

FLEXIBLE WORKING PRACTICES IN THE ICT INDUSTRY IN ACHIEVING WORK-LIFE BALANCE

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ABSTRACT. Flexible labour practices became increasingly institutionalized and professionalized (Aroles, Mitev and de Vaujany, 2019). However, mechanisms and motivations behind these practices have remained often unexplored. This paper discusses the flexible labour practices among ICT professionals with regard to their spatial and temporal dimensions, with the aim to identify the key-factors that improve work-life balance and overall well-being. The qualitative research is based on in-depth face-to-face interviews with ICT knowledge workers, using Grounded Theory in generating new theoretical approaches that connect flexible labour practices with work-life balance. The study reveals, on the one hand, that particular and adapted flexible arrangements contributes to the reconciliation of the working life with the personal life; on the other hand, had led to the rise of knowledge workers with power and influence over their own intellectual capital, with a richness in personal choices.

Keywords: ICT, teleworking, spatial and temporal flexibility, flexible work practices, Cluj-Napoca.

Introduction²

In the midst of the global pandemic of Covid-19 and the dawn of the Europe 2020 Strategy (EC, 2010), this paper proposes a retrospection on labour flexibility practices in ICT two years before the pandemic turned telecommuting mainstream in this sector. The evolution of labour flexibility should be seen also in relation to the flexicurity targets of the EU for 2020. The research approaches a second rank East-European city (as defined by Petrovici in his work, *Personal Development and the Flexible Contracts: Depoliticized Class struggles between Highly Skilled Workers and Manual Workers in Cluj, 2014*), Cluj-Napoca's ICT industry, revealing a complex picture of how flexible working arrangements

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influence the reconciliation of working life with personal life. The process of retrospection creates a framework for the Europe 2030 Strategy (EC, 2019), which outlines the continuous relevance of the Information and Communication Technology, digitalization, flexible labour practices and lifelong learning practices in achieving sustainability on both social and economic levels.

An important stream of current research on flexible working practices is focused on identifying the directions of new forms of spatiality, that highly institutionalizes teleworking (Aroles, Mitev and de Vaujany, 2019; Messenger and Gschwind, 2016), and the digital nomadism trend (McElroy, 2020; Aroles, Mitev and de Vaujany, 2019), as well as determining the ICT tools and processes through which off-site work can be performed (Neirotti, Raguseo and Gastaldi, 2019). The thread behind this logic is the unprecedented relevance of the ICT sector on the current labour market, its large share in the overall demand for labour and its role in revolutionizing work. Cummings et al. (2017) argues that the knowledge society reflects techno-scientific-economic discourses in the EU Agenda 2030 and in the Sustainable Development Goals of the United Nations (UN, 2015), which encompasses the discourses of the ICT, intellectual capital, science, economic development, and network society. Three main characteristics of this discourse had been identified: ICT shapes the socioeconomic development, scientific knowledge prevails, and knowledge generates economic growth (Cummings et al., 2017).

The present paper brings a contribution to the ongoing research in this field by identifying the key-factors of knowledge workers' flexible labour arrangements that improve work-life balance and their overall well-being. As the empirical research shows, this is achieved through particular, personalized flexible working practices, that are aligned with the benefits offered by the ICT companies to their employees. Reconciling professional and personal life has deep effects on work, nonwork, and stress-associated aspects (Sirgy and Lee, 2018). The European Union encourages its member states to create and implement work-life balance policies, as well as to negotiate organizational programs, such as flexible work arrangements, parental leave systems, career breaks, social support, child-care facilities, elderly care in fostering work-life balance (EC, 2018; Sirgy and Lee, 2018; Hoessle, 2016).

The qualitative research is based on in-depth face-to-face interviews with ICT professionals, using Grounded Theory in generating new theoretical approaches that connect flexible labour practices with work-life balance. The location of field research was chosen based on Romania's relevance in the transnational ICT industry, as well as the privileged position of the ICT sector on the national agenda of pro service sector growth by simultaneously widening the highly skilled talent pool and stimulating heavy investments in

the ICT sector (Petrovici, 2019; Ban, 2016; Văduvă and Negoaie, 2016). The ICT industry turned into one of the main driving forces behind the economy of Romania, in terms of GDP share (5.4%) (INSSE, 2018) and it was among the first industries to take off in Romania after the 2009 financial crisis, generating an explosion in the number of jobs related to increased foreign direct investments.

Among Romania's economic poles, Cluj-Napoca is arguably one of the most suitable research grounds for ICT-related studies. The city, also known as "the Silicon Valley of Eastern Europe," incorporates almost a tenth of its and its metropolitan area's labour force (having 22.600 ICT employees out of the total of 203.900 employees) (CISD, 2020). The City Hall (City Hall paper, 2015) promotes a strong support toward the development of the local competitive ICT labour market and the attraction of foreign investments, developing Cluj-Napoca into an important East European hub for outsourcing and offshoring (Petrovici, 2019).

