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## **Flexible work as an opportunity and risk for the careers of women with care responsibilities**

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### **Abstract**

Flexibility of work in terms of time and place is often discussed in organizations in the context of higher participation and inclusion for women with care responsibilities for better career management. This paper presents manifold interdependencies between work and career as well as the associated inclusion and exclusion mechanisms especially for women with care responsibilities. It is based on a qualitative study on mobile working for administrative staff in a university. Different models of mobile working can be used to show the impact of different organizational frameworks on the social participation of women with children and their individual career constructions. On the one hand, mobile working as a flexible work design measure enables more participation and empowerment, if the framework conditions are appropriate. On the other hand, increasing internal organizational regulations and digital control restrict freedom and self-determination. At the same time, flexibility measures can also lead to a backlash with regard to traditional gender roles - also with corresponding career consequences. Overall, it is evident that several factors determine careers. The study focuses on the contextual conditions for careers, the visibility of work and the mobile worker, as well as social networks as career drivers, trust in the team and leadership as a form of visibility.

**Keywords:** flexibility of work, mobile working, women with care responsibilities, inclusion and exclusion mechanisms, empowerment, work autonomy, backlash to traditional gender roles, economic capital

## Introduction

Changing career perceptions and expectations of work at the individual level have been increasingly discussed, especially since the Covid-19 pandemic and employees' experiences with remote working and the work autonomy experienced as a result. In the context of desires and work expectations of high school and college graduates as well as young professionals regarding better reconciliation of private interests, issues such as meaningfulness, sustainability, and equality in work are coming into focus and impacting subjective perceptions of one's career (Achmad, et al., 2023; Donald, et al., 2021; Canji, 2020). However, work and career expectations at the individual level are always embedded in societal frameworks. The transformation of the world of work since the Covid-19 pandemic and the associated processes of disruption and digitization have had a massive impact at the organizational level and are driving broad organizational change (Apostolidis, et al., 2022; Bocean, et al., 2021). This process of dealing with disruption is about identity and power issues. Specifically in the focus of career research, two contradictory sides are currently facing each other. On the one hand, the desire for autonomy and self-determination in one's own career through appropriate work design measures and, on the other hand, career systems in organizations that are increasingly based on excellence, work intensification, control over performance targets and constant accessibility based on new technologies. At the same time, organizations are confronted with the challenges of contextual conditions that have triggered organizational change processes, including the transformation of organizational culture through new work organization measures and an increasingly heterogeneous workforce that focus on the need to manage attraction and retention of (excellent) workers (Achmad, et al., 2023; Trenergy, et al. 2021). Within this highlighted framework, the issues of work and careers are being renegotiated.

This discussion about changing career expectations and new forms of career management on the part of the organization includes the offer of remote work with different work models. In this context, the influence of more autonomy on employee performance, commitment and loyalty to the organization is addressed (Deschenes, 2023; De-La-calle-duràn, & Rodriguez-Sánchez, 2021).

On the other hand, the shift in the importance of career factors means that employees no longer shape their careers according to familiar patterns. Perceptions of work and professional success are changing. Temporal dependencies on specific

life and career stages and corresponding career positions are dissolving - due to changed contextual conditions. Subjective experiences, own possibilities and resources flow into different narratives (Canji, 2020). On the one side, this is favored by the perception of socially conditioned instabilities and insecurities, mediated via social media and self-experienced situations as well as family circumstances. This feeds into their own experiences, stories and knowledge. Thus, issues based on social problems such as experiences of migration and discrimination, poor working conditions, low wages, lack of schooling associated with poverty, and lack of professional opportunities find their way into notions of professional careers and corresponding career constructions, as do cultural movements focused on sustainability and well-being (Schnitzer, et al., 2023; 2022). This second side, discussed primarily in positive psychology as subjective well-being (De-La-calle-duràn, & Rodriguez-Sánchez, 2021; Canji, 2020), reveals career narratives based on positive emotions, job and life satisfaction, and health in career constructions.

In the case study on remote working in higher education presented here, it is shown how the flexibility of working hours and work location in different contexts affects the careers of women with care responsibilities. Different organizational settings are addressed and the impact of different remote work models on individual and organizational levels is discussed. Based on the specific sample, it will be shown which strategies are pursued in individual career constructions. At the same time, on the organizational side, the focus is placed on the issues of status and privilege within hierarchical organizational structures, which raise questions about trust and control over visibility of work and the working person. In this context, it is made clear that “bricolaging” (Canji, 2020) as a metaphor for self-constructed careers is always interdependent with social and organizational differentiations and thus has implications for organizational processes of inclusion and exclusion. In this context, the following questions are pursued: (1) How do contextual conditions affect organizational arrangements for mobile working and consequent individual career constructions for women with care responsibilities? (2) Which organizational differentiation processes can be observed in the context of mobile working? (3) What insights can be drawn from individual career constructions of women with care responsibilities for current career discussions?

