



INNOVATIVE AND FLEXIBLE APPROACHES TO WORKING TIME

CASE STUDIES

FINLAND



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CASE STUDY. FINLAND

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1 INTRODUCTION

Flexible working time arrangements are typically associated with higher-educated, professional and expert work, where employers accommodate their employees' wishes for autonomy concerning their work practices (Weideman and Hofmeyr, 2020; Davidescu et al., 2020). Employers also necessitate flexibility in the expert and manager work, for instance, working overtime in project work. Flexibility and flexible working arrangements, however, extend over the whole labour market (Brega, Besamusca and Yerkes, 2023). The Finnish case study focuses on "the other side" of the spectrum; examining how flexible working arrangements are designed and implemented in sectors, where employees traditionally have limited autonomy over their work practices, concerning both working time and place. Specifically, the Finnish case study focuses on two cases on two sectors, 1) retail/service/commerce and restaurant sector and 2) the public social and health care sector. In these sectors, the combination of flexible working arrangements and other working conditions may present different challenges and opportunities than in the high(er)-wage sectors where flexible working time is generally advert to. The perceptions around flexible working arrangements are also likely to differ as whether looking from employees or employers' perspective (Zucconi et al., 2024; RWA, 2024; OECD, 2017).

In Finland, the Act on Working Time (872/2019) regulates the maximum limits of working time and the minimum limits of rest periods. The clauses of the Working Time Act allow some degree of deviation from the regular working hours by Collective Agreements (CA) made by the employer or the national level employer organisation and the national level employee organisation. Working hours are a typical subject of CAs, and CAs also

include provisions on the possibility of local agreements specifically regarding working hours.

In addition to promoting flexibility in work arrangements, Finland has made efforts in creating pathways for reducing working time through legislative and policy frameworks. The Working Time Act (872/2019) allows for arrangements like annual working time systems, which average work hours over longer periods, enabling shorter workweeks or extended rest periods while maintaining overall productivity. Collective agreements often complement these provisions by permitting localized adjustments to working hours, particularly in response to employee needs such as caregiving or health considerations. Moreover, Finland has implemented policies like the 2022 Family Leave reform, which facilitates equitable sharing of parental leave, indirectly reducing working hours for caregivers during critical life stages. There is also a growing interest in exploring shorter workweeks to improve well-being (Kelly, 2020). However, interviews conducted for this study highlight that such reductions are often deemed infeasible in sectors like health and social care, low-wage service industries, and the restaurant and service sector. The nature of these industries, which rely heavily on hands-on, customer-facing roles and consistent service delivery, makes shorter working hours challenging to implement without jeopardizing operational efficiency or service quality (Ilsøe and Larsen, 2021). For example, in the restaurant sector, fluctuating customer demand necessitates adaptable staffing models that are incompatible with substantial reductions in working time. Similarly, in health care, staffing shortages further complicate the feasibility of reducing hours. Productivity concerns also play a significant role, as these sectors operate under tight margins and high demand.

The statutory maximum working hours in Finland are 8 hours daily and 40 hours weekly. Weekly working hours can also be organised to equalize to

an average of 40 hours in a maximum of 52-week period without exceeding the daily maximum of 8 working hours. In addition, in certain occupations, working hours can be averaged to a maximum of 120 hours over a period of three weeks or to a maximum of 80 hours over period of two weeks. (Working Time Act 872/2019 5 §). The average collectively agreed normal weekly working hours for full-time employees in Finland is 37,5 hours, which falls below the EU average of 38,1 hours (Eurofound 2023). In addition, when considering the average number of usual weekly working hours in main job for full-time employees, Finland has the shortest working hours in the EU with 37,9 hours, while the EU average is 39,8 hours. (Eurofound 2023).

In Finland, the weekly working hours are thus relatively moderate and typically determined through concerted negotiations. Issues concerning working life, including working time and place practices, are established in the two partite agreements between employer and employee organisations. These agreements are considered as a Nordic tradition or "innovation" (as referred to by two representatives of an employer organisation in the interviews for the Finnish case study), in addition to adhering to a long tradition of tripartite collaboration between the state and the social partners (employers and employees' organisation) (Jonker-Hoffren 2019).

The 'Nordic model' of industrial relations in Finland is determined by the high level of organization of both employers and employees and their established role in the decision-making of labour markets (Käräylä 2024). In recent years Finland has moved from national level agreements to sectoral and local level agreements in collective bargaining (Sippola & Bergholm 2023; Liukkunen 2024) and for now most of the agreements are made on the sectoral level between employer and employee organisations (Ahtiainen 2024). On the local level, agreements are made

between individual organised companies and trade unions (Ahtiainen 2024). These agreements are vital for example in agreeing on telework practices as the regulatory basis for working time offers only the basis for implementing flexible working place practices (cf. The Working Time Act, 13 §).