With the eruption of the Covid-19 pandemic, the lockdown triggered businesses to reinvent themselves, as well as to renew working practices. While the ICT industry seems to be less affected by the pandemic, remaining fairly stable, sustained by the already existing remote work practices, its role is to point towards and shape new working practices, with tailor-made spatial and temporal arrangements for other affected industries. As the study of Donnelly and Proctor-Thomson (2015) conclude, the reinvention of the working practices in the aftermath of natural disasters is a subsequent process, which is created by necessity.

Theoretical perspectives

With the spread of multinational companies, the production crossing national boundaries and with the consolidation of 24/7 cities (Glucksmann, 2005; Gereffi, 2005), as well as with the rapid development of ICT tools (Messenger and Gschwind, 2016, Kingma, 2016), the necessity of flexible workforce increased significantly, requiring availability and attendance at any time, regardless of space. ICT not only uses flexible labour arrangements, but it is the core cause of developing telework and flexible work schedules. Information and communication technology increasingly contributed to reorganizing professions, enabling work activities to be performed from anywhere and at any time (Aroles, Mitev and de Vaujany, 2019; Boell et al., 2013). While the term "telework" is perceived outdated in the context of new ICTs based on cloud technologies, new definitions of telework had been formulated (Messenger and Gschwind, 2016). Still, till today the definition assigned by the European Commission (2002) describes in the most general way this term:

Telework is a form of organizing and/or performing work, using information technology, in the context of an employment contract/relationship, where work, which could also be performed at the employer's premises, is carried out away from those premises on a regular basis (EC, 2002, p. 3).

Based on latest research, three distinct forms of spatial flexibility practices can be outlined. The first, on company's premises there are hot-desking, touch-down, drop-in desks, replacing traditional fixed desks and offices (Aroles, Mitev and de Vaujany, 2019), as well as supplemented with leisure areas for relaxation (gaming room, lounge). The second form is right on the opposite side, teleworking, which means detaching offices from company's premises, allowing knowledge workers to work from anywhere. Messenger and Gschwind (2016) distinguishes three types of telework: home office, mobile office, and virtual office. Home office represents the initial transition from the traditional workplace-tied offices to home-based workplaces, still being stationary and location-tied. Mobile offices denote the advancement of technologies, which enable through mobile equipment work to be undertaken from anywhere, even in trains or cafés. Virtual offices represent the last generation of ICT development, which is strongly related to the storage of information and technology in the cloud. This enables the users to access information from a light-weighted device, as are the smartphones, without the need to carry around storages of information in laptops or external hardware (Messenger and Gschwind, 2016).

Due to these technological advancements in the recent years, the third form of spatial flexibility arose among knowledge workers, a phenomenon called "digital nomadism" (McElroy, 2020). It is the privilege of professionals to choose where to live, thanks to work performed remotely. As the trend is becoming more popular, it is "becoming increasingly institutionalized and professionalized [...] it is an extension of capitalist logics, rather than an alternative to them" (Aroles, Granter and de Vaujany, 2020). The narrative of the spatial flexibility points toward the beneficiaries, who are the highly skilled professionals in the high-status occupations in the advanced service sector, the elite workforce (Vilhelmson and Thulin, 2016; Kingma, 2016).

Neirotti, Raguseo and Gastaldi (2019) points out that off-site work is possible due to job disaggregation by three processes embedded in information and communication technologies: job codification, standardization and modularization. Codifiability refers to the process where knowledge is captured in ICT tools through written instructions and can be used by workers in performing their job. Standardization is achieved through the development of common frameworks,

this is especially the case of the ICT tools that store information, standardizing in this way business processes. Modularization refers to the process where projects are break down into tasks, which are performed by different members of a team, at the end integrating the work of all members into a whole (Neirotti, Raguseo and Gastaldi, 2019). In this sense, ICT tools are essential and instrumental in organizing work among remote workers, as well as making processes more efficient. However, some studies show the negative effects of teleworking, mainly affecting employee performance and overall team performance (van der Lippe and Lippényi, 2019).

As a greater attention toward remote work is granted in recent studies, temporal flexibility is considered to accompany spatial flexibility. It refers to non-standard working hours (daily 9-17, 40 hours a week), which can be varied upon agreement between employer and employee (Donnelly and Proctor-Thomson, 2015) and include practices as flexi-time, part-time, overtime, shift work, weekend work or seasonal work (Wilton, 2011).

As flexible labour arrangements gain space, simultaneously they prone workers to exploitation, in the absence of in-place social security measures. Studies show that simultaneously with the introduction of flexible practices in the labour market, Romania's legislation had a decline in protecting workers, meanwhile exposing their rights to violations by employers (Maganaris and Grigorescu, 2014). Though legal framework exists to meet the minimum requirements of the European labour market, these frameworks are subject to the interpretation and application of employers and decision-makers (Grigorescu and Niculescu, 2019).