To answer the questions, the importance of careers as an analytical tool in the design of work will be addressed first. In doing so, different career research approaches are used to understand self-construction of careers in their respective contextually. Subsequently, the methodological procedure will be explained by discussing the specifics of the field of study, the survey situation and sample, and the analysis of the data. The presentation of results is based on the questions posed in this paper in order to ultimately summarize specific opportunities and problems in the construction of careers at the individual and organizational levels in the discussion.

### **Theoretical background**

Careers and work are related issues that are individually and structurally anchored. Careers in this context are understood as a sequence of positions over time that, linked to a work context, reflect a change in an individual's capital (social, economic, cultural and symbolic) endowment due to transitions. Careers are constructed directly from milieu of origin (Bourdieu, 1998), gender (Hermann, & Strunk, 2012; Hermann, 2004), work contexts such as occupational socializations, and work biographical (dis)continuities (Bardmann, 1994). In addition, differentiated life contexts, shaped by environmental conditions, enter into careers, with temporal and symbolic determinants being essential. Work as a concept has been controversially discussed for centuries in philosophy and subsequently in the social sciences and humanities. For example, Hannah Arendt refers to Aristotelian ethics, in which a strict separation is made between freedoms on the one hand and economic necessity on the other (Arendt, 2011). Historically, the change of the concept of work occurred through Max Weber, who included any gainful and professional activities in all areas of society in the concept of work (Weber, 1922; continuing Sennett, 1998). In social and economic theories, it is mainly Adam Smith (2005) and Karl Marx (1972) who shape today's focus on work, coupled with the organization of social systems, social participation and the reproduction of power relations, in particular the discussion of social classes and class struggle. Fraser continues this discussion and links these aspects to the lines of difference of ethnicity and gender (Fraser, 2022).

Work, considered separately from the person, implies the principle of exchangeability and purpose rationality (Bardmann, 1994) and thus becomes a social structural feature. The transformation of people and the environment inherent in labor simultaneously brings about the production and reproduction of social structures as

well as the - related - habitual imprinting as a central identity-forming characteristic (Bourdieu, 1998). The relationship between capital and labor determines the norms, functional contexts, and procedural rules of social systems, with which social inequalities, social exclusion, and aspects of domination, foreign determination, exploitation, and coercion are associated (Bourdieu, 2012; Kurz-Scherf, 2004b). For example, a concatenation of work and poverty is evident in feminist research with a focus on the issue of compatibility among women (Chung, 2020; Schmidt, et al., 2020; Sardadvar, & Mairhuber, 2018; Self, 2005). Following on from this, current discussions about the dissolution of boundaries and the subjectification of work are linked to statements about the self-economization and self-utilization of human labor (Beck, & Beck- Gernsheim, 2002; Beck, 1994).

The discourse on flexibility, which covers these topics and is addressed by Beck (1994) and Sennett (1998), among others, shows these two sides, socialization and individualization, which are mutually contradictory. The flexibility of work simultaneously causes the dissolution of rigid rules and norms that imply freedom, self-realization, recognition, and social participation (Bardmann, 1994). However, the perception of work-related freedoms, through the tendency of the dissolution of boundaries in work with regard to place of work, workplace, working hours, and colleagues, which at the same time allows for an expansion of the individual's scope of thought and action, ultimately represents nothing other than individual adaptations to changing social structures of power and domination. Bardmann (1994: 235) describes these processes as "refractions" in the form of manifold differentiations related to internal and external labor markets, primary, secondary and tertiary workplaces, formal and informal sectors, manufacturing production work and administrative, planning as well as reflexive service work, which not only generate new forms of work, but at the same time shift exploitative and coercive relations (Bardmann, 1994; likewise Arendt, 2011; Kurz-Scherf, 2004a; b; Fraser 2022). The paradoxes of labor discourse show the multiple entanglements, relations of difference, mechanisms of exclusion and inclusion. Socially controversial topics, such as gainful employment vs. janitorial staff members, family work, care work, community work, flow into the research, as do gender discourses in the sense of men's and women's work or ethical-moral approaches. On the organizational level, aspects such as organizational integration, working hours, and work organization, work evaluation via work capacity or work satisfaction are discussed in connection with work. At the individual level,

topics such as work perceptions and work attitudes are of interest (Sardadvar, & Mairhuber, 2018). These discourses are also evident in current discourses on remote work (Battisti, et al., 2022; Pianese, et al., 2022; Marsh, et al., 2022; Campo, et al., 2021).

In order to identify logical system of the work discourse with regard to flexibility, career research offers itself as an analytical tool. The stronger emphasis on the individual within career research emerged at the same time as the discussion about the flexibility of the world of work. Corresponding career concepts such as "career resilience" (Waterman, et. al. 1994), "boundaryless career" (Arthur, 1994; Arthur, & Rousseau, 1996), "protean career" (Hall, 1996) and "post-corporate career" (Peiperl, & Baruch, 1997) represent approaches to map changes in the global socio-economic system (Baruch, 2002).

