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## **Flexible work arrangements: exploring the linkages between perceived usability of flexible work schedules and work/life balance**

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The relationship between the perceived usability of flexible work schedules and work/life balance were explored with 710 office based employees. Furthermore, the direct effects of a variety of flexible work arrangements on work/life balance were assessed. Direct linkages were found between perceived usability of flexible work schedules and the three dimensions of work/life balance (work interference with personal life, personal life interference with work, and work/personal life enhancement). In addition, employees operating under flexitime work schedules displayed significantly higher levels of work/life balance than their counterparts utilising traditional fixed-hour schedules. However, non significant differences in the levels of work/life balance were found between two other flexible work schedules (flexiplace and job share) and fixed-hour work schedules. Consequently, while individual flexible work schedules may have a marginal overall positive impact on employee work/life balance, the perceived usability and availability of these work schedules appears to be a key element in achieving work/life balance for many office based employees. The implications for employees, organisations and future research are discussed.

**Keywords:** Work/life balance, strategic human resource management, flexible work arrangements.

## **Training the next generation of local government managers**

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Several factors are converging to give local government a prominence it has lack for decades. As governments in market oriented democracies struggle with demands for improved services and greater efficiency as well as public disengagement from political processes, local government is emerging as a strategically located but under-utilised institution at the interface between government and community. In particular locality-based approaches to the 'wicked problems' of public management increasingly identify local government as the steward of the community resilience and local knowledge required to address the pressing issues of our times. For this to happen, however, local government itself needs to change developing a new type of leadership capable of accessing a new type of knowledge. In this paper we look at the management challenges facing local government and suggest the competencies and skills which will be required to meet them.

**Keywords:** Public Sector Reform, Local Government, Competencies

## **Training the next generation of local government managers**

### **ABSTRACT**

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### **PAPER TEXT**

Public management in market-oriented democracies has always been dynamic and the current waves of change sweeping through it are to be expected. In this paper we briefly introduce those changes identifying particularly what they have meant for the competencies and skills required of public managers. We then focus on local government which current trends are drawing back into the limelight and investigate what challenges this re-discovered prominence pose for the training of local government managers.

What we now think of as the 'traditional' model of public administration, described by Weber in terms of 'legal, rational, authority' (Weber 1968), is really a relatively recent invention. It has also been a dynamic reality, changing as the societies in which it operated changed. Limiting discussion to those countries which developed or inherited a Westminster system makes it possible to broadly characterise these changes in terms of the decades in which they reached a high point. So the 1930s might be seen as the high point of traditional British bureaucracy. The 1960s may be seen as the epitome of the planning based administration of the welfare state. The 1990s may be viewed in terms of the new public management reforms favouring market based instruments.

These broad changes are captured in Table 1. The 1930s may be regarded as the high point of traditional Westminster public administration. In Weber's seminal analysis this bureaucracy featured a professional graded hierarchy in which officials knew their place and communicated with those immediately above them and immediately below them in an orderly chain of authority. This subsumed the individual into the organization in ways that, in theory, left little room for personal initiative or influence. In operational terms the classic bureaucracy focused on rules and procedures. These were legal in that they had been sanctioned by legislation enacted by parliament. They were rational in that they followed principles established in policies which were openly stated. Weber contrasted this form of public management with those based on the whimsy of hereditary leadership and with administration based on military or religious authority.

The implications for the attitudes and skills of public servants are clear. First they had to be trained, full-time career specialists. Second they had to be literate and understand why the system in which they worked operated as it did. The career based public service arose from the necessity of having well paid officials who would not be tempted to take bribes or would not need to act on personal interest. Rather they could have the impartial implementation of procedures as their sole focus. The need for literacy arose from the nature of bureaucracy as a set of procedures based on written rules

with written records preserving precedents, which formed the basic resource of decision making. Being able to accurately interpret rules and previous decisions as well as being able to accurately record, store and retrieve information was all vital and called for a high degree of functional literacy. Understanding was also significant because the public servant had to know why the system operated as it did. Significant disciplinary sources of knowledge appropriate to being a public employee were to be found in law and political history. The point is that the problems faced by these employees were mainly to do with administering a set of regulations drawn from legislation and the knowledge they needed was about the proper procedures by which this could be accomplished. Their training could therefore consist of pre-employment school and university education which broadened the mind making them aware of and able to serve the public interest.

Table 1: Public administration reforms and competencies

	1930s	1960s	1990s
Caricature	Manuals and forms	Planning and policy	Management and contracts
Core subject	Constitutional Law	Policy analysis	Management
Disciplines	Political science Law, history	Policy studies, Social science	Management, Economics
Problematic	Administration	Poverty Employment	Legitimacy
Main tools	Regulation Budgeting	Planning Management	Competition Productivity
Organising focus	Bureau	Programs	Output groups
Public Servant	Bureaucrat	Public Administrator	Public Manager

Source: Adapted from Hess and Adams 2002: 73.