Nevertheless, labour flexibility practices allow knowledge workers to reconcile personal life with professional life, as well as increasing work autonomy and job satisfaction (Neirotti, Raguseo and Gastaldi, 2019; Boell et al., 2013). The European Commission (2017, 2010) foresees labour flexibility arrangements (part-time, flexible working schedules and telework) to conform child-care, elderly care or other personal needs. Temporal and spatial flexibility practices enhance well-being and fulfils professionals in being able to accommodate personal responsibilities with work commitments (Sirgy and Lee, 2018). A new, integrative definition of the work-life balance concept is the section of two dimensions: "role engagement in work and nonwork life and minimal conflict between work and nonwork roles" (Sirgy and Lee, 2018, p. 232). The research of Collins, Hislop and Cartwright (2016) shows that "permanent teleworking allowed workers to distance themselves from negative or non-essential work relationships whilst developing positive ones, predominantly with other teleworkers", which reinforce the theory that flexible working practices promotes well-being, job satisfaction, and work-life balance. Though, the ICT industry is

considered to be a “family-friendly” sector, which comprises flexible work schedules with home-based telecommuting practices (EC, 2018 Coyle, 2005), in reality the flexible practices blur the boundaries between personal and professional spheres (Eurofound 2020; Aroles, Mitev and de Vaujany, 2019; Glucksmann, 2005) by long working hours and the urgency of keeping up with the new knowledge and technologies appeared on the ever changing, high tech industry (EC, 2018).

Eurofound’s (2020) e-survey, *Living, working and COVID-19*, highlights the effects of the global pandemic on working practices, finding that over three-quarters of EU employees would like to continue working from home, even just occasionally. However, due to the side effects of mixing working life with the private sphere, they highly recommend governments to introduce initiatives of “right to disconnect” to prevent workers from physical and emotional burnout and exhaustion (Eurofound, 2020). Telecommuting became critical due to the pandemic in Romania as well, the Labour Code (articles 108, 109, 110) regulating telework since 2018. Knowledge workers are able to work and attend team meetings from home, without limitations. Their working time is flexible as well, to cope with demands of clients (which are many times from different time zones), colleagues and projects, simultaneously balancing their personal life.

The following sections describes the methodological approaches and the results of the qualitative study regarding flexible labour arrangements. As the introduction already foresaw, the aim of the research was to explore those spatial and temporal working practices, that support and promote the reconciliation of professionals’ working life with their private life. The logic behind this approach is to emphasize the mechanisms that animate workers’ decision when choosing an employer or a job.

Methodology

The qualitative research was conducted in 2018 in two phases, first in spring and the second in autumn. The study is built upon semi-structured face-to-face interviews, which allowed an in-depth immersion of the details and events. The interview guide is structured into seven main themes, incorporating education, career trajectory, temporal and spatial flexibility at the actual workplace, internal hierarchy versus relation to colleagues and to superiors, financial aspects of labour security, lifelong learning practices and future perspectives of the subjects on their career. The subject of flexible working practices is discussed from the perspective of reconciling professional life with personal life.

The research ground was chosen considering the high relevance of Cluj-Napoca in the Romanian ICT industry. In the past decades Cluj-Napoca became a genuine cradle of knowledge, innovation, creativity, culture and education, becoming one of the most attractive tech-hub for investments in Romania, following Bucharest. Being a second rank city, it became a major player in the service industry within the Central and East European urban hierarchy (Petrovici, 2014; Gál, 2014).

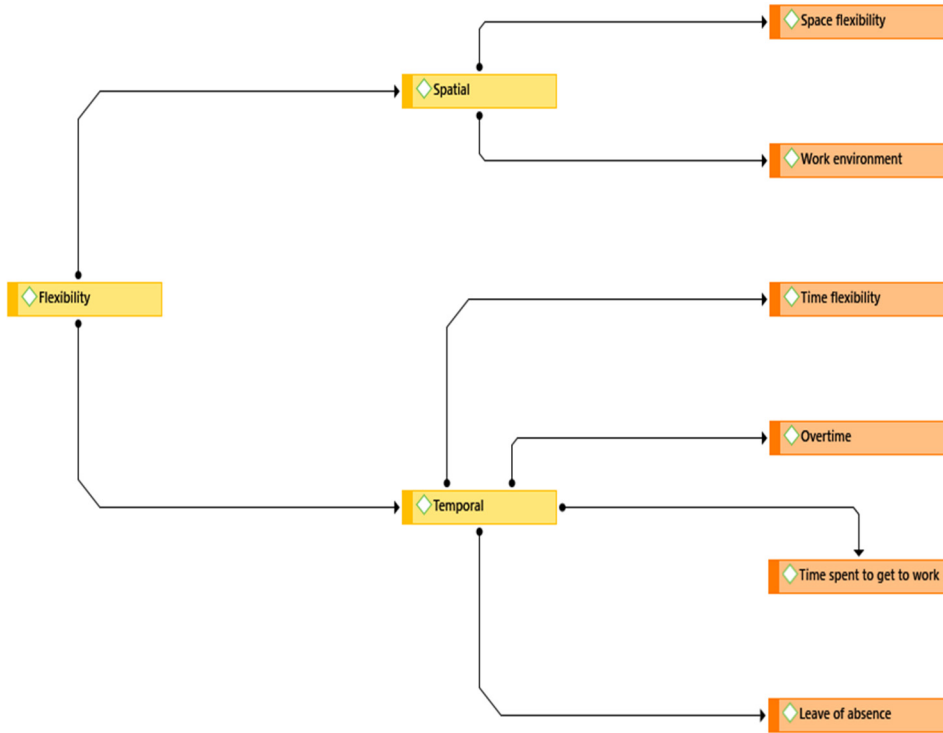
The sampling of the subjects was designed to cover a wide range of factors that occur in an economic unit. Subjects from all four company classes (micro-, small-, medium- and large companies) were selected, having diverse positions in company (developers, testers, customer support experts, team leaders, scrum masters, project managers and product owners), disposing of seniority levels from juniors to consultants, ages ranging from twenties to forties. The sampling was focused on ICT professionals; complementary roles in ICT companies, such as HR professionals, management roles were neglected, as these categories would undermine the uniformity of the ICT professional’s category.