These approaches focusing on uncertain contexts, which conceive of careers as changeable, unreliable, but also boundaryless, often assume that internal psychological factors as well as individual values create an openness to multiple career possibilities that influence career developments and behaviors (Briscoe, Hall, & DeMuth, 2006). In this context, Inkson (2008: 549) argues that the term "boundaryless career" is inaccurate because boundaries within and outside the individual (may) shift but are not dissolved. Instead, he chooses the term "boundary-crossing career."

The increasing integration of subjective experiences as well as contextual effects on the change and instability of work leads to a more holistic view, away from trait and personality models in career research. Thus, we find approaches of chaos theory that enrich careers with the aspect of complexity while assuming the limited ability of individuals to control their own careers. This means a dynamic shift of traditional career patterns and organizational career paths, which bring the topic of failure, devaluation and/or revaluation of careers (especially in the international context and in connection with migration and flight movements) or career interruptions and career plateaus depending on environmental factors and life situations into career research (Briscoe, et al., 2023; De Vos, & Van der Heijden, 2015; Strunk, 2009).

Referring to societal developments, changing forms of work and demands on people in organizations as well as employees' expectations of organizations, individual tendencies towards self-optimization and free shaping of one's own life path, links

between these different career concepts can be found in career research (Gunz, & Mayrhofer, 2017; Mayrhofer, et. al. 2002; Bird, et al., 2002), among others also in the term "bricolage" defined by Lévi-Strauss in 1962 and currently included in career research (Canji, 2020). The notion of career construction is closely associated with adaptive performance and the ability of individuals to adapt to changing environments. Canji (2020) describes that these individual career constructions map the uniqueness of life design in careers. "Bricolage" is simultaneously chosen as a metaphor for stories that express this uniqueness and underlie it with meaningfulness. The focus is on the individual actions in the respective social contexts that effect career enablers or constraints and ultimately find their way into personal narratives.

For organizations, a changed individual understanding of career means rethinking career patterns accordingly. The focus is no longer on the fit between personality (characteristics and behaviors), work, career (ideal worker (Acker, 1990) and corresponding life orientation, (breadwinner model (Hultin, 2001), but on the desire of many employees for more flexibility in work and alignment of the career idea with changing work models (Claes, et al., 2023). This means that careers can no longer be conceived as a continuous process, but must take into account the heterogeneity of employees with different needs and requirements.

With the Covid-19 pandemic, the topics of work and career came increasingly into focus with two contradictory tendencies. On the one hand, pandemic-related changes in working conditions were seen as contributing to work-life balance and more meaningfulness; on the other hand, especially for women, they were associated with the issue of "backlash" with regard to compatibility and stress (Hermann et al., 2022; Chung, 2020). Recent studies already show known positive and negative effects of work flexibilization in terms of social inequalities, social exclusion, domination aspects, heteronomy, exploitation and coercion - especially with a focus on gender (Çoban, 2022; Collins, et al., 2021; Emmler, & Kohlrausch, 2021; Derndorfer, et al., 2020). In this paper, we focus on changes within flexible work arrangements before and during the Covid-19 pandemic to analyze how changing frameworks and different arrangements of flexible work affect work and career conditions of women with caregiving responsibilities.

## Method

### *Research context*

Structural change in the academic field due to international political and competitive changes is being brought to bear on individual organizations and requires management and administration in higher education to respond flexibly (Apostolidis, et al. 2022; Donald, et al. 2021; Graf, 2019). The increasing competitive pressure on higher education institutions is described by Lenger and Rhein (2018) and Bourdieu (1992) as positioning to assert interests via different struggles of recognition and acknowledgement for, among others, financial resources, students, scientists as well as qualified professionals, which follow different logics (Kuo, 2009). The changing environment exacerbates conflicts of interest in the science field since the Covid-19 pandemic. Disruption and digitization processes combined with internationalization and increasing heterogeneity of stakeholders affect all internal university areas, especially administration. As a result, the expectations placed on personnel are changing. The HRM sector is facing completely different challenges. Despite these massive changes in higher education, general staff in universities, in contrast to academic staff, is an under-researched group.

Organizational culture in the management and administration of higher education institutions is characterized by specific principles of hierarchization, showing institutional and institutionalized power tied to positions - bureaucracy principle - on the one hand (Bourdieu, et al., 1994; Graf, 2019; Weber, 1922; 1930) and the field-specific importance of academic capital, as cultural and symbolic capital of recognition and acknowledgment, on the other (Hüther, & Krücken, 2013; Barlösius, 2012; Bourdieu, 1992).

This system of different aspects of hierarchization generates different forms of boundary setting via control and discipline (Ette, & Weinmann, 2022) on the part of university management, but equally on the part of the academic field.

The establishment of the accompanying study is anchored within this framework - changed requirements in the scientific field, specifically in the administrative field and effects on bureaucratic structures. Universities face international and national competitive conditions. External factors influence the HRM sector in particular with regard to the availability and qualification of employees, while at the same time internal demands and expectations of female employees with different needs must be taken



into account. On the part of the organization, it is a matter of positioning itself as an attractive employer, especially for recruiting and retaining staff through commitment.