Re-reading the text books of this earlier generation of public employees is illustrative of just how much things have changed. Harold Finer provides an interesting insight into the character of the public employee of the 1930s and by implication of the skills (almost always) he required (Finer 1932). Finer's description of the ideal public employee is fundamentally about having the correct set of attitudes. It starts from the belief that the welfare of the public must be the sole goal of public servants' work to the exclusion of any personal end. They were to employ all their abilities to follow the policy directions coming from above because representative democracy ensured the legitimacy of those directions. While a sense of obedience needed to be strong, Finer's public servants were not automatons. On the contrary they had to use their imagination to see beyond the forms and reports of their daily activities to the human realities captured in the uncontested idea of the public interest. This was seen as an overarching unitary goal. Its existence and nature were not open for debate within the public administration. It was assumed to be the natural and normative product of the proper functioning of democratically elected government.

In terms of public administration the procedures and the due process of working these through fully was the best guarantee that the public interest would be ultimately served regardless of the personal feelings of those who administered the systems of government. For public servants to be most effective in this system they needed above all, faith that the procedures would, if followed fully, produce outcomes which served the public interest. The logic was rigid and the idea that flexibility would be helpful was not considered because a causal relationship between proper procedure and the achievement of public interest outcomes, was assumed.

For public administrators of this period the major training issues were the balance between ancient and modern in their study of history, philosophy and language. Either the ancient or the modern focus would provide opportunity to develop the levels of literacy without which the system could not operate. The question open for debate was which focus would best inculcate the values and attitudes



the system required of its employees. In their actual work public servants were preserved from association with less elevated disciplinary concerns by the distinction between 'administration' which dealt with the high affairs of state and 'management' which was about mundane operation of the system.

This high-brow, elitist and attitude based approach to the skills required of public servants persisted through post-war recovery. The determination of the post-war generation of policy makers to increase personal security resulted in the waves of reform later characterised as the 'welfare state'. Elements of this welfarism had been present in Westminster nations prior to this, especially in Australia and New Zealand. The adoption of a political program of state based welfare provision, however, marked an approach across government which required some quite new administrative procedures and skills. The 1960s may be taken as a period characterised by this policy. At the top of the list of new skills this demanded of public employees, commentators of this period placed planning and policy analysis (Self, 1972). The previous historico-institutional framework of knowledge could not deliver on these highly applied skill sets. Specialists with quantitative skills became necessary but senior administrators were kept at one remove lest they be reduced to being technicians unable to understand the context and broader problems of public administration. Despite this the impact of planning on the way in which government did business, however, meant that the quantitative social science techniques became essential.

This necessity for planning and analytical skills was bolstered in this period by the contention that social science would provide answers to social problems in the same way as physical science was providing answers to physical problems. There was an expectation that human progress would be boosted by the application of social science and the discovery of laws of social development. In this context it was possible for some governments to assume that they could, for instance, plan poverty out of existence. The social science body of knowledge necessary for this period of public

administration, like that necessary for traditional bureaucracy, could be adequately taught in formal pre-employment courses. Major differences were the lack of discipline specific skills like literacy, historical understanding and linguistic capacity typical of the earlier period of bureaucracy. In their place universities and colleges were offering courses in areas such as policy studies where the focus was not on the discipline but on its location in relation to policy. So the knowledge was not considered to be valuable for its own sake but rather for the extent to which it was applied to a particular policy area such as health, education, agriculture and so on.

In the 1990s the quantitative focus received a huge boost with the emergence of economics as the core discipline of public management. Issues of efficiency and choice were resolved by reference to technocrats whose narrow expertise gave them a functional monopoly on measuring inputs and outputs. One result was that non-market based ideas made little headway and the skills they required were gradually supplanted as necessary to public administration (Stilwell 2000). During the 1990s therefore public administration was conceptualised increasingly as being like a market. Good knowledge in this situation was knowledge derived from public choice reasoning with price signals and competition becoming the forms such knowledge took. This knowledge became so dominant as to be almost self-referential. The high period of the New Public Management, therefore was also the high tide of this focus on economic expertise as the central disciplinary and skill set required of decision makers in public administration. Despite appearing to alter the balance away from 'big government' these market oriented instruments embedded an expertise-based positivist methodology at the heart of public management.

Significant Australian critiques of the impact of NPM include Quiggin (1995), Weller and Davis (1996), Argy (1998), Stilwell (2000), and Davis and Keating (2000; 2001). The significant issue for this paper is the loss of decision making capacity at local level under NPM because the knowledge deemed appropriate to public management became the preserve of economic experts associated with

central government agencies. The contradiction this created was that, even as deficits began to appear in the ability of government to manage its interventions well because it lacked local knowledge, citizens were increasingly withdrawing from involvement in public decision making. This further deprived service provision of much needed local knowledge and voluntary support. One response in recent years has been the rise of community-based approaches to government activities. Most OECD governments now boast of the raft of community consultation mechanisms, community strengthening activities and community engagement programs, particularly volunteering, which they have put in place.

Local government has, however, been neglected as a potential component in this. This is remarkable because the fundamental characteristics of local government make it a particularly appropriate institution for addressing these contemporary issues of public policy and management. Local government is, in theory at least:

- Democratically elected;
- Close to the people;
- Locally accountable;
- Responsive; and
- Place oriented.

