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In Search of Flexibility: Implications for Temporary Agency Workers and Human Resource Management

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This paper examines the role of HR and labour flexibility in relation to temporary work arrangements within an Australian context. Such arrangements have increased over recent years due to user firm demand and temporary work agency supply. One of the most frequently cited reasons for the growth in temporary working has been the labour flexibility it provides to user firms. The authors provide an inside view of temporary work in relation to five key HR areas: recruitment and selection, integration and identification, employee commitment, HR administration and training. Finally, implications for HR within the temporary work sector are outlined.

Introduction

Flexibility has been hailed as the panacea for achieving greater organizational competitiveness, efficiency and effectiveness. In addition, it has been promoted as assisting with the creation of more jobs and the introduction of change indicatives. Flexibility does, however, come in many forms with multiple definitions. The focus of this paper is on numerical flexibility whereby an organisation's labour force can be quickly and easily increased or decreased in line with changes in the level of demand for labour (Atkinson, 1984:28). The creation of flexible labour markets through numerical flexibility has led to increases in 'non standard working' whereby non-permanent and part time forms of employment are encouraged and enabled. The rise of the temporary agency sector can be interpreted as one manifestation of organisations shedding internal labour and internal labour costs and shifting recruitment, training and on-costs to temporary work agencies and temporary workers.

Temporary working involves a triangular arrangement in which a temporary work agency (TWA) hires a worker for the purpose of placing him or her at the disposal of a third party, the user enterprise, for a temporary assignment (Bronstein, 1991, 292). Temporary work is not new. It is a way of selling labour power that dates back at least to the beginnings of the Industrial Revolution.

Evidence suggests, however, that a new approach to temporary employment has emerged. Whereas temporary workers were once used primarily to fill in for sick or vacationing permanent employees, they are now frequently employed on an ongoing basis. Indeed, in many cases permanent jobs are being converted to temporary positions (Smith, 1998). Today's temporary agency worker is as likely to be found on the factory floor, in a laboratory, behind a computer and in the executive suite as on the company switchboard (Cauldron, 1994). The rationale for hiring temporary workers tends to be the same as many other workplace initiatives – labour cost savings associated with downsizing, increased global competition, new technology and the need to respond quickly to an ever-changing marketplace. Although temporary workers provide user firms with labour 'on demand' once the job markets tighten up, companies that have relied too heavily on contingent workers in critical skill positions may find themselves at a competitive disadvantage. For example, Michie and Sheehan-Quinn (2001) cite their own and a number of other studies that examined firms innovation activities, growth and employment and found that the use of certain types of flexible work practices had negative effects on measures of firm performance. As a result, they argue that improved productivity and competitiveness is based on quality and high value added, requiring investment in people, rather than the contrary.

Cauldron (1994:54) maintains that contingent workers are being managed as they were two decades ago. "That is a panicky department manager calls human resources, requests 'x' number of bodies to help with a work emergency, human resources finds those bodies and then goes away until another crisis hits. By many accounts, there's little, if any, strategic staffing going on". Drucker (2002) points out that temporary workers are not employees, although HR policies assume that most, if not all of the people who work for a company are employees of that company. The oversight of any HR strategy for aligning the temporary workforce was evident in a review of six recently published HRM texts where it was found that the content ranged from nothing to one-and-a-half pages on the topic (see Byars et. al., 2000; Ivancevich, 2001; Storey, 2001; Nankervis et. al., 2002; Noe et. al., 2000, and Dreher et. al., 2002). If, however, as Rubin (1995:310) notes, 'impermanence is becoming permanent' then it is important to understand and plan for the implications of this situation, both for the temporary workers and the organizations that employ them, particularly given the increase in temporary work arrangements around the world.

