

Original Research Article

Task and Role Flexibility as Enablers of Work–Life Balance among Women Information Technology Professionals

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Abstract

The fast-growing information technology (IT) industry has offered new employment opportunities to women and new work structures that are demanding and involve long working hours, tight deadlines, global teams, continuous connectivity and high performance expectations. These demands are often compounded for women in the IT profession, especially when married and having children and caring responsibilities. Workplace flexibility, as a tool, has become a significant option to deal with competing work and life demands in this context. To address these issues, the paper investigates two aspects of flexibility – task flexibility and role flexibility – and how they can aid in work–life balance for women working in the IT sector. Task flexibility is the degree of freedom and discretion that workers have in relation to how, when and, in some instances, where work tasks are executed. Role flexibility is the ability to adapt/modify, redistribute or temporarily change professional role due to personal/organisational situations. The paper suggests that these forms of flexibility can help to alleviate work–family conflict, increase autonomy, increase job satisfaction, and support women's retention and career continuity in the IT sector. But being flexible doesn't always yield positive results. However, if expectations of availability are too high, if there are career disadvantages for having a flexible working schedule, or if the culture of an organisation promotes long hours, the benefits of EWP can be compromised.

The paper therefore suggests that it is important for the organisations to implement structured gendered flexible policies with inclusive leadership, the implementation of performance-based evaluation and clear work-life boundaries.

Keywords: Task flexibility, role flexibility, Women IT professionals, Work–life balance, Flexible working, Role conflict, Workplace flexibility, Information technology

Introduction

In the past few decades, women's contribution to the information technology industry has grown significantly. Women make great career prospects in the IT sector as they can grow their career and earn money by their own efforts. In some ways, though, the nature of IT work can be a challenge when it comes to having a healthy balance between work and life. Working with projects, clients from abroad, long hours, virtual meetings around the clock,

evolving technologies and changing expectations for constant availability can be challenging for workers to keep work and life separate.

These may be especially relevant for women as they might be simultaneously expected to be working in a job and taking care of their children and the elderly, or managing the household and other family duties. Studies specifically on Indian women in software industry have pointed to some overlapping and multiple responsibilities, family influences, organisational practices and social supports as important factors influencing work–family balance. (Valk & Srinivasan, 2011)

Work–life balance should not, therefore, be seen as an equal allocation of time between work and life. Instead, it is a person's capacity to regulate the demands of various life domains in a way that is sustainable and satisfactory. Flexibility in the work place can be an important contributor to this.

Task flexibility and role flexibility are two concepts that are closely related and have not received much attention: task flexibility refers to flexibility in the tasks people are assigned to perform, while role flexibility refers to flexibility in the roles people are expected to perform. Task flexibility relates to the freedom that workers have to organise and perform the tasks.

Role flexibility relates to the ability to adapt roles and responsibilities to changing circumstances. These are all part of the flexibility that can give women working in the IT sector greater choice and control over their working lives. (Kossek & Kelliher, 2023).

The second step is to conceptualise Task and Role Flexibility. The second step is to conceptualise Task and Role Flexibility.

Task flexibility refers to the extent to which an employee has discretion regarding the scheduling, sequencing, location or method of completing assigned tasks. For instance, in an IT environment, a software developer might be able to decide when to finish some coding tasks, and a project professional might be able to schedule individual tasks around meetings and deadlines.

It doesn't have to be a compromise to be flexible with a task, it can also mean that one isn't doing as much work. Rather, it affords workers more flexibility in scheduling the work. This is a distinguishing feature. An employee can have challenging goals and a more flexible approach to when and how activities are carried out.

Role flexibility is expanded. It identifies a range of ways in which an employee or organisation can adapt the nature, level and/or structure of professional work. This can involve temporary transfers of duties or job rotation, having reduced managerial duties or job sharing, or returning to work in a phased manner after taking parental leave or temporary changes when there are significant family life changes.

Role flexibility may be especially useful for women in the IT profession during some of the typical job transition periods for women, like pregnancy and childbirth, early childcare/caregiving of family members. Role flexibility can enable an employee to continue to work with the organisation and adjust the form or the level of the work without having to leave their job in order to meet their own obligations.