The coverage of collective agreements in Finland has remained high and in 2021, 88,8 per cent of all employees were covered by collective agreements (CAs). In the public sector, including the social and health care sector, CAs cover all employees. In the private sector 83,9 per cent of all employees were covered by CAs in 2021. In the trade sector 71,7 per cent of employees were covered by CAs and in the hotel and restaurant sector 83 per cent were covered by CAs in 2021. (Ahtiainen 2024) Trade union membership levels have been declining in Finland in recent years: in 2021, unionisation degree was 54,7 per cent compared to the 60,2 per cent in 2017. In contrast to the overall decline of union memberships, in public services the level has risen 3,9 percentage points from 72,8 to 76,7 per cent in 2021. The private service sector on the other hand has the lowest rate of union organised members, 41,6 per cent. (Ahtiainen 2023)

In this case study, we define flexibility in two ways: employer-driven and employee-driven flexibility. The latter refers to the employee's ability to schedule and allocate work autonomously, while the former refers to the employer's ability to utilize the workforce according to demand. The two sectors we are examining are characteristically "high" on employer flexibility but "low" on employee flexibility industries. Against this background, this case study explores the complexities of both reducing and extending working time and innovating with flexible working arrangements within these sectors.

2 HOW THE CASE STUDY EMERGED

Work-time flexibility has emerged as a defining feature of Finland's labour market over the past decade, becoming a crucial element of employment policy (Böckerman et al., 2017). This shift has allowed many employees to better manage their work-life balance as flexible working arrangements have expanded across various sectors. The amendments to Finland's Working Hours Act in 2019, which further expanded options for flexible schedules and remote work, underscore this shift (Hanni, 2019). By enabling employees to adjust their working hours or locations, the legislation has empowered the Finnish workforce to tailor their schedules to align with both personal and professional needs. This focus on flexibility mirrors global trends toward more adaptable work practices, particularly as many countries, including Finland, move away from rigid, traditional models of work (Böckerman et al., 2017).

The COVID-19 pandemic further highlighted the critical role of flexible working arrangements. As global labour markets faced unprecedented disruptions, many sectors struggled to adapt to the new realities brought on by the crisis (ILO, 2022). In Finland too, the pandemic caused significant disruptions to the economy, causing businesses to adapt rapidly to health and safety concerns (Zucconi et al., 2024). While certain industries, such as retail, experienced an unprecedented surge in consumer demand, others, especially in the public and healthcare sectors, were burdened with increasing workloads and labour shortages. This led to a push for greater need of flexibility in managing work schedules. In response, Finland's social partners, including employers and trade unions, put forward proposals aimed at easing labour market constraints and supporting both employers and employees during the crisis (Akava, 2020; Strigen et al., 2023).

However, the design and impact of flexible working arrangements varies significantly across different sectors, particularly between low-wage and public service sectors (Nordic Council of Ministers, 2019). For example, in low-wage sectors, flexibility often reflects the need to adapt to fluctuating consumer demand, with practices such as on-demand scheduling optimizing operational efficiency. On the other hand, in public service sectors, flexibility is often shaped by the need for workforce stability with the continuous provision of services. Further, these sectors also face distinct constraints, such as limited budgets and workforce shortages, which influence the extent and form of flexibility implemented reflecting the unique economic and institutional contexts of each sector. This case study emerged from the need to investigate these contrasting dynamics, examining how flexible working arrangements are designed and implemented in sectors where employees have limited control over their work practices. By focusing on the low-wage retail, service, and restaurant sectors alongside the public, social and healthcare sector, the study sheds light on the different challenges, opportunities, and tensions that arise. It explores how flexibility, though widely promoted, takes on different meanings depending on sector and whether it is driven by employer needs or employee preferences.

The service/retail/commerce and restaurant sector(s) are typically considered low-wage service sector work (Ilsøe 2016). In these sectors, flexible working time practices contrast sharply with traditional models of non-flexible working time structures, where Monday to Friday, 9 to 17 working times are adhered to. In these sectors, part-time work and unusual hours are common and are frequently combined with low wages (Ilsøe 2016). In Finland, wages are based on collectively agreed wages, instead of statutory minimum wages. The combination of low weekly working hours and the timing of the working hours, give a rise to theoretical basis for examining “the living hours” instead of “living wage” (Ilsøe 2016).

Additionally, work in these sectors is closely tied to employer-set physical workplace, opening hours, and service weeks (evenings, weekends, public holidays). This makes the sectors particularly relevant for analysing employer-driven flexibility, regarding determining the conditions and forms of flexibility.

In contrast, the public social and health care sector in Finland differs from the service, retail, service and restaurant sector, by obtaining full-time employment as the standard form of work (Finnish Government, 2023). With Finland's statutory rights for public services and ageing population, the need for care workforce is high (Yle, 2021), and this, combined with serious labour shortages, restricts reducing working hours or employee-driven flexibility. As observed in the interviews for the Finnish case study, instead, there are increasing pressures to *extend* the working time. Furthermore, relatively low wages of the nursing staff and the employees in the social care in the social and health care sector may push employees to work more hours to raise their income, particularly if they reside in the southern Finnish cities where costs of living are higher than rest of the country. Maintaining wellbeing and work-life balance is central for the fair labour market and decent job quality in this sector, regarding the work pressure and the need to work overtime, shifts, nights, and weekends.

To explore the challenges, we first conducted an online survey with 18 employers' and employees' organisations and then carried out six semi-structured in-depth interviews with the representatives of these two sectors in (May-June) 2024. The Survey was sent to all potential employer and employee organisations. 18 organisations responded (See Appendix for details). The interviews were conducted online (via Teams) and at least two interviewees were always present per interview. The duration of the interviews was generally between 1-1,5 hours and the respondents signed the letters of informed consent prior to the interview, following the project

agreements. The sample covered both public and private sector employment, characterized by limited autonomy in work practices.