For instance, during the 1990s, temporary agency work was the most rapidly growing form of atypical employment in the European Union. It doubled in most EU member states, and in Denmark, Spain, Italy and Sweden numbers increased five-fold (Storrie, 2002). This equates to between 1.8 and 2.1 million

people working for TWAs in the EU (1.2–1.4% of the total number employed). In the United States the temporary workforce is estimated to be 3% of the total workforce (Peck and Theodore, 2001), while in Australia it is estimated to be 2.1% - equivalent to the UK (Campbell, Watson and Buchanan, 2002). Although the proportion of temporary agency workers may appear to be small when compared with the remainder of the workforce, it has been growing steadily and it is expected that temporary agency work arrangements will continue to expand over the coming decade. For example, Adecco and Manpower are amongst the largest labour hire operators in Australia and have spread their supply of labour across the entire labour market. In 2000 it was estimated that Adecco had revenues in Australia of over \$700 million that were anticipated to top \$1 billion within two years (Hall, 2002). Furthermore, AWIRS data indicated that over 20 per cent of workplaces (with 20 employees or more) were utilising temporary agency workers, a sharp rise from 14 per cent in 1990 (Morehead et. al., 1997).

HRM and Temporary Work

Noe et. al., (2000) argue that HRM practices help companies gain a competitive advantage over their competitors and Storey (2001) that this should be achieved through employee commitment rather than compliance with company rules. Drucker (2002) challenges the notion that temporary employees can develop commitment to the organisation to which they are contracted. The productivity of people, he argues, depends not only on how and where workers are placed, but also on who manages and motivates them - an area the temporary agency does not control.

Likewise, Cauldron (1994) argues that people have a psychological reference to their place of employment. This, she contends, becomes problematic once people are in the contingent category, where the belief is that they are expendable. From an individual's perspective, the HR policies, practices and actions that are on the front line of employment relations, will be instrumental in the determination of psychological contracts (Westwood, Sparrow and Leung, 2001). Over time employees develop psychological contracts or sets of expectations with respect to what their employer expects from them and what they can, in turn, expect from their employer (Rousseau, 1995). In a context of rapid organisational change, Storey (2001) argues that the violation of the psychological contract is almost inevitable and can have damaging effects for both the individual and the organisation. Conversely, Robinson (1996) provided evidence that where employers earn the trust of employees, perceptions of contract breach are less likely to occur, making the organization 'immune' to negative consequences such as poor performance, low job satisfaction and high staff turnover. Clearly, commitment is part of a relational

contract that excludes temporary workers. The hidden cost to the organization of this exclusion is not known, however, as positive psychological contracts are linked to greater job satisfaction, organisational commitment and motivation (see Guest, 1998) that user firms may not expect from temporary workers anyway.

Storey (2001) reports that, based on the results of an annual survey conducted in the UK (see Guest et. al., 2000), there is a strong association between more HR practices and positive psychological contracts. The same survey also indicated a positive association between workers on fixed term contracts and positive psychological contracts. Storey (2001:109) explains this by pointing out that although people on fixed term contracts are traditionally seen to be disadvantaged, an advantage for them is that they do not become embroiled in an organisation's culture and can, therefore, escape the tyranny of 'citizenship behaviour' – the cultural requirement to work long hours, help colleagues in difficulty, and promote the organization. While it cannot be disputed that a fixed term contract does result in explicit, specific, transactional contracts for temporary workers, it is difficult to conceive that the advantages of temporary work, as suggested by Storey (basically not becoming too involved within the user firm), outweighs the disadvantages.

Temporary employment contracts are characterised by ambiguity complicating the employment relationship, the status of the agency worker and the responsibilities of the parties involved (Rubery et. al., 2000). We argue that this 'fuzziness' has also been translated to related HR functions and that where the employment contract and employment responsibilities are uncertain, the responsibility for, and the assignment of, HR functions also become ambiguous. Once we move outside the traditional employer-employee relationship with its implications of commitment, training, organisational identification and career development, the assignment of HR responsibilities becomes conjectural. As pointed out previously, there is an absence in the literature of virtually any HR strategy relating to temporary working. One of the aims of this research was to discover whether the scarcity of HR literature focusing on temporary workers was reflected in HR practice. Hence, in order to develop a framework for analysis we drew on concepts of 'traditional' HRM functions. Beaumont (1992:40) described the key message of HRM as being to "establish a close, two-way relationship between business strategy and planning", while Hendry and Pettigrew (1986) proposed that strategic HRM means that the people of an organisation need to be seen as a strategic resource for achieving competitive advantage. What is not known is whether 'the people of an organisation' includes those people who may be on temporary contracts. Consequently, this paper poses five questions relating to