Making working hours and the place of work more flexible are work organization measures that have already been tested in this context in the organization studied since 2002. Included in the pilot group were different employment groups, such as experts in the IT sector and managers (“key employees”), as well as Employees with experience/Experts with care obligations and people with disabilities. The accompanying study presented here, starting in 2020, was intended to evaluate the measures and provide recommendations for action for the planned implementation in an internal organizational policy. The 2020 Corona pandemic changed and accelerated the transformation of the work organization. Lock-down measures combined with comprehensive digitization processes enabled all employees to work from home. The mobile working policy that was ultimately introduced was also a result of the flexibility expectations of the administrative staff towards the employer based on the Covid-19 experience and the autonomy in work design that this enabled.

### *Case study design*

The accompanying scientific study on mobile working for general staff in a university, which is located in the field of higher education (HE) research, specifically in the administrative area, focuses on the question of how flexible forms of working in the administrative area affect different organizational differentiation processes. The project, which is anchored at the interface of university and administrative research, has been running since 2020 and is based on a case study design. Strengths of case studies lie in identifying, describing and explaining causal relationships and cause-effect relationships. Analytical depth is achieved via knowledge of practical contexts, processes as well as effects of decisions, understanding of the context and a process view on specific phenomena. The goal is to generate new hypotheses and research questions. In doing so, knowledge is gained directly from empiricism. It is essential for the methodological approach that the chosen methods allow for situational modifications and that a dynamic adaptation of the research process is possible at any time. Different qualitative and quantitative methods can be combined, each with its own rules and principles. Case studies are always context-specific. Different actors with

different interests and resources are considered. Ultimately, it is about "looking at a story" (Yin, 2017; Lamker, 2014).

Case studies can be closely related to the constructivist - "bricolage" - approach to investigating and analyzing specific problem areas. Canji (2020) describes the "bricolage approach" as a process of looking at a topic using a variety of methods (in the form of different lenses) in order to contextually, understand phenomena and generate knowledge. In doing so, complexity is deliberately created through different perspectives. The goal is to develop an understanding of the phenomenon within the context.

The single case we consider has several units of analysis. The structure is linear-analytical, connected with a chronological structure. The chronological order is based on contextual changes, which include clearly determinable temporal sections that can be considered separately (Lamker, 2014).

In order to analyze the impact of mobile working on different levels, an explorative approach was initially chosen via problem-centered interviews. The goal was to approach the unknown topic in an exploratory and principally open manner (de Lucas, et al., 2020). In doing so, the complexity was accounted for and at the same time, new things were discovered by asking questions such as "How? What? Why?" (Lamker, 2014). Building on this, a document analysis was carried out in 2021 on the corresponding guidelines for mobile working. The findings led to a quantitative survey of all employees in the administrative area at the end of 2022, in which 50 percent of the workforce participated. The results presented here are based on this explorative study.

### *Data Collection*

The study sample consists of 43 female and male administrative staff managers from all organizational sectors with homeworking experience prior to the Covid-19 pandemic from 2002 to 2020. These are 34 women and 9 men who, with one exception, are employed on permanent contracts. Further differentiated, the sample is composed of 16 full-time employees and 27 part-time employees. Among the 43 interview participants, 14 were managers, 13 of whom were themselves participants in the pilot project and one manager who was interviewed in connection with her experiences with a female employee working from home.

Problem-centered interviews (Lamnek, & Krell, 2016; Witzel, & Reiter, 2012) were conducted between the beginning of October 2020 and the end of December 2020. The basis of the interviews was a set of guidelines with topic areas based on theoretical concepts, i.e., background knowledge and experience of the researchers (de Lucas, et al., 2020; Breuer, et al., 2019). Open-ended questions that merely narrowed the topic area offered a narrative-generating stimulus (Lamnek, & Krell, 2016). In the interviews, interviewees reflected on experiences regarding the topic of teleworking prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, during the first phase of the Corona pandemic in the context of the initial lock-down and implementation of the organization's digitization strategies, as well as initial experiences with the mobile working policy, the "normality" of using new technologies, and desires for future mobile working regulations. The interview form is based on Grounded Theory (Witzel, & Reiter, 2012). At the end, a short questionnaire complemented the interviews, which had the function of collecting specific background data from the interviewees. The first interview took place on site with both the employee from the pilot project and her manager. The research design had to be adjusted due to the lockdown, so the other 41 interviews were conducted via ZOOM or MS Teams and all but one were recorded. Due to the skepticism towards new media, in some cases not the entire interviews were recorded, but only excerpts, so that the statements were partially transcribed. The duration of the recorded interviews lasted between 15 minutes and 1 hour and 5 minutes. In a final postscript, impressions and essential content were recorded directly after each interview. A simple transcription was made, in that only the spoken word was written down.

