

Zero hour contracts are 'tip of the iceberg' of damaging shift work, say researchers

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The consumer society is happy (for a while). Credit: Markus Schopke

New report shows that zero hour contracts are only one of a wide number of flexible employment practices that are abused by managers - leading to financial insecurity, anxiety and stress in the workforce. Researchers say the Government consultation was too narrow and call for legislation requiring employers to defend scheduling decisions.

New research on two supermarket chains, one UK and one US, shows that a range of flexible employment practices – extending far beyond just zero-hour contracts – cause widespread anxiety, stress and 'depressed mental states' in [workers](#) as a result of financial and social

uncertainty, and can block worker access to education as well as much-needed additional income.

The findings are included in a report submitted to the government consultation on zero hour contracts at the request of the Department of Business, Innovation and Skills.

The report's authors, from the University's Department of Sociology, say the UK government should widen the net in reviewing damaging employment practices, arguing that employees be granted the right to make statutory claims to work additional core hours and have a say in the scheduling of their hours.

"Zero hour contracts are the tip of the iceberg; just one small manifestation of this much wider problem in our workplaces," said Dr Brendan Burchell, Head of Department and co-author on the report, compiled with his PhD candidate Alex Wood.

"Workplace flexibility is thought of as helping employees, but it has become completely subverted across much of the service sector to suit the employer – and huge numbers of workers are suffering as a consequence.

"So-called 'flexi-contracts', whether that's zero, eight or ten hours – none of which can provide a living – allow low-level management unaccountable power to dictate workers' hours and consequent income to a damaging extent that is open to incompetency and abuse."

The research – based on interviews with UK and US supermarket workers and union officials, as well as months of shop-floor observation – found that strategies such as extreme part-time contracts, key-time contacts and frequent labour matching, as well as 'at will' zero-hours employment, are all experienced as a form of job insecurity that causes

untold stress for thousands of employees and their families.

Extreme part-time contracts guarantee such low hours of work that many workers must work overtime as a matter of necessity. Labour matching involves management rearranging shifts to meet predicted future shopping demand.

With key-time contracts, workers are given limited core hours and asked to state additional times they can work. Managers can demand they work any hours falling during these times with just 24 hours' notice.

Previously, these contracts were reserved for roles where matching demand was most critical – such as fulfilling online orders. The UK supermarket's policy is now that all new stores aim for 45 per cent of staff to be on 'key-time'.

As one UK worker interviewed by the researchers put it: "I've got two kids and a mortgage and I'm gonna be out of a job because I can't do these hours". Another said: "They put a lot of stress on people... I used to be in tears".

It's not just financial insecurities, psychological well-being and blocks to additional earning that impact workers, say researchers. These contracts also reduce access to education and training programmes, and mean that those with children and other caring responsibilities are often forced to put the burden on others with very little notice. Burchell describes the problem as a "combination of individual and social impact".

In the report, the authors note that even informal employee input into work schedules has been shown to significantly reduce negative consequences of unpredictable working hours. They write that there is a need for the policy debate surrounding zero hours contracts to be better informed by evidence.

Previous research cited by the government doesn't make the important distinction between high and low wage workers on zero hours contracts, say the researchers. For example, many consultants work on a zero hour basis.

"It is the invidious way that vulnerable people at the low end of the labour market – such as in supermarket retail – are forced to live their lives that requires scrutiny," said Wood

"High unemployment and tough economic times, combined with ever-increasing flexible working practices that favour corporations, is creating a culture of servitude – trapping people in vicious cycles of instability, stress and a struggle to make ends meet.

"The policies the government is looking at completely misunderstand the nature and scale of the problem."

While California is an 'At Will Employment' State, meaning that all the US supermarket workers are on de-facto zero hour contracts, the UK supermarket does not make use of zero hour contracts. However, the researchers say that through a combination of extreme part-time and key-time contracts it achieves similar worker flexibility.

They found that all these employment strategies contribute to employee anxieties as workers try to juggle these demands with social and family responsibilities – as well as the enduring financial worry if next week's hours drop.

During fieldwork, Wood interviewed a number of current UK and US employees on flexi-contracts.

One UK worker said: "Nobody can possibly survive on three and a half hours' pay a week. And then it boils down to you've got your three and a

half hours plus you've got flexed-time which they will give you if they need you.

"But once your face doesn't fit you don't get any more hours and you might as well stay on the dole really."

Burchell adds that some employers use these contracts because they have genuinely unpredictable staffing needs – such as salad production that is weather dependent. But in the case of supermarkets, employers are using flexi-contracts because they are convenient for management, and the impact on the lives of workers isn't being considered.

"There is plenty of guidance for managers about good practice for health and safety, for example, but almost nothing about scheduling worker hours – and there could and should be," he said.

"Much of the misery caused is probably through incompetent scheduling, and management not realising the way they are controlling workers' lives. If employees have a right to request more predictable hours enshrined in legislation that the management would have to justify refusing, it would at least help redress the balance slightly."

Provided by University of Cambridge

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