The results provided new insights into the opportunities, challenges, and frictions within these sectors, often considered as low-waged labour market segments. The two case studies were designed to highlight how flexibility varies across sectors and how it may have different connotations depending on whether the flexibility is either *employer-* or *employee-* driven, or combination of this. The findings synthesised in this reported shed light on the impact of flexibility on overall social sustainability and on flexible work at the sectors with potentially less flexibility on working time and place.

3 MEASURES ADOPTED IN MATTER OF WORKING TIME

3.1 Measure 1: RETAIL, SERVICE, AND RESTAURANT SECTOR

Although previous research and our findings from the interviews indicate that the retail, service, and restaurant sectors often involve less employee-driven flexibility, our case study sheds additional light on the evolving dynamics. This sector recognizes the importance of addressing employee needs and has sought solutions to increase employee-driven flexibility. Flexible working arrangements in this context have demonstrated both financial and non-financial benefits, which can strengthen employee autonomy, improve well-being, and enhance workload management. For instance, the introduction of flexible full-time job models has offered part-time workers opportunities to achieve financial stability by increasing their hours during peak periods. This aligns with employee preferences for higher earnings and provides operational benefits to employers in meeting fluctuating customer demand. Furthermore, working time

equalization systems enable employees to balance peak and low-demand periods effectively, ensuring predictability and reducing stress.

Below we discuss flexible working models adopted in the sector, including flexible full-time job arrangements, working time equalization systems, and part-time work, all highlighting their role in adapting to fluctuating labour demands and improving work-life balance for employees. These systems, while beneficial, are often shaped by collective agreements and labour market structures, which determine the extent of flexibility available to workers.

- **Flexible Full-Time Job Model**

In the retail sector, the traditional employment model has evolved significantly due to fluctuating customer demand and labour requirements. This dynamic environment has prompted the adoption of a Flexible Full-Time Job Model, which is increasingly viewed by employers and employees as a strategic solution to both unpredictable labour demand, but also to respond to the employees' financial needs.

Under this model, part-time employees can receive a salary comparable to that of full-time workers by agreeing to a flexible arrangement through mutual consent (Eurofound, 2020). Typically, employees are required to be available for additional 'flexi hours' beyond their scheduled shifts, ensuring that they work the equivalent of full-time hours while accommodating demand. In other words, as part of the retail sector's collective agreement, flexible full-time work allows employees working less than 37.5 hours to still earn full-time wages, provided they take on additional shifts to meet the required hours (Das, 2023). In some cases, shifts can be announced with a minimum of 24 hours' notice, offering both employers and employees greater flexibility. This approach responds to the growing demand for greater autonomy over working hours among

employees, a trend that has gained momentum as workers seek a better work-life balance (Lehtinen, 2021) and economic stability. However, despite the advantages, the model has yet to be universally implemented across the sector.

Nevertheless, the flexibility granted to employees in terms of their working hours is often limited by the labour market structures. According to the neoclassical model of labour supply, workers should be able to freely choose the hours they work at the equilibrium wage (Rätzel, 2009). However, in practice, workers are constrained to choose between predefined "bundles" of hours and wages (Pekkarinen and Tuomala, 2020). Therefore, while flexible models aim to empower workers, labour market conditions may delimit the extent to which this flexibility can truly be realized. Moreover, for this to be effective, agreements between employees and employers must clearly outline the conditions under which flexibility is granted. The Working Time Act, for instance, allows for up to four hours of flexible time daily, but deviations from this can be made through collective agreements (Työsuojelu.fi, 2021). To avoid misunderstandings, social partners also suggest that it is advisable for such arrangements to be documented either as separate agreements or as clauses within employment contracts (Ammattiliitto Pro, n.d.). Interviews for the Finnish case study suggest that employers in these sectors are increasingly viewing this model as a viable solution that reconciles their fluctuating operational requirements with the need to provide employees a consistent income stream.

- **Working Time Equalization Systems**

Working time equalization systems have become central to the flexibility strategies, employed in these sectors, where fluctuating demands require adaptable labour practices. These systems allow for the redistribution of working hours over predefined periods, ensuring that employees can work

longer shifts during peak periods and receive compensatory time off when demand decreases. This flexibility not only caters to the operational needs of employers, but also aligns with the growing emphasis on work-life balance for employees (Isohanni & Karhonen, 2015).

According to Finnish labour regulations, the Working Time Act sets the maximum permissible regular working hours at 8 hours per day or 40 hours per week, with overtime defined as work exceeding these thresholds. However, the legislation permits the use of working time equalization systems, wherein work hours are averaged over an agreed period. For example, if an equalization period spans three weeks, overtime would be calculated based on work exceeding 120 hours over that timeframe (PAM, 2023). As one respondent explained this more precisely:

“Using the working time equalization system, a single work shift can be a maximum of nine (locally agreed upon 10) hours and a weekly working time of a maximum of 48 hours; in addition, six working days can be ordered per week. The condition is that the working time equalizes to the agreed average working time within a maximum equalization period of 26 weeks and that the working week is an average of five days during the same period. Extending the equalization period to a maximum of 52 weeks can be agreed locally.”

This allows businesses to adapt working schedules to operational demands, while maintaining compliance with legal limits on working time.

