees thus went beyond contract (Fox, 1974) to display discretionary behaviour, doing over and above what they “have to do” in order to help the Trust work more effectively. Other respondents went further and suggested a link between happiness and discretionary behaviour which is consistent with the links made in HPWS literature between employee attitudes and discretionary behaviour (Purcell et al., 2003). Typical examples of these references to happiness include:

It [flexible working] keeps everybody much happier really . . . if the employers can be flexible, then you are more prepared to be flexible . . . If you don’t feel the strain . . . If you’ve got to go for your children for some reason or I have to take my mother for an appointment to the hospital or anything, I think it spreads across, you know, your approach to the patient. You’re much more flexible about, you know, how you’ll co-operate with relatives of patients and if you have to do a home visit at times that suit them and the same thing with other colleagues . . . we fit in with them more (Occupational Therapist 3).

It [flexible working] works brilliantly. It removes the stress. I might take an hour but then I will work two hours longer when I come back . . . I think it’s a good place to work. The NHS they have always been fair to me anyway (Administrator 3).
The first quote is clearly a direct reference to happiness, the second one suggesting happiness in terms of calm through the removal of stress. This supports Macky and Boxall’s (2007) suggestion that flexible working may serve to reduce work intensification. Managers also suggested that affording flexibility to employees would promote happiness and encourage them to display discretionary behaviour, an example being:

Very, very important [flexible working], I can’t see the benefit of making somebody sit there from 9-5 if it’s better that they start a bit earlier . . . Really to make the staff as comfortable and happy as they can be. If there is a job to be done, I know they will stop and do it. So if they say to me, “Can I have a couple of hours off this afternoon and then work till whenever”, I am quite happy to let them do that (Ward Manager 1).

Both employees and managers suggested that the Trust gains as much as employees from flexibility. Employees indicated that it makes them more willing to work with their colleagues, cover for them and support them with an emphasis on “pulling together”. There appears to be clear evidence of flexibility promoting the attitude of happiness which leads to discretionary behaviour (Appelbaum et al., 2000).

Flexible working, happiness and performance outcomes

Finally, we asked respondents what they perceived the outcomes of flexible working to be. Most responses related to performance outcomes that are identified in the current literature. A total of 21 respondents, almost half, suggested that the Trust was promoting flexible working in order to achieve primarily four outcomes: improved recruitment (eight respondents, Hall and Atkinson, 2006), improved retention (three respondents, Mahoney, 2000), improved employee performance (eight respondents, Kim and Campagna, 1981) and reduced absence (two respondents, Bloodworth et al., 2001). While the assertion that within a HPWS employee attitudes and behaviours influence performance has gained acceptance (Purcell et al., 2003), and to a lesser extent that flexible working forms part of a HPWS (Peccei, 2004), we contribute by demonstrating the role of the previously overlooked attitude of happiness in promoting these outcomes. While emergent, we argue that our data provides a strong indicator of potential relationships that merit further exploration.

Eleven respondents cited examples of the links between flexible working and recruitment and retention and some made explicit reference to happiness within this. One example relates to both recruitment and retention, a nurse having resigned because she was not granted the flexibility she requested and then having re-joined the Trust when the flexibility was made available:

I went to my manager saying, “Look I having a few problems at home” . . . I told him, yeah, I went into the office and told him, but he just wouldn’t [offer flexibility in working patterns] . . . I felt hurt and I’m thinking “I’ve been there for four years . . . I thought I was a valued member of the team” . . . I just left, yeah. I handed my notice in, I worked on the bank (Nurse 4).

Unhappiness created by lack of flexibility led the nurse to resign. She later returned to the Trust’s employment when she secured a job on a ward where flexibility was available and where she suggested that her manager “really does look after the staff. I’ve got just so much respect for her, you know. Cos she is so supportive and so approachable.” A second example relates to happiness influencing retention and the broader work context:
... you will feel a lot happier in your role [if working flexibly] and the Trust on the whole will retain you in employment. Then you will be happier in your work, so in a way the Trust should have a happier work force (Nurse 2).

As shown in these examples, respondents linked recruitment and retention to flexibility and happiness. Eight respondents similarly linked flexibility, employee performance and happiness, some of them in a fairly stark manner. From a management perspective, for example:

Well it [flexibility] keeps your staff happy and happy staff, you get more out of them (Administration Manager 1).

We’ve got a tradesman, a technician that works for us and he has two small children and his wife works two nights a week through the night and it means he can’t leave the children until she gets home so we allow him to come, he asked me personally what would be the chances of him coming in at 9 a.m. one day and one day that week he would work through until 5.30 p.m. Which we didn’t have a problem with as he is working his hours and is able to do his job better (Maintenance Manager).

This is clearly aligned to HPWS thinking (Peccei, 2004) and was supported from an employee perspective:

On a personal point of view, I think if you’ve got a contented work force, I think you will get greater efficiency and you will get more output out of them. The way obviously to do that, to keep people happy . . . I should imagine there is a vast majority of people that would like to tailor their hours to suit their own personal lives (Finance Administrator).

The last quote demonstrates the role of flexibility in promoting happiness through the positive state of contentment and the impact of this on performance. A number of other respondents made similar points by suggesting that flexibility led to happy people who work harder and people being more content in their jobs and inputting more, which supports the “happy/productive worker” thesis (Wright, 2006). Others suggested that flexibility enhanced service delivery as staff were available at non-standard hours and were able to undertake their roles in a more effective way. Finally, two respondents suggested that flexibility contributed to reducing absence rates through the removal of work/life stress. For example:

I think it is best for everybody [flexible working] and takes pressure off. I also think it will reduce sickness . . . Dead right, because you are not pressurising people, you are not putting more hours on people which can lead to sickness in itself, I think flexibility does take that load off (Linen Assistant).