### *Analysis strategies*

According to Lamnek and Krell (2016), the evaluation of problem-centered interviews takes place in different stages. First, a methodological commentary takes place in which information about the text is provided and the interview is reflected upon in order to exclude possible interviewer bias. In a second step, a first interpretation whereby an individual is controlled is made following grounded theory with a final discussion (Breuer, et al., 2019; Charmaz, 2014). In the third phase of the evaluation, codes close to the data are developed and memos are created, and parallel work is done with the reflections to capture latent meaning structures. The goal is to identify

patterns. The memos on the interviews allow theoretical concepts and assumptions to be developed, continuously reviewed and changed.

Within the framework of qualitative data analysis, 1029 codes were generated in our study via inductive open coding, which resulted in 840 codes via exclusion and delimitation. From these codes, 52 categories were formed, which ultimately resulted in 10 core categories. In the following presentation of results, only women with care responsibilities are considered in order to make statements about careers of this specific group.

## Findings

### *Mobile working under changed contextual conditions*

Three time periods emerged in the analysis of the interviews. The first period covered the experience of the sample within the period from 2002 to 2020, prior to the Covid-19 pandemic. The second period covered the period from the beginning of the pandemic and the experience in the first lockdown starting in March 2020 and ending in September 2020. The third period shows the implementation of a mobile working policy by the end of 2020.

In the first period under review - before the Covid-19 pandemic - agreements on mobile working were made individually at the suggestion of the Personnel Office. That is, the agreements were made between the manager and the employee. Approval had to be requested each year. Women with childcare obligations coordinated working hours and work location with their direct superiors. For example, it was possible to work at home for half a day or for a longer period, e.g. for year-end reports or during semester breaks. The agreements were based on trust and the control of the work was based on the work content, i.e. on concrete performance targets. In this context, we can speak of results-oriented leadership.

*"It was simple, so these framework conditions were never discussed in any particular way. It was all very much based on trust, and easy, so to speak, that we knew each other." (I 14, 47)*

On the organizational side, the possibility of mobile working was not communicated, nor was it transparently regulated. There were only "rumors" within the organization.

In the second period under consideration, which includes the first phase of the Covid-19 pandemic, due to societal regulations on employment health protection, employees were enabled to work from home. This phase includes the rapid implementation of various digitization strategies. Team communication was switched to Microsoft Teams, and internal processes were digitized in a very short time.

*"And there's also the understanding suddenly there from the Rector's Council, yes, it needs that. That was not the case before. Moreover, it is important that when you work at home, you can no longer send invoices on paper and with a stamp, but online. And there it goes now also very / and there is also a lot happening now." (I 25, 96)*

Regulations on teleworking due to the pandemic were regularly communicated via various internal media. The hybrid work organization was agreed upon within the teams. The manager acted as a moderator. This organizational change process was driven by external conditions.

*"But that was all, I say, that was all not very professionally put on, to put it that way now, because it was always this problem, actually you didn't want it, yes, but somehow there was just already the pressure, yes. It was somehow a, yes, there, yes, somehow looking for a way. Now the whole thing is no longer an issue, because Corona in particular has simply shown that you can trust people." (I 14, 23)*

On the organizational side, however, management sees a loss of control, so that the policy on mobile working is introduced in the third period. This period is characterized by a "normalization process". Administrative processes have been converted to digital technologies. Different software solutions enable coordinated collaboration. On the organizational side, there are clear regulations on mobile working. Communication is transparent and information is accessible to all employees. Working hours and work locations are precisely regulated. Work control takes place via time recording as well as (indirectly) via digital media (who works when (and who does not) in teams). The request for mobile working is formally made via the Personnel Office and the approval via the manager.

*"I am very happy that we [...] now have a concept for mobile working for all administrative staff, because I believe that this is a really good thing and because I believe above all that we would not have been able to avoid it. Because if you want to be an attractive employer, you simply have to offer it. We see it in the recruitments. Many young people ask if it is possible to work in a home office, because that is simply important for today's young people. They have completely different ideas and wishes when it comes to working." (I 14, 107)*

Nevertheless, there is also criticism of the precise regulations, as a restriction of freedom is seen in them.

*"We have actually agreed, also in our entire area, that we will now simply work with this Corona regulation, but not conclude the mobile working agreement now. However, I think/ so from my point of view, and of course we have also discussed this in the team, it is the case that in reality this Corona Regulation gives much, much more freedom at the moment. And I think that is just/ will be, I think, rather difficult to accept new regulations." (I 49, 19)*

Many lines of argument emphasize the advantages of mobile working for the employer and at the same time show a lack of understanding for the withdrawal of freedom. The arguments refer to the attractiveness of the employer, to the topics of sustainability (limiting commuting) and health aspects.

*"So no cold, nothing at all. And that's what you catch when you're at home, but not so often, I'd say. If I'm not sick, I don't miss work. Isn't this an advantage for the employer?" (I 27, 51)*

### *Work and career factors*

The results of the first observation phase show that the form of flexible working enabled individual adaptation to family and personal rhythms. It offered the opportunity to increase weekly working hours and thus accumulate economic capital.