HR strategy, planning and the development of people as a strategic resource, from the perspectives of temporary workers, TWAs and user firms:

- a) **Recruitment and selection.** *A key element of HR planning: who selects and recruits temporary workers? Are temporary engagements a form of screening whereby temporary workers may potentially become permanent employees within the user firm?*
- b) **Integration and identification.** *If temporary workers are to become a strategic resource, the 'fit' between the worker and the organisation will be important (Cauldron, 1994). Are temporary workers integrated with the user firm's core employees or do they work independently? With which organisation, if any, do they identify?*
- c) **Employee Commitment.** *Integral to most HR strategies: do temporary workers have commitment to the agency or to the user firm? Do they see each engagement as an opportunity to shift into more regular employment arrangements, or are temporary contracts the preferred arrangement?*
- d) **Training.** *Walton (1996) makes a case for the training and development of 'non-employees', arguing that the increasing creation of non-employee relationships entails considerable risks unless such distinctive competencies can be learned and sustained outside the traditional employment relationship. Once a potential temporary worker (non-employee) signs with an employment agency, what training is available to them and where can they find it?*
- e) **HR administration.** *As per the traditional functions of the HRM department: who administers the temporary workers payroll tax, OH&S, PAYE etc? Is this the responsibility of the agency or the user firm?*

Method

To address the five questions listed above, this paper reports on research conducted during 2001 and 2002. This research included interviews with temporary agency workers, TWAs and user firms. The research strategy involved interviewing temporary workers and employees from selected TWAs and a representative sample of the firms that employ them. All of the interviews were undertaken within the Hunter region of New South Wales, Australia. This region has a population of approximately 550,000 with an unemployment rate of 11.3 per cent in January 2002, as compared with a national average rate of 7 per cent.

TWAs were approached first and asked to provide a sample of organisations that the researchers could contact with a view to including them in the study.

The TWAs also acted as a conduit for contact with temporary workers whereby letters were sent to a sample of temporary workers inviting them to participate in the study. Temporary workers were invited to attend a number of focus groups in their own time at a 'neutral' site (that is not the temporary agency's premises or their user firm's). Each focus group represented temporary workers from only one TWA. A potential disadvantage of this sampling method meant that the agencies selected the workers by inviting them to attend the focus groups, and the workers self-selected by deciding to attend.

Five TWAs were included in the study (see Table 1 for details). Although referred to as temporary work agencies, all of the agencies included in the study also undertook permanent work placements. Each agency covered a wide range of occupational categories but also tended to specialize in one particular area. The pseudonyms given to the agencies represent their specializations, namely: ItCo, CleriCo, NurseCo, ConstructCo and UnemployCo. UnemployCo is a job network agency that deals with both employed and unemployed job seekers. This agency was included in the study as some TWA representatives indicated that when low skilled job seekers wanted to sign with them they were referred instead to UnemployCo. In addition, the participation of UnemployCo meant that we were able to include a sample of 'low skilled' workers in the study.

Five user firms participated in the study. They are listed as Company 1, 2, 3 and so on in order to provide anonymity. Each organisation contracted temporary workers from one of the TWAs included in this study. The range of temporary worker usage varied widely between firms from 1% to 33%. Table 2 outlines some of the main characteristics pertaining to each user firm.

Table 1: Agency Information (figures are for branch offices included in this study)

<i>Agency</i>	<i>Specialisation</i>	<i>Years in Operation</i>	<i>Temps. on Books</i>	<i>Agency Employees</i>
1. ItCo	IT	8	7700	16
2. CleriCo	Trades, Clerical & Hospitality	30	1845	6
3. NurseCo	Clerical, Nursing	5	1500	8
4. ConstructCo	Construction	5	2-3000	4
5. UnemployCo	Intensive Assistance & Job Matching	4	500 2000	12

Note: *All clients on database includes people seeking temp and perm work - no breakdown available from ItCo

Table 2: The Characteristics of the User Firms

User firm	Industry/ Service	Years in Operation	No. of employees		Part of larger co.?
			% Perm	% Temp	
Company 1	Technical Services	40	66%	33%	Y
Company 2	Financial Services	40	99%	1%	Y
Company 3	Manufacturing	80+	?*	?*	Y
Company 4	Power Supply	95+	87%	13%	N
Company 5	Training	40+	95%	5%	N

Note: *This company did not wish to provide a breakdown of perm/temp employees.