The appeal of this system extends beyond operational efficiency. Interviews suggest that younger workers, in particular, value the predictability that working time equalization provides, as it allows them to *better anticipate their work schedules and plan personal activities* (corresponding to Ilsøe's “living hours”). The ability to take time off during

quieter periods contributes to improved work-life balance and reduced stress, fostering a healthier working environment (Isohanni & Karhonen, 2015; also PAM, 2023). This decentralized approach to labour agreements reinforces the principle of flexicurity (European Commission, 2007), where flexibility in working arrangements ensures that both businesses and workers benefit from tailored work schedules without sacrificing stability. Local agreements further enhance the flexibility offered by equalization systems, enabling both parties to align working patterns with business needs and employee preferences.

In essence, working time equalization offer a structured, yet flexible approach to managing labour demands of the sector. By allowing for the variation of work hours across specified periods, these systems support both employer operational needs and employee well-being, making them a crucial tool in modern workforce management.

- **Part-Time Work and Autonomy**

Part-time work is not only common, but also fundamental phenomenon to the labour market in the retail, commerce, and restaurant sectors. The ILO Part-Time Work Convention, 1994 (No. 175) defines part-time employees as those whose regular hours are fewer than full-time workers. However, statistical definitions often set thresholds of fewer than 35 or 30 hours per week, depending on regional or sector-specific criteria. In Finland, full-time contracts in the retail sector typically involve 37.5 hours per week, with part-time work arrangements falling below this, often determined by individual agreements (Ropponen et al., 2022). The need for flexible work schedules is amplified by the fluctuating nature of customer flows, leading to approximately 45 percent of employees in these sectors working part-time, a trend mirrored across Europe, where part-time and temporary roles have become key drivers of workforce flexibility (European Commission, 2009).

In the Finnish retail and restaurant sectors, the unpredictability of customer demand necessitates a highly flexible workforce. Evening shifts, for example, make up a significant proportion of work schedules in these industries, especially restaurant sector, accounting for as much as 40–50% of all annual work shifts (Garde et al., 2019). This high demand for non-standard working hours underscores the essential role of part-time workers, whose availability during peak periods is critical to maintaining business operations. However, as Lindholm (2025) found in her study of restaurant employees, the reciprocal nature of flexibility is often crucial to worker satisfaction. Employees are more likely to remain committed when they perceive that their employers are accommodating their scheduling needs. Flexibility, in this sense, becomes a two-way street, benefitting both the employer and employee.

This rise in part-time work as a commonly occurring feature has emerged alongside broader changes in labour markets, where full-time, open-ended contracts are gradually giving way to more flexible and atypical forms of employment (Schoukens and Barrio, 2017). This shift allows firms to adapt more swiftly to volatile market conditions and changing consumer demands, particularly in retail and restaurants sectors, where staffing needs can vary significantly across the day and week (Jany-Catrice & Lehdorff, 2005). Interviews for the Finnish case study also suggest that many bigger firms, in particular, have adopted lean labour scheduling strategies, where the number of staff scheduled is closely aligned with fluctuating sales and customer volumes. In this context, part-time work has become central to managing labour costs, as businesses can adjust their staffing levels with greater precision (Price, 2004).

Beyond the operational benefits for employers, an important element of part-time work in these sectors is working time autonomy practices i.e., the ability of employees to exert control over their work schedules (Beckmann,

2016). The idea of autonomy is not merely a matter of scheduling convenience; it touches on deeper concepts of job quality, well-being, and employee agency. Studies (Zychová, et. Al, 2023; Reinardy, 2014) suggest that the quality of work is fundamentally linked to the autonomy, workers have, in shaping their work schedules while also fostering well-being, trust and motivation among the workforce (Appelbaum, 2000; Gallie, 2008; Bauer, 2004). Such arrangements can further help mitigate the pressures arising from competing demands at work and home (Chung, 2022; 2011). This is especially true for those who voluntarily choose part-time work for personal reasons, such as childcare or health concerns, for whom job quality often matches that of full-time employees (Lönnroos, 2016).

From a regulatory perspective, Finland's Employment Contracts Act mandates that part-time employees be given priority for additional work when a full-time position or extra hours become available (PAM, 2024). Employers are required to offer these opportunities equitably, ensuring that part-time workers have access to the same employment prospects as their full-time colleagues. This provision not only supports income stability for part-time employees, but also mitigates some of the negative aspects of part-time work, such as job insecurity and limited career progression. The law also provides recourse for employees who are denied these opportunities, allowing them to seek compensation for lost earnings, if their rights are infringed (ibid.).

Despite the operational advantages that part-time work offers employers, the expansion of part-time roles in some countries raises questions about the long-term sustainability of labour market flexibility. Firms that rely heavily on part-time workers to manage labour costs may inadvertently contribute to a workforce that is less secure and less invested in long-term career development (Hamermesh, 2021). Additionally, the prevalence of

involuntary part-time work can go against the sustainability of such arrangements. Approximately 20% of Finland's workforce is engaged in part-time roles involuntarily (Eurostat, 2024 (EU - Labour Force Survey microdata 1983-2022); CEDEFOP, 2024), with the highest proportions among lower-paid occupations such as elementary workers, including cleaners and helpers (Eurostat, 2024). This pattern presents a duality in labour market flexibility: while optimizing labour costs, the reliance on part-time roles in especially sectors with a comparative lower pay might concurrently reinforce precarious employment conditions, presenting potential trade-offs (i.e., fair access to stable, well-compensated work) that are likely to shape employment equity and skill investment within these sectors (Hudson and Kelleberg, 2019; Caldbick et al., 2013).