*"And I've come back now 40 hours, with 40 hours. And that would not have worked for me if I couldn't do teleworking, otherwise." (I 1, 22)*

The interview participants for old-age provision saw the increase in economic capital as essential, and the additional earnings were also invested in childcare. Self-determination over the organization of work and the opportunity to reflect on one's own work and work processes were particularly emphasized.

*"That I can manage my time better. I have to say that I have two children. That was also the decisive reason for me to take up teleworking. Because of course, it is much easier to be a bit more flexible here with the demands you have with children. Bringing the kids to school, then working at home, picking them up again. So that works much better. And my performance hasn't dropped here either." (I 25, 6)*

For the interviewees, these were forms of well-being; they talked about feeling healthier, happier, and more content.

*"On the days when I work at home, I always have the feeling that I've done something useful. And yes, from that point of view I think it's also an advantage, it's also much less strenuous, working at home." (I 14, 105)*

*"So I think you just get more quality time out of it." (I 17, 34)*

All respondents also spoke of high intrinsic motivation and commitment to the employer.

The work organization was their own responsibility. Indeed, while the psychological pressure and the bad conscience regarding the family decreased; this was not the case with regard to the team colleagues, where the feelings of guilt increased.

*"But the pressure you put on yourself is still enormous, of course. Because of course you don't want to be the one slacking off at work, and you probably want to prove twice again in the teleworking that you can do it all." (I 1, 24)*

This was due not least to knowledge about their own privileges, but also to knowledge about socially entrenched stereotypes against mothers.

*"Yes, it is rather one's own pressure, the personal pressure that is greater and, as I said, also that the colleagues who are perhaps already skeptical when they think, oh, she has [...] children, she won't do anything anyway."*

*This is when one can do their best rather than slacken their efforts. That is, I think, the greater pressure." (I 1, 24)*

This guilty conscience provided extra work and specific strategies to show colleagues that the person at home was really working.

*"And there I have this pressure, for example, that I very often catch myself that I count, for example, how many emails I have written today and that I look whether I have written emails in the, at the beginning of my working hours and at the end, so that you can see that I have worked from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m.. Or if I on Fridays, for example, if then little is going on and I'm in the teleworking and it's actually nothing to do, then I can of course, I'm working then already, because I might be planning something or developing something, but no one sees it. I.e. I try to send out an email on Friday so that everyone can see how you are there. (I 43, 28)"*

At the same time, it is addressed that in addition to family work and professional work, there is no time for personal aspects, such as continuing education. There is also no time to build up social capital via social networks within and outside the organization, due to the volume of work.

*"But I just do an insane amount. I.e., I think that objectively speaking, I actually have a very high output." (I 43, 70)*

During the second observation period, interviewees also spoke of a high double workload due to school closures and lack of childcare. Due to the unpredictability of daily schedules and unanticipated work, the extreme workload and dissociation of work and leisure time were discussed.

In the third period, internal regulations on mobile working were introduced. The transparency and communication of the regulations were seen as positive, as was the fairness achieved towards all employees. However, the interviewees also spoke of a withdrawal of freedom. Due to the tight framework conditions with regard to opportunities for mobile working, individual women thought about reducing their working hours, since a compatibility can no longer be organized *individually*.



## *Social inclusion*

In the first phase, the interviewees talked a lot about problems in the team, envy debates and exclusion from internal team communication.

*"And where, of course, there is also a bit of envy, that you are perhaps granted more flexibility than you/or as you yourself would also like." (I 1, 52)*

In general, interview participants spoke of being made to feel like they did not belong.

*"They just asked, "Are you working today?" And I say, "Yeah, sure." (I 29, 95)"*

The second observation phase was characterized by a completely changed team communication. Coordination and decisions are made jointly within the team. A culture of mutual support and helpfulness was evident. Team cohesion increases. The employees with experience in teleworking were seen as experts in work organization, especially in questions of agreement and self-organization of work.

*"Funnily enough, it has improved with the Corona time, because now the others are also in this situation and you communicate much more just about (...)/ so much less relying on seeing each other, but you communicate much more with/ about them/ about Zoom, teams or whatever." (I 24, 34)*

In the third reflection phase, the freedom and team cohesion during the Corona period are mourned.

*"That I think is a bit of a shame because I think that was what everyone lived strongly during the lockdown of us and I think enjoyed. Just to say, 'I'm going with my biorhythm. I do my thing and that's what everyone did and the boss also trusted in that and yes. And that's how everyone does it at certain times/and I think that's something that's missing a bit, this flexible design. I mean, of course, you also have to be available, but somehow that worked out well." (I 29, 55)*

At the same time, there are again discussions about who works in a mobile way, when and how often. Coordination is perceived as difficult, as is dependence on the

approval of the manager. The topics of control and trust as well as visibility of work are also discussed again.