A total of 35 subjects were interviewed, most of them having tertiary education in the technical field. Subjects’ ages varied from 23 to 42, with 20 interviewees being male and 15 females, to cover diverse experiences. Below table show the distribution of the interviewees.

Table 1. The distribution of interviewees

Role	Gender		Age			Education	
	M	F	<26	26 - 34	>34	Tech	Non-Tech
Dev Ops Engineer	11	8	4	11	4	19	0
QA and Support	4	3	1	4	2	2	5
Management and Coordination	5	4	0	8	1	8	1
Total	20	15	5	23	7	29	6

Source: Author’s dataset

Figure 1. Semantic linkages between the concepts

Source: Author's own illustration in Atlas.ti

The data analysis is based on the Grounded theory approach (Glaser and Strauss, 1967), in generating new ideas, concepts and theoretical frameworks through the systematic comparison of empirical data and their continuous abstracting and theorizing (Alvesson and Sköldbberg, 2000). The main purpose of the emergent and grounded methods is to discover patterns and variations in the researched social phenomenon (Corbin and Strauss, 1990).

The face-to-face interviews were recorded, then transcribed and processed in the Atlas.ti (version 8) qualitative research software tool (Friese, 2019), following closely the methodological canons of the Grounded theory approach (Corbin and Strauss, 1990). The collected data were processed through open coding, where the transcribed interviews were conceptualized and abstracted line by line. The obtained codes and concepts were constantly compared against each other, generating core categories, after which the process of selective coding took place, by aggregating data in-depth and building semantic

linkages between codes, concepts and code categories (Corbin and Strauss, 1990). The concepts were organized around the central theoretical concept of flexible working practices and their effects on ICT professionals' work-life balance, which induced new theoretical perspectives on the researched area.

Above network encompasses all the relevant relationships and interconnectedness among the concepts and categories identified during the qualitative analysis.

Spatial and temporal flexibility

Flexible working practices are highly important when discussing the reconciliation of knowledge workers' working life with their personal life. These dimensions of flexibility became mandatory requirements in retaining ICT professionals, as well as becoming competitive for talents among ICT companies. The boundaries of workplace and home became blurred, stretching the limits of flexibility and stability, setting norms of individuals in a service society. While spatial-temporal flexibility is a necessity for modern labour in enhancing competitiveness on the global capital market, it is also an individual option in balancing personal life. The following analysis presents a wide range of flexibility practices among ICT professionals.

Spatial flexibility

Home-based telecommuting practices range on a wide scale, from high spatial flexibility in micro firms to limited ones in large enterprises. While small organizations handle a lower number of projects, clients and employees, disposing of high plasticity when organizing labour, large companies rely on strict processes to successfully handle the massive number of projects, teams and workload. Therefore, creating transparency is their number one goal, by comprising teams at workplaces.

The schedule is extremely flexible. Practically, they ask us to be here 2 or 3 days a week, so you can work home office or from another one in the rest of the days. You can work from home or from other place, whether is from Bucharest or Germany headquarters. For the first few months, I didn't benefit of it, as I did not need it; I only needed it last month due to some emergencies in my family, when I had to use it. When you need it, you just use it, but we don't exploit it. So, there is a maximum flexibility, the people are very open-minded: practically, you don't have your own office because they are shared, so you can settle your laptop at any available office and start working (C, 38, m, Software Engineer at a multinational company).

To supplement the perhaps limited possibilities of remote working, large companies display of sophisticated office environments, with comfortable desks and chairs, gaming rooms, relaxing rooms and coffee corners. Many of these facilities aren't available at small sized firms' offices, due to financial impediments. Equipped workplaces facilitate teamwork, committing members toward projects and employers, also having an indirect impact on productivity, professional fulfilment and even personnel retention. In this context work-life balance lies between the habits, the ordinary and the regularly.

The space is new, with a modern design, in best conditions. We have a room with table tennis, table football, and air soft (air hockey). We also have a relaxation room with books, games, and board games. You can go to any of these whenever you feel like it and have time. If you don't have a meeting or something else to do, an urgent task or something that waits for your reply, then you can go there. I don't use much of these advantages. We can also benefit from massage at the office. You can book a 15 minutes session. We have a room with showers, towels, and a laundry machine. If you come to work by bike or on foot, or if you play some game and you're sweaty, then you can take a shower and change your clothes. You can keep exchanging clothes at the office, since it's big enough for your personal things. We have a terrace where you can enjoy fresh air, also underground parking, that is not sufficient for everybody, but there are around 80 parking lots; that means they are only for the half of those who drive to work. Being underground is very convenient: you don't have any problems in finding a parking place or having your car frozen in winter as well as being at an optimum temperature on summer days, the sun doesn't shine directly on it, so it's more than ok. Regarding the positioning [of the office company], it's very convenient being very close to the transport means and to downtown. If you have some errands to do - at the bank or somewhere else - you get half an hour, no matter when and what time (S, 35, m, Software Engineer at a multinational company).