Further, it must be noted that in the trade sector, an average minimum working time must be agreed with a part-time employee. While variable working time contracts, including zero-hours contracts, are not commonly utilized due to collective agreement provisions, they are not outright prohibited. The regulation of variable working hours in Finland mandates that such arrangements must meet specific criteria to protect employees (Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment, 2018; Tyosuojele.fi, 2022). Employers are required to agree on minimum working hours with the employee, and any deviation must be justified by the genuine needs of the business (Employment Contracts Act 55/2001). There is also provision regarding days off, as a respondent shares:

"The employee's ability to cope and opportunities to combine work and other life are made easier by provisions regarding days off. First, there should be an average of 2 days off in the working week. Some of the days off must be given consecutively, and some of them should be placed on the weekend. The employee has the right to a certain minimum number of Sundays off, in addition, the employee

has the right to have Sunday off for family reasons. Based on the hours worked, the employee earns a maximum of 9 extra days off. The maximum number of work shifts between days off is limited to a maximum of 8 (locally agreed 10, one-off agreed 11)."

Lastly, Trials of work community-oriented shift planning are underway in companies in the trade sector. Especially in trade logistics, it has been possible to arrange regular working hours so that the working week mainly consists of three 12-hour days.

Let it be added that the Finnish working hours legislation still assumes that an employee has only one employment relationship. However, especially in the context of low-paid jobs, a person may have several, for example, zero-hour contracts. The employer's control does not extend to these working hours in any way. In a trade union representative's interview, it was considered problematic that employees might increase their earnings by working for multiple employers. In this case, one job does not provide 'living hours', but several are needed - the situation reminds us that low-wage work does not provide sustainable working conditions - even in a Nordic country - since the pressure for changes in working hours is more likely upwards than downwards.

3.2 Measure 2 PUBLIC, SOCIAL AND HEALTH SECTOR

Collective agreements in Finland's public social and health care sector enable a variety of ways of arranging and agreeing upon working hours. Based on the interviews for the Finnish case study 2, in this sector, at least two key factors influence the implementation of flexible working time practice. First, the demand for labour is high, since the services, in many cases, operates round the clock and cover the essential services of the society, such as the rescue services. Second, the social and health care sector is experiencing significant labour shortages. These shortages

emphasize the importance of employer-driven flexibility in work schedules, as it allows organizations to adapt quickly to staffing needs, while potentially also supporting employee well-being. The measures adopted to promote work time flexibility in response to these challenges include:

- **Annual Working Time Arrangements and Work Time Banks**

In contrast to the retail and service sectors, the public social and health care sector in Finland operates under considerable pressures due to the constant, high demand for essential services (Turunen, 2024). To address these demands, flexible working time arrangements have been implemented, with Annual Working Time Arrangements and Working Time Banks being among the most prominent measures. These systems enable employees to accumulate work hours over extended periods, offering them the flexibility to adjust their schedules based on personal needs and organizational demands.

Annual working time systems have proven particularly effective in managing the unpredictability of service demand (Antilla, 2005). They allow employees to take time off when needed without compromising financial security. This flexibility also supports the well-being of the workforce, for instance by preventing burnout and enhancing work-life balance, crucial in a sector that frequently faces labour shortages and high workloads (Finnish Institute of Occupational Health, 2020).

Furthermore, the concept of work time banks, provide employees with the opportunity to save and combine extra hours, earned leaves, or monetary benefits converted into time off. They are governed by both statutory provisions and collective agreements, giving employees the flexibility to manage work-life balance while addressing the sector's unpredictable demands. Here too, written agreements provide details on the aspects

such eligibility, limits on saving as well as termination of such flexibility (YTK, 2023).

However, when not managed properly, workers risk accumulating excess time credits, leading to burnout, absenteeism, and diminished motivation (ILO, 2004). This risk makes it critical for such systems to be carefully regulated to avoid the negative outcomes of overwork while maintaining the necessary flexibility to ensure continuous service delivery.

- **(Ergonomic) Shift Planning**

According to the Interviews, in the public, social and health sector, shift planning has been introduced to enhance employee control over their work schedules. This system enables workers, particularly those in high-demand roles, to manage their personal and professional commitments more effectively. This approach focuses on improving work schedules to enhance both employee well-being and organizational efficiency, particularly in sectors that operate 24/7, such as hospitals, emergency services, and social care facilities. Research conducted by the Finnish Institute of Occupational Health (2020) underscores the impact of ergonomic shift planning on reducing work-related health risks. For instance, cities that invested more in inspecting shift ergonomics saw a nearly 20% reduction in occupational accidents compared to hospital districts where less time was devoted to such practices (Finnish Institute of Occupational Health, 2020a).

Further, despite inconsistent implementation, one notably effective element of this framework introduced to address these challenges is the “*Working Time Traffic Light Model*”. This model was brought up by a respondent as a good example of a built-in tool for shift planning that pays attention to the health of the employees. The model categorizes shift patterns into three colours, namely, green, yellow, and red, based on their

impact on employee health and safety. Green represents optimal shift patterns with sufficient recovery time, while red indicates schedules that pose significant risks, such as excessive night shifts or short recovery periods. This model aims to optimize shift schedules, balancing work demands with the need for rest and recovery, thus reducing the likelihood of stress, fatigue, and occupational accidents (Finnish Institute of Occupational Health, 2022).