*"And of course I think that it's the manager's job to make sure that the tasks are completed, but just as in the presence (...) and you also have to find ways to keep an eye on that. But it is best to do it together, because it was also important for the employees to know where they stand in the processing. [...] So you had to talk about it much, much more, and I think that this discussion alone is actually the control. And that is not control in the sense of: "Have you worked your eight hours today?", but rather: "How are we getting along with our tasks?" (I 49, 43)*

## **Discussion**

### *Theoretical Implications*

The contribution of the study results shows that it is necessary to look at the complexity of career constructions on a macro, meso and micro level (Mayrhofer, & Gunz, 2017; Hermann, 2004; Baruch, 2002). Structural frameworks, in which culturally shaped social role attributions with clearly defined responsibilities for family and domestic work, are inscribed within the framework for the consideration of the specific sample. Interviewees construct work and careers in relation to family responsibilities. Responsibility for children and family always comes first (Schmidt, et al., 2020; Sardadvar, & Mairhuber, 2018; Kurz-Scherf, 2004a). Family work and role expectations are firmly inscribed in the habitus (Hermann, 2004; Hultin, 2001). At the same time, this habitual anchoring also enables a dynamic reaction to changing contextual conditions. Work and occupation are flexibly adapted accordingly, as the three temporal phases of the study show.

In the first phase, it became clear that the changed competitive conditions that higher education institutions have to deal with led to changes in working conditions, as did societal expectations of equality and inclusion. In this context, individual models for mobile working emerged. Women with caring responsibilities were encouraged to participate more. Mobile working enabled women to increase their working hours while gaining financial freedom for pension provision and childcare. In this context, the sustainability effect within careers is particularly noteworthy. (De Vos, & Van der

Heijden, 2015). This first phase has shown that organizational framework conditions for flexible working enable empowerment with economic capital (Bourdieu, 1998) and self-determination through work. This phenomenon was described by Kurz-Scherf (2004a) as a paradox in the flexibility of work. More freedom leads to inclusion (more social participation) and exclusion at the same time.

Based on the results, it is evident that women with work-life balance issues build or construct their work and career around the issue of childcare. This requires coordination and organization of different topics that are disharmonious with each other in terms of time. The great scope for action, autonomy and well-being due to changed working conditions is emphasized particularly positively in this phase. The issue of visibility is not discussed with the leader, but is only an issue within the team. Performance fulfilment and the manager's trust in the person are prerequisites for the possibility of flexible working. In this context, a high level of job satisfaction, motivation and commitment to the organization and the manager are mentioned as enabling these degrees of autonomy at work. Closely linked to these constructs are feelings of satisfaction, health and happiness, which are associated with self-determination, as also discussed in the literature. (Achmad, et al., 2023; Campo, et al., 2021; Chakraborty, & Ganguly, 2019).

At the same time, individual rules show negative effects in organizations if they are not communicated transparently and clearly. The envy debates about privileges that occur at team level, as well as devaluations and exclusion, cause the sample under consideration to talk about negative effects. Psychological and social pressure lead to extra work and justification. Likewise, negative effects on social capital, which is indispensable for the career, are shown (Marsh, et al., 2022; Weideman, & Hofmeyr, 2020)). However, the lack of social capital building is also addressed through the high workload of gainful employment and janitorial staff members, which is again context-specific.

Especially in the second phase, it could be shown that the Corona pandemic was a driver for organizational change (Battisti, et al., 2022; Bocean, et al, 2021) de Lucas, et al., 2020). It becomes evident that a flexible understanding of career construction via different flexible work models was a competitive advantage for the interviewees. They were able to adapt to changing contextual conditions without any problems. Due

to their ability to organize themselves, they were valued in their teams as experts in dealing with complex situations.

In this second phase of consideration, evidence shows that while very high degrees of freedom in mobile working had a positive effect on team cohesion and team organization, ultimately the elimination of external childcare options increases the work pressure on women with children (Çoban, 2022; Collins, et al., 2021; Emmler, & Kohlrausch, 2021; Derndorfer, et al., 2020). In this context, it becomes clear how important social childcare measures are for women's labor force participation in general and for shaping their careers from a personal perspective. Particularly in the Austrian context, the overall burden of professional and family work is mainly borne by women (Schmidt, et al., 2020). For the interviewees, there was a constant oscillation between self-organization and being overburdened in order to achieve work goals and generally work effectively. Organizational commitment was high in this phase, as the employees saw it as a sign of confidence to be given high degrees of freedom in their work - these results are also shown by other studies (Campo, et al. 2021; De-La-calle-durán, & Rodriguez, 2021).

In the third phase, it was regretted even more often that the organizational guidelines again restricted this autonomy. These restrictions were equated with a loss of trust (see also Pianese, et al., 2022). Nevertheless, the correctness of the regulations on mobile working, which radiate equality, clarity and transparency, was emphasized. However, this perceived fairness was contrasted at the individual level with a lack of orientation toward specific needs.