There is a discrepancy between ICT company employees and self-employed knowledge workers as the latter benefiting of higher spatial flexibility. Many freelancers are lacking an actual office space, setting up working stations at home or other locations they might go for vacation or for business trips. While this practice is attractive from the personal life's perspective, it could also endanger labour productivity, enhancing procrastination. Therefore, loose working habits jeopardize work-life balance, interfering with personal spaces and time slots. Delimited spaces and timeframes allocated to labour are yet the best solutions in enhancing labour productivity and for clear personal timeboxes.

At home, cafés, beaches, we even have colleagues who enjoy travelling to other countries weekly or monthly. They apply for a rent on applications like Airbnb, because it's affordable and you can both work from another city and go to the beach [...]. Regarding myself, I felt I wasn't very productive [working from home] and that I didn't take my work seriously; at least after the vacation, I started to postpone my tasks. If I was up by 10, I wasn't in the mood to start, I was lying on the couch until 12, maybe I wanted to eat, or I was watching TV. I knew I hadn't had meetings until 5 PM, so I postponed it more until it got late, and I was tired, so I didn't work 8 hours per day; actually, I didn't even work 5 hours/day [...]. Many times, I felt guilty for not doing my tasks and that's why I was neither relaxed, nor working. So, many times I let my work on the weekend. [...] [The fact that now I'm renting an office] helps me because I want to feel that I'm at the office and I intend to get there at 9 even if I don't have to, but due to the fact that you get out of the house and you walk a little bit in the fresh air, you see people in the street, you don't feel isolated, staying inside; it's very good to get out of the house and to come to the office. Of course, it's very comfy working from home, and not losing your time on the way; you wake up whenever you want, you can do this several months, but then you have to get out of your house to see people, to socialize and to feel the world around you differently (A, 26, m, Chief Software Architect at a multinational company).

Freelancers and micro firms often lack the financial possibilities to detain their own offices, therefore, the concept of co-working spaces arose to satisfy these needs. In Cluj-Napoca a number of co-working spaces exist, where for a monthly fee, knowledge workers can rent out an office desk with all the infrastructure needed (high speed internet, meeting rooms, kitchen, restrooms and relaxing spaces). These hosting hubs act like real business accelerators, comprising professionals from all service and ICT industries, creating a space to exchange ideas and knowledge.

Cluj Hub is a sort of synonym for freedom, but it also means responsibility to take your life in your own hands and to take care of yourself, because you're not paid unless you work. So, practically, you're paid as you work. As I've noticed, here – at Cluj Hub – all the people share the same idea, most of them having Start Ups or being freelancers or contractors. All of them have taken their lives into their own hands and they are working for themselves. What I really like in here is that the working zone is separated from the one of relaxation and recreation. That's why, when you enter the working area, all of us have the same working mindset, so you just feel like producing a lot. When you want to get out of that place, you have another one for chatting, you can use all the coffees you get, or

the terrace or what the girls have prepared for brunches, or other things that are included in the price; all of these give you that feeling of freedom. So, this is what Cluj Hub offers (N, 31, m, Scrum Master and Software Developer at a Central-East European company).

As a distinct aspect to discuss, when talking about offices, are the type of premises utilized – open spaces or office rooms. The attitudes of knowledge workers toward space distribution differ, in accordance with preferences. Some of the interviewees were against closed office rooms, which in their opinion feeds separation, isolation and lacks any stimulus, human interaction. The others expressed the contrary, open spaces allowing little or no intimacy, background noises disturbing all the time, exposing professionals to constant interruptions during work processes.

We work in an open commercial space. I hate the open spaces. I don't think we're made to work in an open space, but I understand their purpose. I bought some headphones, and they help me, but I still don't like the open spaces. The rest of it is all right, the chairs are ergonomic, and everything is OK, but that's it; there's a constant problem with the noise in an open space (C, 28, m, Team Lead at a local company).

To sum up, home based telecommuting is a great tool in organizing professional life in accordance with home life, but only when using with moderation. At the extreme of working only from home, may harm productivity and could emphasize the feelings of isolation. However, it is undeniable its relevance in allowing professionals to cope on both ends of their life. Therefore, while high spatial flexibility endangers labour productivity, a total lack of remote arrangements harms intellectual work. Balanced approach toward telecommuting practices enhances benefits on both sides (employers and employees), making the most out of a contractual relationship in offering and receiving.

Temporal flexibility

Flexibility in working hours is a common practice in the ICT industry, as being a benefit negotiated with employers in order to fit professional and personal life demands of knowledge workers. Though the standard working schedule is usually between 9 a.m. and 6 p.m., with an hour lunch break, it is rarely the case for ICT professionals in Cluj-Napoca to strictly follow these conventions. As explained by the interviewees, the focus is on the quality of the labour output, not on the working hours. The internal company policies allow flexibility when goals are met, with fewer hours than estimated. Employers

acknowledge that increasing work-life balance with flexible working arrangements increases labour productivity.