Local government has a distinctive role to play here because the drivers and enablers for many place shaping activities are within its remit. These include citizen participation, community cohesiveness, local service delivery and mediating views on local issues. In terms of citizen participation, because local government represents people at the level of the communities in which they live it is much more able than national or state government, to ensure that small voices are heard in public discussion. In terms of community cohesiveness, because local government is the custodian of community assets and infrastructure (roads, parks, meeting places) it has access to resources through which the growth and competitiveness of the local economy can be promoted. In terms of service delivery because the regional basis of local government can enable it to be more easily oriented to both people and place, it has greater potential capacity to deliver local services in ways which match local needs. Finally local

government is in a stronger position to broker challenges, such as environmental concerns, which impact differentially on particular localities.

Two facts about this list of activities indicate that they are lasting needs for which local government is a logical provider. One is that where local government is seen as inactive in these areas regional entities have been created to fill the gap this leaves. This has the advantage of leveraging economies of scale and scope and of increasing the competitive advantage of locality by using more coherent regional identities. The other is that historically the disappearance of local government as the major player in these activities is a recent phenomenon. Traditionally market oriented democracies have had strong local government but issues of financing and sustainability have led to a gradual erosion of local responsibility for public decision making. What we are observing then is a list of essential activities which used to be undertaken by local government but which local government no longer has the capacity to undertake. One result is the creation of regional entities which are better resourced and therefore better able to tackle the challenges of providing a place-based focus for government interventions. Another is the depth of thinking evident within local government about its own future. Four years of research and reporting on local government in the UK has led to the conclusion that there is a fundamental contradiction at the heart of market-oriented democracy between the local participation required for democracy and the economies of scale required for fiscal responsibility (Lyons 2007). Eight years of research on and implementation of a community-based policy approach in Victoria has shown a strong correlation between local government performance and personal well-being (DVC 2006). While these issues are beyond the scope of this short discussion they point to the centrality of the issue of the future of local government.

The loss of power from local areas has, however, also resulted in a loss of expertise. This loss of local capacity, the issues it creates for economic activity and suggested remedies for it has attracted both international (Cooke and Morgan, 1998; OECD, 2005;2006) and national (Rainnie, 200?;

Montgomery, 2006) attention. Some activity is already evident in Australian local government with serious attention being paid to future workforce planning. This is, however, yet to take account of the emerging role of local government in community-based public management and focuses on a fairly traditional set of public management skills. In order to re-build local government capacity to meet the emerging needs it will be necessary to re-discover and re-train for the skills required. Decision makers in local government need, for instance, to know about local assets (physical, social and human) and how they are changing. They also need to be able to read and measure the pulse of the communities and understand the local drivers of growth and satisfaction. They will need to understand and use new areas of knowledge such as geographic information systems, industrial ecology, civic renewal and locality based innovation. While many successful local politicians and business people have an intuitive grasp of such realities, an evidence base is required to turn in them into useable knowledge and instruments for public administration and this requires serious research capacity. They will also need to expand current understandings in traditional public sector knowledge areas. In particular, more knowledge of policy processes (mandates, authorisation, capacity) and the techniques of management (accounting, economics, human resources) will be needed to make local action politically supportable and administratively implementable. Overarching these codifiable forms of knowledge there is a more general issue of knowing how to value and manage complexity. With the 27 plans each local government area oversees, issues of interdependence (economic, social and natural worlds), and loss of boundaries (who is responsible for water, planning, energy, skills?), the tasks facing local government are seriously complex.

Despite the need for new skills to access new sources of knowledge, few local governments in Australia have anything other than an ad hoc approach to training with some in-house provision and some contracting out of professional development training packages. Some traineeship type schemes operate but there is little acknowledgement that local government may require specialist training and not much discussion between officials and elected representatives about training needs. Most seem

content with the possibility that some staff will choose to undertake some kind of public administration or public sector management course either before or during employment. The common barriers are the difficulty of returning to study, the current undervaluing of learning, the perception that courses on offer don't match practical needs, and the issue of who will pay the real and opportunity costs.

International experience indicates that successful training is likely to be characterised by:

- Formal links to career paths through policies related to recruitment, promotion, professional development and performance management;
- Material tailored for regional circumstances;
- Integration into business plans and budgets;
- Participation of senior staff and elected councillors; and
- Work-based placements

The best results are obtained where these are integrated into practice and where there are credit transfers between their vocational and professional elements. Few examples exist of attempts to tackle the more tacit forms of knowledge required for local government to re-gain capacity although the existence of some Local Leaders Institutes is notable.

The point of this paper is that in the growing trend towards community and place-based policy making and service delivery requires a new interface between government and locality. Local government is a logical player in this interface. It will, however, only succeed in this area if urgent attention is paid to building the skills this new forms of engagement require. To bring government and community together, the new leaders of local government will need to be:

- stewards of assets;
- brokers of complexities;
- facilitators of networks;
- advocates for place;
- shapers of place;
- social entrepreneurs; and
- innovators.

The skills and competencies these activities require are not natural and are not in evidence in current local government organizations. The challenge is whether we are going to do anything about this or whether we are just going to hope that somehow young people will develop these competencies without training.

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