In terms of practical implementation, shift planning involves tools such as participative shift scheduling, where employees have a say in their work schedules. Further, Local agreements also play an integral role in managing working time in this sector. These agreements facilitate customized shift arrangements tailored to the specific needs of various roles. For instance, workers in demanding positions may agree to extended shifts, such as 12 or even 15 hours, followed by longer rest periods. Such arrangements help establishments and employees manage their workload while ensuring that service levels remain consistent. Interviews suggest that the use of self-rostering has been particularly effective in meeting work life balance among employees by allowing them to choose shifts that best fit their personal needs, thus improving their work-life balance and reducing absenteeism.

4 IMPACT OF THE MEASURES

The introduction of flexible working time measures has shaped the landscape of labour agreements across both the sectors, bringing impact that resonate deeply with both employees and employers. These policies, designed to reconcile the dual pressures of fluctuating labour demand and the need for employee stability and predictability, have

fundamentally shifted how work is organized and how work-life balance is managed in these sectors.

Who Drives Flexibility?

In the retail, service and restaurant sectors, flexibility has been pivotal in addressing the unpredictability of customer-demand. Here, flexibility measures are largely employer-driven, responding to the highly fluctuating nature of customer demand. Employers in these sectors are motivated by the need to optimize staffing levels to match the peaks and lows of business activity. Many interviewees from this sector highlighted that while flexible working arrangements, such as the flexible full-time job model or working time equalization systems, were introduced to meet operational requirements, however, their design and implementation often reflected a top-down approach. As one respondent notes:

"Employee-oriented flexibilities are more typical in white-collar positions than in blue-collar positions. For example, remote work is basically not possible at all in most executive-level positions. Employer-oriented flexibilities in the trade sector mainly mean part-time work and temporary work. For example, in retail, 45% of employment is part-time, and in many grocery stores, up to 80% of the staff work part-time."

This means that the design and implementation of these systems are often driven by the organization's needs, focusing on operational requirements rather than considering the needs or preferences of the employees. As a result, the workers may feel the systems may not fully address their concerns or improve their work-life balance effectively.

The flexible full-time job model, which allows part-time employees to receive full-time salaries in exchange for variable shifts, has provided a

structured yet adaptable framework. This model meets the operational need for rapid labour adjustment while offering workers financial consistency. Yet, this same flexibility can present a double-edged sword. While employees gain control over their schedules, the reality of fluctuating shifts, sometimes announced with minimal notice, can add a layer of unpredictability to their lives. Despite this, the autonomy inherent in these models has been a step forward in offering employees, especially part-timers, the agency to negotiate better work-life integration, even if the benefits still lean slightly in favour of employer needs.

In the public, social and health care sectors, the stakes tend to be particularly high at the moment of writing this report. In this sector, the demand for labour is constant and often strained by chronic staff shortages. The dynamics around flexibility measures seem to be somewhat more balanced i.e., they are both employer and employee-driven, with a noticeable focus (due to demanding profession) on worker's well-being and work-life balance. Unlike the private sector, where flexibility is tied closely to business needs, flexibility in the public and health care sector is worded by the respondents in this study, to stem from the need to manage the high and constant demand for services while ensuring that employees do not experience burnout. As a respondent shared:

"For providing services, i.e. primarily for the employer's needs. Hired labour is used e.g. in cleaning, food, office and technology services, care and social work and therapy services. Employee-oriented flexibilities include long work shifts, where nursing staff in particular want to reduce the time they are tied to work. In principle, the employee can also benefit from working time banks if they could get time off at their desired time, but mostly it is about the savings needed by the employer (in case of bank leave or working time allowances given during period work act as overtime buffer specific

to the working time period, in general working time only as a weekly overtime buffer, i.e. they are returned to be given later if the actual working hours are more than planned)."

Here, flexible working time measures like annual working time banks and shift planning have emerged as critical tools in ensuring that services are maintained effectively without stressing the workforce too much. Employees, particularly in high-stress roles such as health care, report significant improvements in job satisfaction when they are given control over their schedules. The sector exhibits a more balanced and rounded approach in its work, notably, *"even in shift or period work, you can somehow influence the timing with your own preferences,"* which provides employees with a degree of autonomy in their schedules.

However, the employer's tendency to optimize and minimize staffing leads to tight staffing levels and to the use of *"on-call arrangements"* with regularly employed staff, particularly where demand peaks for example in the mornings and afternoons. This approach where *"being on call is cheaper for the employer"* than to plan shifts with sufficient staffing leads to practices of regular staff working overtime on call arrangements. On the other hand, measures providing the employees the ability to manage longer shifts in exchange for extended rest periods has reduced some of the physical and emotional burdens of the job, providing a necessary buffer against burnout. However, there is a delicate balance to maintain. If poorly managed, flexibility can transform into an implicit expectation for employees to constantly adjust to shortfalls in staffing, stretching them too thin in critical periods.

At the organizational level, local agreements have been instrumental in driving and tailoring flexibility to specific needs in both sectors. For example, the Nighttime work arrangements which gave the opportunity to locally agree on the limits of daily working hours. These agreements,

negotiated directly between employers and employees or their representatives, based on the local provisions of the sector-level CAs, allow for a customized approach to work time management, which has proven especially effective in sectors where uniformity in shift patterns is neither practical nor desirable. For employers, this results in a more dynamic and responsive workforce, capable of scaling labour efforts in line with fluctuating service demands without incurring the financial and operational burden of constant overtime. For employees, the ability to influence the timing and structure of their work fosters a sense of autonomy/agency, helping them to manage personal obligations while maintaining their professional roles.