It's very flexible, we know; you also know about the IT level competition in Cluj, which means that the employer has to offer something extra in order to keep up with the rest of the companies. We have 4 to 5 days home office monthly, which is by default, so we don't have to justify. Working from your home by e-mail, the schedule is super flexible. Our entrance system is based on using the card, so they can check you upon your entrance time; as for the exit, you don't use the card anymore, so they don't know how long you work. You can stay as long as you like if you do your job without being a jerk – arriving at 11 and leaving at 4 PM. That's it. The so-called "core time" is between 11 and 3 PM, when they expect to be there and available (G, 35, m, Development Associate Software Engineer at a national company).

Complementary services of software development, like system security, customer support and others, are closer to a fixed schedule, with lower flexibility. While the standard working hours are not at negotiation, employees benefit of flexibility arrangements when needed, to respond to their family obligations. Knowledge workers of auxiliary industries to the ICT are aware of the differences in flexible labour arrangements between them and professionals working in the core industry of software development.

The beginning of the program should be at 8:30, but now, after some negotiations, it was settled from 9 to 17:30, with a one-hour lunch break, but it's pretty flexible. For instance, if I need to be somewhere, to go out for one hour, to go downtown to fix a problem, I can do it. I can talk, I can go, they'll say: "Go ahead, sure!", so the schedule is not so tight, so you feel constrained to do this or that, it's a system of internal monitoring that we are working with, but it's used especially by the firms that we are managing, for which we are doing the billing support, like time sheets. We don't have direct tracking. The time sheets are done manually, you write down what time you arrive, when you go, when you can recuperate those hours. So, I say it's pretty decent. I'd like it to be looser, meaning to be able to work from home, I'd love that very much (L, 37, m, System Administrator at a local company).

Offshoring businesses that opened offices in Cluj, demand client related flexibility from employees – this is mostly the case of customer support call centers. Often this means that working hours slide to the afternoon, to match, for example, a client from the U.S. Many times, non-standard working schedules

fit personal needs, especially in the cases of families where child-care needs always a spouse being available. Even in other cases can be a great fit in big cities' life, though client reliant flexibility arrangements offer limited real flexibility to employees.

I work Monday to Friday from 15.30 hours to 12 midnight in order to be in sync with the USA. There is also the possibility to work from 12.30 hours to 21.00 hours, or from 10.00 hours to 18.30. For the time being, as I handle many aspects related to the team, I can also afford to start work half an hour later and leave the office half an hour after work. We have a so-called compensatory timing system, whereby we can skip work up to three hours in a week but recuperate those hours in any other day of the same week. And nobody was ever three hours late (A, 30, m, Software Developer in Customer Support at a multinational company).

Temporal and spatial flexibility came to a full circle with the entering of millennials on the labour market, placing work-life balance and subjective well-being as first priorities. Their arrival marked the beginning of a new dimension of working life, with accents on individual's needs and aspirations. Their demands reflect rather individualistic attitudes toward labour organization and promote ideologies of self-accomplishment and fulfilment.

Nowadays, especially with the youngsters who are free-spirited, it's more difficult to introduce a fixed program from 8 to 17, because you can do the same thing if you're not constrained by certain meetings, you can work from 8 to 17 or 9 to 18 or 10 to 19 (F, 31, m, Team Lead in Software Testing at a multinational company originated from Romania).

To meet the new requirements, employers offer not only flexible working schedules, but also preferential working contracts, such as part-time with 4 or 6 working hours per day, project-based contracts, freelancing, etc. Even in the case of full-time contracts, core hours are agreed between employer and worker to ensure smooth working procedures. Usually, the core hours give a time frame when all the members of a team can be reached for discussions, meetings, pair programming and developing. This core timeframe consists of a few hours in the middle of the day, such as 10 a.m. – 3 p.m., or 11 a.m. – 4 p.m., around which one can organize the rest of the working hours as please, being able to work earlier or later. Many professionals imply that working early in the morning or late in the evening boost their productivity, as those are the hours when usually offices are emptier, colleagues aren't around, and creativity arises in silence and stillness.

For the respective client, certain hours are recommended, not necessarily mandatory. They are called core hours. There are in fact 6 hours during the day when all of the team members can be contacted. They are practically at the office; they can be reached. Afterwards, outside the 6 hours, we as contractors work as registered sole traders, so we can work from 160 to 200, so nothing is off limits. We choose our own schedule, but it's preferable that during these 6 hours when everybody needs you, to interact a lot, to be present and to be able to interact. Besides this, there is no fixed program necessarily, but for maximum productivity, I have chosen to maintain somehow the working hours from my previous job, to start at 8 or 9, give or take, and leave at 16-17, so practically around 8 hours. I'd like to work more, up to 200 hours, as I said, but this is not my purpose and financial wise I'm being paid quite okay for the 8 hours, so I don't long to work extra hours (N, 31, m, Software Developer and Scrum Master at a Central-East European company).