The process of introducing a mobile working policy reveals the specific administrative structures. Bureaucratic organizations are characterized by rule-based order and neutral administrative action. Predictability, plannability, stability and security are built on this. (Ette, & Weinmann, 2022; Kuo, 2009; Bourdieu, et al. 1994; Weber, 1922) The rules introduced for mobile working in the third phase are precise and comprehensible. The approval process, based on the respective manager, is based on the hierarchy principle, the specialization of functions and formalized processes that place responsibility in the respective areas. At the same time, these formalized processes suggest a methodical approach, affective neutrality, equity over interchangeability and efficiency (Bardmann, 1994).

In this context, it is necessary to talk about organizational difference-setting processes. An essential factor of differentiation is privilege, which is ultimately a career driver. As has been shown, privileges change. Privileges emerge through hierarchies, functions, and professions, among others. In the first phase of consideration, flexible working was a privilege for so-called "key personnel". At the same time, social hierarchization processes (Bourdieu, 2012) show different valuations of female employee groups, which are additionally linked to certain stereotypes (Hultin, 2001; Acker, 1990) - based on social and organizational participation (Campo, et al., 2021; Schmidt, et al., 2020). These show up, among other things, in careers based on social, cultural and economic capital, which are transformed into symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 2012; 1998). Here, intersectional connections with diversity criteria become visible - organizational positioning, extent of employment, remuneration in connection with the autonomous decision on how, where and when to work. The approval process for home office is an example of this (Pianese, et al., 2022). This social differentiation can also be explained in terms of self-categorization, in the psychological and social pressures that respondents face in mobile working and develop individual strategies of visibility (Hermann, & Strunk, 2012; Hermann, 2004).

### *Practical Contributions*

Various social transformation processes were used as context criteria in the study. It is suggested that organizational change triggered by external framework conditions has an impact on career systems. "Managing" careers must be oriented to changing expectations and needs of employees in order to achieve commitment and engagement. In this context, organizations must see themselves as learning organizations (Apostolidis, et al., 2022; Trenergy, et al., 2021).

Adaptation to changing environments in administrative structures takes place in the hierarchy principle ("from top to bottom") and brings several advantages. The methodical approach to implementing flexible work structures enables equity, efficiency and stability (Ette, & Weinmann, 2022). With the help of mobile working, it becomes possible for many employees to construct their own careers in such a way that a better compatibility between different areas of life is generally made possible. Flexible working can therefore in principle contribute to higher degrees of autonomy in shaping one's career - as the results from the first period show. However, across all

three periods, it also suggested that mobile working leads to a reinforcement of traditional gender roles due to societal role attributions. Flexible forms of work in the organization studied are oriented towards binary gender assumptions (heteronormativity) and thus demonstrate the production and reproduction of power relations inherent in society (Kurz-Scherf, 2004a; b; Bourdieu, 2012; 1998), which determine social participation. The participation of women with care responsibilities, which is made possible by the flexibility of working conditions, is perceived individually as freedom and autonomy, but at the same time, it causes a double burden in connection with time poverty due to the dissolution of work boundaries. In this context, the perceived individual autonomy of choice in the construction of one's own career is to be placed in the flexibility discourse of work, which ultimately shows the link between socialization and individualization (Sennett, 1998).

In this context, the limitation of the scope for action, especially in the third phase with fixed organizational regulations on mobile working - which at first glance seem fair - must be discussed controversially. The restriction of autonomy also reduces motivation and possibly leads to a decision of the sample against work and career, which, as Fräser (2023) puts it, represents a decision against a capitalist logic of exploitation and may well have positive connotations.

### *Conclusion*

Different forms of flexible work arrangements, focused in this study on mobile working, show different degrees of autonomy, trust and control at work. The smaller the individual scope for action in shaping work is for this study group, the more dissatisfied they are with their work and their career. There is a desire among this study group to shape their own career in accordance with individual needs and desires. Thus, this group can be seen as exemplary for current career approaches that focus on individualization and contextualization. In this study, career is seen as an opportunity for greater social participation and empowerment, via autonomy and generation of economic capital.

At the same time, the findings suggest that career promoters in the traditional sense of social networks and visibility are largely absent in all flexibility models. In this context, it makes sense to think about changing career constructions in organizations. Bardmann (1994) points out that due to the complexity of the environment, the

multiplicity of macro structural variables, different interests and influencing factors, an irrationality of planning and decision-making prevails in organizations. At the same time, it is necessary to intensify the work discourse within the career discourse.

### *Limitations and need for further research*

The findings from the case study presented here are a very limited sample on the topic of work and career. A larger sample and the inclusion of a male comparison group would be necessary, especially in order to describe the contextual framework conditions more precisely. Among the nine male interviewees, there was no one who saw mobile working as a way to reconcile work with family obligations. In addition, the process of career construction is seen in a manageable life span - children in need of care. Here it would be necessary to accompany careers for longer.

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