Reflection of the findings in relation to Sustainable Working Time Flexibility

In the post-pandemic landscape, *the restaurant sector, retail and service sectors* have been confronted by unparalleled challenges. These sectors, already characterized by intense competition, were forced to adopt abrupt operational changes, creating an environment where managerial ability and innovation became priority. Since the sectors are dependent upon instant client satisfaction, the pressure regarding service delivery and sustainable business may create tension between economic viability and social responsibility. In this sector, the way work time flexibility is currently controlled by employers may confront the ideals of social sustainability. Relying heavily on part-time, temporary, and unstable jobs has driven polarisation at the labour market. Part-time workers, in particular, are often given shifts during evenings, nights, and weekends, which adds to the divide. Workers may want to have more hours, but lack of available hours given by the employers' lean business model, may keep them stuck in an unpredictable job situation. Such unpredictability restrains their "living wages" (Ilsøe 2016) and can hamper their capacity

to manage and plan both work and personal life or budgets effectively, negatively impacting their agency in balancing life demands.

Shifting towards more employee-cantered flexibility, where work arrangements prioritize stability, predictability, and well-being, could improve worker retention and enhance the sector's reputation as a socially responsible industry. Offering decent wages with more regular shift patterns and flexibility that aligns with workers' personal needs is likely to build a stronger, more motivated workforce, benefiting both employers and employees. Ultimately, the current approach to work time flexibility highlights a potential conflict between short-term economic goals and the need for long-term social sustainability for the employees. The struggle between irregular hours, low pay, and the desire for work-life balance suggest a need to redesign flexible work arrangements with social sustainability at the forefront. This shift could strengthen these industries to gain economic success and social responsibility aligned.

In the health and social care sector, social sustainability is embedded in the structural, legal, and workforce dynamics that shape the industry. It goes beyond merely protecting workers' rights: in the context of chronic staff shortages, it aims to enhance the long-term well-being of staff and ensure sustainable working conditions. Given the indispensable role of human presence in this field, achieving a delicate balance between employee welfare, service delivery, and institutional requirements becomes crucial to maintaining both the workforce and the safeguarding the quality of care.

As highlighted by a respondent, *"personal and family needs, and work needs often become so significant that other issues fade into the background."*

Flexibility, in this context, goes beyond conventional models and requires a better understanding of time management, job design, along with availability of support structures to address the demands of the workforce. In this context, social sustainability translates into creating conditions where workers can thrive without sacrificing their personal lives, a task made more complex by the inherent demands of the sector.

However, unlike many other industries where remote work offers a range of flexibility in achieving work life balance, the health and social care sectors face challenges due to the hands-on and critical nature of the job. Remote work, in that sense, is largely impractical for most of the frontline staff, but may apply to specific administrative tasks or medical consultations conducted by doctors and nurses. For example, interviews highlight that digitalization and post-COVID-19 societal shifts have led to solutions such as remote consultation in elderly care. Therefore, remote work in this sector, predominantly address operational efficiencies. The real test of social sustainability of such approaches lies, may be, in scaling and integrating them into broader health care strategies while recognizing that they serve supplementary roles rather than replacing direct, on-site care delivery.

5 GENERAL EVALUATION AND CONCLUSIONS

The implementation of flexible working arrangements in Finland, particularly within sectors like retail, service, and the public social and healthcare sectors, demonstrates varying levels of practices. The central focus of the study highlights the differences between sectors where employees have differing degrees of autonomy over their work practices.

In the retail and service sectors, flexibility tends to be more employer-driven, a necessity to meet fluctuating consumer demand. This system,

while offering employees the potential for financial stability through e.g. flexible full-time job models, also introduces unpredictability, which disproportionately affects part-time workers who may face unsustainable working conditions, with unpredictability of short notice shifts negatively affecting job insecurity.

On the other hand, in the public healthcare and social sectors, flexibility tends to be more complex and on a surface level tries to balance employer and employee needs in labour intense environment. Systems such as working time equalization and ergonomic shift planning have been instrumental in safeguarding employee well-being in high-stress environments. However, the ever-increasing demands for care work, affected by Finland's aging population, pose a risk of employees, particularly given the chronic staff shortages in these sectors. Despite these pressures, the introduction of annual working time arrangements and the ability to influence work schedules have contributed significantly to employee satisfaction, suggesting that flexibility, when implemented with sufficient safeguards, can mitigate work-related burnout and enhance work-life balance.

The findings of this case study suggest that flexible working arrangements in Finland are an evolution to meet modern labour market demands. However, the success of these arrangements is contingent upon the ability to balance the needs of employers and employees. In the private sector, particularly in restaurant and service environments, the interviews suggest that there is a need for oversight, for example, for unchecked overtime or labour on demand. The public healthcare and social sectors face challenges due to chronic staff shortages. The interviews, however, suggest that structured flexibility, supported by collective agreements, can yield positive outcomes both in terms of operational efficiency and employee satisfaction. The broader challenge, moving forward, lies in

adapting flexible work models to maintain social sustainability, increased autonomy of work, and practices that reduce any occupational health risks such as ergonomic shift planning.

Both sectors underscore the importance of collective agreements in ensuring that flexibility does not become a substitute for worker exploitation. As flexibility becomes more embedded in Finnish work culture, attention must be paid to how it is implemented and monitored to ensure it serves both the operational needs of businesses and the personal well-being of employees. The future of work, especially with technological advancements and changing work landscape, will require continued dialogue between employers, unions, and policymakers to develop systems that are adaptive, fair, and sustainable for all stakeholders involved.