Women IT Professionals and the Work–Life Balance Challenge

In the IT industry, jobs tend to demand the exercise of knowledge and there is generally greater flexibility in the way of working. But technology can also foster a “connected” culture. Smartphones, collaboration tools, email and virtual meeting software allow workers to be productive almost anywhere, but it can also make work a late-into-the-night, weekend or holiday affair.

New information and communication technologies have helped to blur the distinction between paid working time and personal life, according to the International Labour Organization (International Labour Organization, 2022). (International Labour Organization, 2022)

This boundary issue can be exacerbated by the remaining gendered expectation of responsibility for care for women. Studies on Indian women IT professionals have identified work–family balance as being affected by family expectations, multiple roles, work and family policies, coping strategies and social support. (Valk & Srinivasan, 2011)

So, offering remote jobs isn't necessarily the answer to easing the work–life balance dilemma. A working at home woman has to perform the same amount of work, travel outside of regular business hours for meetings and be on call at all times, as well as take care of household duties.

This means that quality and design of flexibility are more important than flexibility.

How to Use Task Flexibility to Support Work–Life Balance

The government would introduce new regulations to establish greater control over working time.

The main advantage of task flexibility is that its completion can be scheduled. There are often situations in which IT professionals need to undertake tasks that do not necessarily call for them to be physically present in the office 24 hours a day. When organisational needs allow, the employee is able to arrange focused work in relation to their personal needs.

For instance, a work focused childcare professional might get some focused work done in the early morning or late evening, but be able to attend key meetings during the day. This offers more control, but doesn't always mean that there is a reduction in organisational outcomes.

A review of ILO research shows that flexible working time arrangements, such as flexitime or telework, can help to achieve better work–life balance. (International Labour Organization, 2022)

Additionally, a reduction in work–family conflict is achieved.

Work–family conflict is experienced when the demands from work and family cannot be fulfilled when both work and family pressures are there. This is a potential source of conflict, which task flexibility may help to minimize by enabling employees to reconfigure tasks around known personal responsibilities.

A study with Indian IT sector women employees revealed that flexible working arrangements had a positive impact on the work–life conflict and intention to quit job among the women in the study and improved women's job satisfaction. (Shanmugam & Agarwal, 2019)

This is especially so since work–family conflict not only impacts personal well-being, but also on the organisation's outcomes, including employee retention, productivity and commitment.

Skills for greater autonomy and job satisfaction

Flexibility can provide more employee control. Employees are not obliged to work set schedules for every task but are given judgment to determine the best way for them to complete their tasks.

Research on workplace flexibility in India has shown that there is a strong association between flexibility in place and time and quality of work life, especially for married women workers. (Rastogi et al., 2018)

There might also be a boost in trust between employees and managers with greater autonomy. Evaluating performance through outcomes instead of physical appearances can boost women's confidence in handling job and personal obligations.

How to Ensure You're Not Booked Solid on a Job You Hate How Role Flexibility Supports Women Professionals

The most common way task flexibility affects existing tasks is by altering the way they are done. Role flexibility extends to the role itself and is when the role can be adapted.

Supporting women at life transition times

There are times in women's lives when they can no longer take on challenging work. These periods can be caused by pregnancy, childbirth, childcare and family caregiving.

Role flexibility enables an organization to keep talented staff by modifying roles rather than requiring them to have the same workload at all life stages.

For example, a woman who has come back from maternity leave might start off in a fast-track position as a contributor before making the leap back into a demanding managerial role. Responsibilities can be slowly increased as her personal situation becomes more stable.

These can contribute to less career discontinuity and fewer women dropping out of the IT workforce.

Supporting career continuity

The Indian IT industry has been termed a 'leaky pipeline' for moms and other transition periods in life. Flexible working arrangements in IT industry is one of the research findings that can decrease work–life conflict and turnover intention among female employees, in addition to organizational and supervisory support. (Valk & Srinivasan, 2011)

This flexibility can then be used as a retention strategy. Career development should not be viewed as a

sequential, linear journey of full-time work; organisations can acknowledge that people are at various stages of career development that involve different levels of responsibility.

Facilitating sustainable leadership

Flexibility in roles can also be a way to help women advance in leadership. One challenge to leadership is when leadership roles are seen as time consuming and involve a lot of being available.

When the leadership role is reframed as an outcome, delegation and shared responsibility are available as options and women may be able to take up leadership roles without compromising on their family responsibilities.