While there is evidence in the current literature that flexibility serves to reduce absence (Bloodworth et al., 2001), there is limited consideration of the attitudes that might be important within this. In terms of both absence and the other performance outcomes cited, our data gathered from an employee perspective strongly suggests that flexible working influences the attitudes of happiness and thus performance (Purcell et al., 2003). The role of happiness is under-explored and potentially important.

Discussion and conclusions
In this paper, we have presented employee views on the HR practice of flexible working in an NHS context, contributing to the small but growing body of research from the
employee perspective (Conway and Monks, 2009). Our qualitative approach gave voice to issues that were important to the respondents themselves, eschewing the tendency to pre-specify employee attitudes based on current theory and to rely on a single managerial-level informant or secondary sources (Macky and Boxall, 2007). This was vital as it allowed happiness to be identified as important by respondents. In making sense of our data, we drew on a conceptualization of happiness as both active and passive positive states (Warr, 2007). Flexible working was seen by employees to promote active states such as being pleased and cheerful through respondents perceiving, for example, that they were well treated and valued. Passive states were reflected in feelings such as contentment and calm, in for example, the reduction of work-life stress and again flexible working was seen to promote these states which is consistent with other research (Berg et al., 2004; Dockery, 2005).

Our respondents further suggested that flexible working, in promoting happiness, gave rise to discretionary behaviour and other desirable performance outcomes. To theorise this, we have drawn on HPWS literature which specifies causal chains between HR practices, attitudes and outcomes (Purcell et al., 2003). Again drawing on Warr (2007), we have argued that happiness is an employee attitude and have demonstrated how one HR practice, flexible working, can influence this attitude. This exploration of happiness contributes to HPWS understanding as current theory is pre-occupied with attitudes such as commitment (Guest, 2002) and involvement (Wood and Wall, 2007). While Boxall and Macky (2009) have suggested a role for a number of other attitudes including trust and motivation, happiness is generally neglected with the notable exception of Peccei’s (2004) work. Our respondents made no mention, however, of other attitudes. This is not to say that they are not important. As Boxall and Macky (2009) argue, different HR practices may influence different attitudes and these relationships are little understood. Based on our study, we argue that flexible working is influential for the attitude of happiness. It may be that other practices will influence trust or motivation. While an emergent body of research considers employee happiness in the psychology literature, there is little recognition of it as an important employee attitude within HR research where wellbeing tends to be allied with health issues (see, for example, CIPD, 2007). While our findings are clearly exploratory and preliminary in nature, we suggest that they surface a potentially important and under-researched attitude and that happiness merits further research.

In summary, we support the return to the “happy/productive worker thesis” (Wright, 2006) and recognition of the role of happiness when defined as subjective wellbeing in enhancing performance (Cropanzano and Wright, 2001). We suggest that HPWS theory may need to incorporate a wider range of attitudes than is currently the case (Macky and Boxall, 2007) and that happiness is potentially one such attitude. This has implications for HR practice, as indicated by Cropanzano and Wright (2001, p. 192) who argue that “organisations could undertake various strategies to better manage their employees to produce greater happiness” and thus performance. There is some early recognition of this in the practitioner literature (CIPD, 2006), but it has thus far received limited attention. We suggest that HR practitioners would benefit from a more detailed understanding of employee perspectives on HR practices than currently exists and that this is an area they could explore in greater depth. We also suggest that, in designing HPWS, practitioners should consider the extent to which HR practices may influence attitudes beyond commitment and involvement. Happiness may be one such
attitude and could lead to deeper understanding of which HR practices influence which attitudes and the extent to which HR practices have sufficient salience for employees to influence attitudes. Further, Warr (2007) suggests that there are other key features in a job role which are critical to happiness, for example skill use, career prospects or money. HR practitioners may also need to consider how to design these within a HPWS in order to influence happiness.

We do not claim that happiness is the only employee attitude of relevance. Clearly there are a range of important employee attitudes and it is likely that these will be influenced by different HR practices (Macky and Boxall, 2007). To identify the individual HR practices which influence specific employee attitudes within a HPWS will be extremely complex and much further research is required. Our qualitative research has been helpful in theorizing, but it may be that quantitative studies would be useful to further develop understanding. Such studies could follow in the statistical tradition of extant HPWS research (see, for example, MacDuffie, 1995) but incorporate recognised measures of wellbeing (see, for example, Fields, 2002). Specific aims of such research should be to both better understand the role of happiness and to identify the influence of individual HR practices on specific attitudes.

Our research inevitably has limitations. We draw on a single case study, our findings being context dependent, and have a relatively small sample. Further in focusing on flexible working, we explore one element of a HPWS rather than an entire employment system and our inductive approach based on emergent data has not gathered comprehensive data on all elements of HPWS models. We also recognise that our respondents were volunteers and that they may have had particular issues that they wished to air. We argue, however, that the attitudes and outcomes described are in the respondents own words and not framed by the explanations of current models, allowing us to identify happiness as an important attitude and make a valuable contribution to theoretical debate on the underlying mechanisms through which HR practices influence performance. Further research based on our qualitative exploration of these issues may serve to develop HPWS theory.

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**Further reading**


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