From a purely sustainability perspective, work time flexibility, in both sectors, react distinctly to the arrangements based on operational imperatives, employee agency and broader long-term vision. In low wage sectors, the systems - while being operationally effective – may constrain worker's agency and undermine tensions between income stability and job security. This may leave sectors juggling within fluctuating schedules, which challenges traditional work-life boundaries but also may raise questions about long term financial goals and income sustainability. Similarly, increasing flexibility through digitalisation (in the future), may not always address the core issues of job stability and workload management. Frontline workers continue to face demanding schedules that can lead to burnout, especially when flexibility does not translate into adequate support or if flexibility is translated into keeping wages inadequate for basic subsistence. Social sustainability, in this sense, for both sectors, is not just about reducing or increasing hours to advance flexibility, but about creating stability at workplace with an environment where diverse needs

can be met without undermining working capacities. Flexibility must not only address the immediate logistical challenges of scheduling but also incorporate broader considerations of job and life quality, including also mental health and work-life integration. Shifting family structures, marked by dual-income households, single parents, and multigenerational caregiving responsibilities, demand that work-time flexibility be robust enough to address these evolving realities while balancing operational efficiency. The true sustainability of flexibility lies in the ability to anticipate, respond to, and evolve with these complex trends, embedding adaptability into the very fabric of management practices.

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APPENDIX: ANONYMIZED SURVEY AND INTERVIEW PARTICIPANTS

Survey

Responses

A total of 18 organizations responded to the survey, representing both employer and employee organizations across relevant sectors. From those:

- 11 represent employees (either confederations (2) or trade unions (9))
- 7 represent employers (confederations (3) or employers' organizations (4))

Interview Participants

Six organizations also participated in interviews. These include a mix of employer and employee organizations from key sectors, which contributed additional insights into the challenges and opportunities of flexible working arrangements.

- Employer Organization and Sector: 3 responses from Restaurant, retail and hospitality sectors
- Employee Organization and Sector: 3 responses from Health and social sector

Notes on Anonymization

To maintain confidentiality, all identifying information has been removed. Responses and insights are attributed only to general organization types (e.g., employer or employee organization) and sector types.

Interview Questions

Background question: In research concerning working time, the different dimensions of working time are typically named as duration, timing, flexibility and the employee's working time autonomy: How are these questions guided & evaluated in the field(s) you represent, starting with duration?

1. AGREEING ON FLEXIBLE WORK PRACTICES

- a. By which group or party (employer, employees or someone else) has the effort to increase working time flexibility come about?
- b. In what ways do employees have the opportunity to participate in negotiations regarding flexible working hours or planning practices and agreeing on them? Do you see these practices as sufficient?
- c. In what ways is the functionality of flexible working time practices evaluated and by whom?

2. FLEXIBILITY AND WELL-BEING:

2.1. In your opinion, how are employer-oriented flexibilities and well-being related to each other? How would you define employer-oriented flexibilities?

2.1.1 In your opinion, how could employer-oriented flexible working time practices promote individual well-being?

2.2. In your opinion, how are employee-oriented flexibilities and well-being related to each other? How would you define employee-oriented flexibilities?

2.2.1. In your opinion, how could employee-oriented practices of flexible working time practices promote individual well-being?

3. FLEXIBLE WORKING PRACTICES: ADVANTAGES, DISADVANTAGES, SOCIAL SUSTAINABILITY

3.1. Work flexibility and benefits: What kind of experiences of financial and non-financial benefits do you have of flexible work practices? Can you give concrete examples of the benefits and possibilities of flexibilities in your field from the employers' point of view and from the employee's point of view (such as strengthening the autonomy of employees, well-being at work, managing workload)?

3.2. Work flexibility and disadvantages: What kind of experiences of economic and non-economic disadvantages do you have of flexible work practices? Can you give concrete examples of the disadvantages or risks of flexibilities in your field from your perspective?

3.3. Work flexibility and fairness: Does the possibility of working time flexibility apply to employee groups equally? Can you give examples of this in practice?

3.4. Work flexibility and social sustainability: for one, flexibility can mean exhaustion, reluctant flexibility, for another, combining work and family and leisure time: how would you evaluate the social sustainability of flexibility from these perspectives? Can you give practical examples?

3.5. How could the industry agreements and the regulatory environment be developed to achieve more socially sustainable working hours?

4. FLEXIBLE WORK PRACTICES AND ECOLOGICAL SUSTAINABILITY

4.1. What does sustainability transition mean from the point of view of your industry?

4.2. What is it understood to mean in relation to job flexibilities? How do you think working time and sustainability and well-being are connected?

4.2.1 To what extent in your industry is under-consumption discussed (e.g. sufficient working hours for low-wage earners so that the work guarantees enough earnings to secure a decent life) in relation to, on the other hand, the problem of overspending (e.g. with high incomes - should we consider rewarding with free time or with other intangible benefits that promote a sustainable society, not just monetary benefits)?

4.3. What kind of working time-related activities are/could be done in your industry to promote the sustainable well-being of the individual and the environment? How could the industry agreements and the regulatory environment be developed to achieve more ecologically sustainable working hours?

4.4. How could sustainable/flexible working time practices increase your industry's flexibility and ability to adapt to the sustainability crisis now and in the future?