Four temporary worker focus groups were conducted comprising 29 people. As illustrated in Table 3, there was a representative sample of gender in the total sample, although this varied between focus groups. The average age of temporary workers interviewed was from the mid-early 30s. The average time interviewees had worked as temporaries ranged from one-and-a-half years to four years.

Findings: Responses and Implications of the Five Research Questions

In this section we return to the five questions raised earlier relating to temporary work and HR addressing: recruitment and selection, integration and identification, employee commitment, HR administration and temporary worker training. Due to the space limitations of this paper, we have selected for discussion what we considered to be the most relevant issues relating to temporary work and HR.

Table 3: Temporary Worker Focus Group Demographics

Focus Groups	Gender		Average Age*	Average time as temp
	Male	Female		
CleriCo	2	3	29	1.5 years
NurseCo	1	5	33	3 years
ConstructCo	6	0	35	3-4 years
UnemployCo	5	7	31	N/A
Total:	14	15		

Note: *Calculated as average of midpoints - <25 taken as 20

Recruitment and selection: *Who selects and recruits temporary workers?* The findings of our study indicate that it is the sole responsibility of the TWA to recruit temporary workers for user firms, although the user firm occasionally becomes involved in the selection process. For example, in some cases agencies will send two or three people to the user firm where the relevant supervisor/manager then makes their choice. It was also a strategy of some user firms to send people they wanted to hire to a TWA so that the agency could take on responsibility for HR administration.

Integration and identification: *Are temporary workers integrated with the user firm's employees or do they work independently? With which organisation, if any, do they identify?* There was no indication that temporary workers identified with the employing agency. The level of integration and identification a temporary worker experienced within the user firm depended on the duration of the temporary contract. The longer the duration of the contract, the more it seemed the temporary worker would be integrated into, and identify with, the user firm. This did not mean that the temporary worker felt any more secure, as some interviewees commented that they still had not taken sick days or any leave after three years with the same organization. Primarily, they worried about being replaced, either because they might be viewed as unreliable or because a person with more up-to-date skills might become the preferred temporary placement. The relatively long periods of time spent by some temporary workers with the same user firm did not, in the case of our sample, translate into any permanent offers of employment.

Employee commitment: *Do temporary workers have commitment to the agency or to the user firm?* Commitment for temporary workers appeared to be initially to themselves rather than the temporary agency or the user firm. For example, the majority of temporary workers interviewed for this study signed on with several agencies in order to obtain work, and commented that they may have a six week contract with one firm but would leave after one week if they were offered a longer contract elsewhere.

Training: *Once a potential temporary worker signs with an employment agency, what training is available to them and where do they get it?* Basically a temporary employee is expected to 'come with the necessary skills' or acquire them on their own behalf. We found that the only training on offer by user firms was essential safety training, induction or job specific familiarization training. User firm interviewees indicated that if more than this basic training was required they would send for another temporary worker. This reinforces the argument made by Cauldron (1994) that temporary workers are considered to be truly expendable.

HRM administration: *Who is responsible for the administration of temporary workers' payroll tax, OH&S, PAYE, etc? Is this the responsibility of the agency or the user firm?* Responsibility for these HR functions rested solely on the temporary agency and was one of the major reasons why user firms utilize temporary agencies and paid the 'middle man' rather than contracting temporary workers themselves. User firms used agencies for HR administration and to handle complex employment legislation. Legislation concerning staff dismissal was a particular deterrent for employers to take on permanent staff.

Discussion

In summary, it appears that, apart from training, all of the 'traditional' HR functions such as recruitment and HR administration have shifted completely to TWAs where temporary working is concerned. From the user firm's perspective, there is frequently little or no emphasis on strategic HR, as temporary workers tend to be recruited as just-in-time employees needed to fill a gap at short notice. Conversely, it could be argued that the recruitment of temporary workers on short-term contracts that are frequently renewed is a strategic HR initiative on the behalf of the user firm. Where this occurs it allows screening within the workplace to occur, labour 'on-tap', a negligible utilization of any HR resources by the user firm and it is immediately cost effective.