Differences among temporal flexibility practices are due to the size of companies, as well as the labour contracts professionals agreed upon. Usually, self-employed or employees of start-ups enjoy higher flexibility in the working schedule, as their counterparts in large enterprises. It is due to the way labour is organized inside micro-organizations, where many times workload fluctuates, dependent on new projects and ideas.

We're flexible, the company as well. The more flexible they are, the more productive is the employee. I'm the proof - the first test: I switched from a very restrictive working policy - with clocking and very strict presence rules (if I was 5 minutes late, I had to send an e-mail on my way to work: "I'm 5 minutes late and I'll compensate after the program) - to an extremely flexible one: I come and leave work when I want. Of course, I have to be very responsible since I have scheduled client meetings. Switching to this new schedule, I worked practically; I produced much more than a regular person within 8 working hours, sometimes forgetting to go home as I didn't mind my arrival time. I think that this clocking scheme, to arrive at a fixed time, engages 5% of your brain, which means that you don't have place for doing something creative or productive at your job. When I released 5% of my brain, without concerning about the time, I became a lot more productive. I don't bother counting my working hours, I feel somehow when it's time to go home, but usually I work a little bit more than the 8 hours standard. It happens to work a little bit less, for example, if I have a busy day with personal appointments (before or after), it's possible to work less that day, but somehow it's my box, it's fine, because we all know that all that matters is to provide as much as possible, to supply as much quality; I

mean to keep a client contact as good as possible and to offer him something valuable, whether it's information or consulting, whether you have to support them on the phone while they're working on something; so this is the most important thing for us at the end (P, 27, f, Project Manager at a local company).

Flexible working arrangements are based upon mutual trust between employer and employee. To benefit from the wide range of flexible settlements, employees commit to deliver quality work, value to customers, reliability, and accountability. The trust is a key element in this equation, without it no flexible labour arrangements are possible. The trust between parties is achieved through transparent labour organization, clear expectations on both sides, measurable tasks and outputs.

The schedule is flexible, and the employee is given freedom, meaning they are not constrained to do their hours as long as – and I emphasize as long as – they mind their own business and do their job well (C, 37, m, Software Developer at a multinational company).

Along the subject of temporal flexibility came up the topic of overtime. Interviewees reported that there are two types of overtime, one being benevolent and the other being at the employer's request. Those at request are usually well paid, followed by benefits like free meal on those days, bonuses, paid off days. Though, overtime is not encouraged by employers, from time-to-time pressures appear from clients in delivering the software. In those cases, benevolent overtime can arise, to prove loyalty on employees' side.

Voluntary means that the employee wishes to work overtime. Nobody pressures them. However, this doesn't mean that there can't be any pressure from the client, indirectly. But this differs from one project to another. I didn't work overtime this year, but it's true that I had some pretty tight deadlines at the end of last year. We had to implement something that was imposed by the law on a company that was active on the capital market of investment, so if the deadline said something had to happen on the 1st of January, we had to make sure that it would happen. No overtime was solicited officially, but I felt the need to help in implementing this (R, 32, f, Technical Lead at a multinational company).

On the flip of the coin, overtime practiced on the long run has a negative impact on work-life balance. One being always attainable and available would set wrong expectations that ultimately would impair personal life and would become unsustainable. The effects on health are an issue too, professional

exhaustion leads to burn out, further weakening the performance. Exemption from burnout must be professionals' number one aim, as their intellectual capital is their most precious asset.

The idea is that if you work more or less time, you set wrong expectations. And I believe that it doesn't matter whether you work at the office or at home, you must offer the same results, but should you work more, it will never end. I've worked overtime for a long time to prove myself, but such things are not appreciated, and I've set wrong expectations, so I learned that it's not ok to work overtime, because then they'll say: "Last week you delivered 10 tasks, so what's the problem this week?" and no one, in any case, will tell you: "Bravo!". And this is why I believe there must be the same balance between the hours when you work and the amount of work that you put in. This is the period of time when you work and when it is done, that's it. If I take longer to perform a task – this happens – it doesn't mean that I must work overtime to finish it. I made this mistake and I learned that it's not okay to do this. Unfortunately, this is not appreciated anywhere, it doesn't have to do only with IT, it's the same situation probably in any field (N, 29, f, Software Engineer at a local company).

Overall, the temporal flexibility practices differ from one company to another, heavily influenced by the company size; micro firms and start-ups being capable of adapting high schedule flexibility, compared to large enterprises, where fixed projects request constant labour hours from staff. Further on, flexibility is highly dependent on whether the business area is the software development or complementary services, like customer support or system administration, which offer less flexibility to their staff, compared to the software businesses. Concomitant, the level of temporal flexibility is related to work-life balance enhancement.

Considering the recent developments caused by the Covid-19 pandemic on the labour market, in November 2020 I re-asked three of the subjects regarding the new working arrangements they are practicing in this situation. Firstly, two of them working as freelancers encountered job loss, due to the company's response to instable economic climate during the pandemic. Finding a new job took more time than usual (around 3-4 months), due to the slowing down of HR activities (mainly new hiring were put on hold). After contracting a new freelance job, they continued to work from a co-working space (ClujHub), although they remarked the number of professionals in these spaces has shrink and didn't recover, not even six months after re-opening the co-working space. The third subject has retained his working place at a trans-national company, these entities being less affected by the crisis, and explained happily the admitted advantages of remote working by his employer:

Finally, the employer realized that we can be productive working from home as well. That is great for me, because before the pandemic we weren't really allowed to work outside our office building (S, 35, m, Software Engineer at multinational).