That's important as there should not be limitations in flexibility for people in Junior roles or mothers. When flexible working practices are only available for women with caring duties, organisational stereotypes could be reinforced.

While flexible working arrangements can help to break gender stereotypes when they are used equally, ILO has warned that they can perpetuate gender stereotypes if the arrangements are used more by women, or if workplace norms persist in favour of physical presence and long hours. (International Labour Organization, 2022)

The role of organisational culture

Organisational culture is one of the key factors for the success of task and role flexibility. If staff feel that the use of a formal flexibility policy will adversely affect their employment prospects, then this has limited use.

Women can be legally allowed to work remotely or adjust their work hours, but they do not do so because they don't want to be seen as less dedicated. Managers might be unaware of this, but may assign high-traveled jobs to colleagues who are always available, resulting in an unseen cost on the employees who work flexibly.

So, the culture of "availability" is replaced by one of "accountability and outcomes" in organisations.

Improvements in performance should be judged on measurable outcomes, quality, timeliness, team working and contributing, not how many hours an employee is online or in the workplace.

Managerial support is particularly important. Studies carried out in the Indian context with women IT professionals points out the importance of organizational and supervisory support in shaping the success of flexible working arrangements. (Valk & Srinivasan, 2011)

Challenges and Limitations

Flexibility has many advantages but it can't be a cure-all.

Flexibility can result in work intensification in the first place. An employees' control over the timing of work may be greater than it is over the length of time that they work, but they can still work longer hours, with work being carried over into their personal time.

Secondly, working remotely can make household duties more noticeable than they are when someone is in the office. Work at home women can be caught up in both business and home duties.

Third, flexible working may lead to career disadvantages if physical presence is taken as an indicator of commitment. According to the ILO's analysis of flexible working styles in 2024, there are risks of wage inequality, restrictions on career progression, discrimination, stereotypes and social isolation. (International Labour

Organization, 2024)

Fourthly, not all IT jobs can be adapted. Depending on the role, some employees might need to be on duty during certain hours, such as those in customer-facing positions, production support and incident management, and in specific project activities.

Flexibility therefore needs to be considered in terms of what the role requires, and of the nature of the work, rather than by a single method.

Recommendations

The following are some possible steps organizations can take to create a positive work–life balance for women working in the IT field:

1. Plan for the flexibility of tasks: Give staff greater choice in the ways and times that appropriate work is done and the quality level is achieved, while maintaining deadlines and quality standards.
2. Establish pathways for role flexibility: Implement steps for temporary changes in role responsibilities at key points in life.
3. Assess performance by results: Cut out the need of physical 'presence' and working hours, and constant 'on-line' availability as measures of commitment.
4. Train managers: Train to enable flexibility in employees without creating disadvantage (conscious or unconscious) for managers.
5. Set boundaries: Organisations should set clear expectations for after-hours communication and availability.
6. Promote gender neutrality of flexible working: Flexible working arrangements should be offered to all employees, not just women, and should not be seen as a women's-only responsibility.
7. Keep employees on flexible arrangements visible in the workplace: Ensure that key projects, training, promotions and leadership opportunities are available to employees on flexible arrangements. Flexible working needs to be supported by parental leave, childcare facilities, employee assistance and supportive working practices.

Conclusion

Task flexibility and role flexibility are also important areas to consider in facilitating women IT professionals' work/personal life balance. Task flexibility offers increased flexibility in how and when professional tasks are performed, and role flexibility offers increased flexibility in how roles are performed based on changes in personal and/or professional circumstances.

For women in the IT field, these types of flexibility can diminish work–family conflict, boost autonomy, job satisfaction and help to ensure career continuity. Research on Indian women IT professionals indicates that flexible work options are likely to decrease work–life conflict, decrease intentions to turn down and increase job satisfaction. (Valk & Srinivasan, 2011)

However, flexibility must not be viewed simply as the ability to work from home. Intrinsic flexibility depends on freedom, positive management, reward based performance measurement, and boundaries of working time. In the absence of these protections, flexibility can become a way of doing work at home and may worsen women's existing work load.

The future of work means that organizations need to go beyond the question of 'Can employees be flexible?' and instead, 'Can the design of the work support employees being flexible without compromising their careers?'. Task and role flexibility can be strong enablers for women to establish sustainable work–life balance if it is an integral part of an organisational culture that is grounded in trust, inclusion, accountability and gender parity.

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