The implications of utilizing temporary workers over the long term are not known in terms of organisational effectiveness. Much of the organizational strategy for employing temporary workers appears to be aimed at cost cutting and achieving greater labour flexibility. In many cases, permanent jobs are being 'lost' to temporary jobs. As Uzzi and Barness (1998) report, reorganisation and technology is aimed at the reshaping of permanent jobs so that contingent workers who can 'complete the full sequence of a permanent job' are substituted easily for permanent workers. Despite the efforts of unions such as the AMWU to legislate for this, employers often find 'loopholes' or work around such stipulations. In addition false economies may occur where 'hard' HR strategy is concerned. For example, Uzzi and Barness (1998) point out that although temporary workers are associated with lower recruiting, insurance and fringe benefit costs than permanent workers, their use may result in 'hidden costs'. Hidden costs accrue, they explain, through the agency's mark up and the governance structure required to resolve conflict and coordination problems between temporary and permanent workers. In addition, as Allen, Sompayac and White (2002) point out, many user firms have incorrectly assumed to their cost that if a temporary worker does something illegal, unethical or fraudulent they are not liable, as it is the TWA that undertook the initial screening process.

For the user firms the implications of attachment, commitment and employee identity demonstrate that although HR rhetoric espouses the benefits of employee commitment and loyalty, this does not extend to temporary workers. Consequently, temporary workers are not required to experience the consequences of a positive psychological contract, such as job satisfaction, organizational commitment, a sense of security and motivation, or to demonstrate organizational citizenship behaviour. Storey (2001) advocates that the absence of citizenship behaviour is a bonus for the fixed term employee who does not have to become embroiled within an organisation's culture, but it seems a poor 'trade off' for the lack of security, career development and sense of being 'second class' compared to permanent employees in the way that some of our interviewees indicated.

In large part the allocation of HR functions will depend on the reason why agency workers have been hired by the user firm. Where this study was concerned, the impetus for temporary hire ranged from strategic HR reasons (such as workforce de-unionisation) and cost cutting initiatives, through to the need to cover temporary labour shortages (such as covering for sickness and holidays) and the provision of occasional and specialist skills. In addition, there was evidence that the labour hire process in itself was a manifestation of contracting in, not only labour, but also HR services.

The evidence presented here points to user firms taking a 'short-term' view of their strategic employment requirements. For user firms the utilisation of temporary workers provides extensive labour flexibility with reduced obligation on their behalf. Labour costs can be cut and labour can be employed on a 'needs' basis. Managers concerned only with making their departmental budget 'look good', and others concerned with gaining immediate benefits to the bottom line, may, however, find their competitive advantage all but disappears in the longer term. Moreover, the implication of such developments for temporary workers is negative in terms of aggregate skill acquisition, employment security and the sustainability of employment conditions. The lack of career paths, adequate training, protection and conditions for temporary agency workers in Australia has led to a growing 'second-class' workforce (Campbell and Burgess, 2001; Connell and Burgess, 2001; Hall, 2000). Ambiguity, confusion and an absence of regulations surrounds the temporary work sector in Australia, indicating that there is an urgent need for policy reform in relation to regulatory norms and employment arrangements. Although some reforms to the industry are being implemented, they are largely on an ad hoc, state-by-state jurisdictional basis. Given the increasing numbers of temporary workers, Australia needs to take account of the recent EU directive *European Union on Working Conditions for Temporary Workers* (2002), where it is stipulated that temporary workers will

no longer be subject to discrimination due to the nature of their employment contract.

The small scale of this study tends to limit the potential for generalisation. However, as the purpose of the study was to achieve depth over breadth, the findings provide a useful exploratory study that in future can be expanded to provide a rich source of data on the topic of HR and temporary workers in Australia. Given the shortage of literature on this topic, alongside the growing numbers of temporary workers in Australia, clearly there is a need for further research in this area.

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