Nevertheless, crises or the current ongoing pandemic force labour market in adapting and shaping new working practices, that ultimately benefits both employers and employees. Mostly, reinvention of labour practices occurs after long, premeditated processes, dictated by top industries, while as in 2020 all the markets and businesses were forced by the Covid-19 pandemic to adapt their working processes to the latest trends and technologies.

Discussion

Present research shed light on the versatile nature of flexible labour practices in bettering ICT professionals' personal life, motivating them in their day-to-day work, as well as increasing loyalty towards employers. Though the aspects that institutionalizes these practices (Aroles, Mitev and de Vaujany, 2019; Neirrotti, Raguseo and Gastaldi, 2019; McElroy, 2020; Messenger and Gschwind, 2016) are highly relevant, per se they neglect to provide deep understanding over the mechanisms behind personal choices of knowledge workers, what motivates them in choosing particular working arrangements. While a radical disembodied neoliberal policy regime (Petrovici, 2019; Ban, 2016) occurred in Romania, particular and personalized flexibility practices emerged simultaneously in consolidating the fusion between employers' and employees' interests. This reflects a tendency of dispersal of the power over labour force, materialized in labour flexibility practices and policies, leaving more responsibilities on the workers, but as well more empowerment over personal decisions in the fields of professional and personal life.

The findings on work-life balance are aligned with the literature; home-based telecommuting and temporal flexibility practices are at high regards among knowledge workers in organizing professional life in accordance with home life, allowing to cope on both ends (Eurofound, 2020; Sirgy and Lee, 2018; EC, 2017; 2010; 2002). On the other side, unbalanced labour flexibility practices create dissonance on the personal life level. Repeated switches and overlapping between personal and professional spaces, availability of 24/7 harm mental capacity and subjective well-being (Eurofound 2020; Aroles, Mitev and de Vaujany, 2019; Boell et al., 2013; Glucksmann, 2005).

Lastly, while the Covid-19 pandemic accelerated the transfer from office work to home-work, it is also clear that teleworking is a natural outcome of the

fast-paced technological development, which would eventually become the global standard in the labour market. Also, lessons learnt from previous crises (financial or natural) help facing the new crisis created by the pandemic (Donnelly and Proctor-Thomson, 2015). These lessons help shaping firstly the ICT industry, which already is in a leading position regarding flexible labour practices, but by defining new working processes are showing directions to be followed on the labour market for other industries as well. As Hodder (2020, p. 1) points out, “issues of control, surveillance and resistance have been central to work on the impact of technology on work and employment and these themes have been identified as central to the experience of work in the current crisis”.

The aim of the present paper was to overtake a comprehensive research on the studied subject, creating opportunities for future research, even with the risk of being limited. Its major limitation is that although the interviewees represent a diversified sampling for the ICT industry of Cluj county, the interviewed sample is not representative for the national or international level, therefore general conclusions upon the ICT industry’s working practices cannot be drawn based on this research. Another constrain is represented by the one-sided perspective of a single researcher upon a subject, which cannot ensure a total objectivity.

Future research on this topic should consider completing the knowledge on flexible labour practices from the angle of companies’ management and human resources (HR) layers. Practices enabled on the top of the hierarchies reflects corporate agendas in overcoming difficulties imposed by a harsh and competitive capital market. Organizational ethnography would further deepen understanding over the specific dynamics that reign in ICT companies, by mapping organizational culture and agile frameworks. Labour flexibility arrangements are highly dictated by corporate lobby, both on the level of policy making and on the level of internal effort in retaining highly qualified personnel.

Conclusions

Flexibility practices provide solutions for a wide range of needs in the ICT industry. While in the beginning of the rise of labour flexibility in the Romanian ICT sector, a unilateral adaptation of it advantaged mostly the employers, lately certain flexibility practices are benefiting employees too. On the micro social level of professionals’, blending labour flexibility practices with success enhance work-life balance. The conducted research outlines the benefits and the obstacles in practicing flexibility working arrangements, framing two main ideas.

Firstly, spatial flexibility is organized on three levels: on employers' premises, home-based and in-between, third, hybrid workplaces (Kingma, 2016). The level of flexibility practiced determines one's ability to cope with responsibilities on the two pillars of life – professional and personal, while also enhancing benefits on both sides of a contractual relationship – employer and employee. Secondly, temporal flexibility is carried out based on the role a knowledge worker has within a company (support, development, management) and based on the timeframes need to be available for the customer. Customer support roles will less benefit of flexi-times, while it will be imperious to comply with customers' working schedule.

Overall, flexibility practices are highly influenced by the company size; micro firms and start-ups being capable of adapting high flexibility practices, compared to large enterprises, where accountability at the workplace in certain timeframes are requested. Also, labour productivity and creativity are enhanced when reconciling work life with personal life is successful. Liberalization of the market entailed not only the easiness of capital movement, but the rise of knowledge workers with power and influence over their own intellectual capital, with a richness in personal choices.

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