SOCIAL CONSEQUENCES OF LONG AND IRREGULAR WORKING HOURS

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Changing working arrangements:
Performance rather than work hours has become increasingly important in nearly all occupations. A strong tendency for shift work with longer and irregular working hours is emerging throughout the Western hemisphere. This change in working pattern may have serious health effects and social consequences related to the individual as well as the family. Research has emphasized working hours and working time arrangements as important factors in relation to the experience of work-life balance. The purpose of this study was to summarize the existing scientific evidence with regard to social consequences of long and irregular working hours. The study is conducted as part of a Nordic collaboration project.

Litterature review
A literature review was conducted including studies of:
1) different kinds of work time arrangements
2) different kinds of social consequences such as form of work-life balance, stress and well-being.
Searches were performed in PubMed and PsychInfo and supplemented with literature from reference lists and summarized in previous reviews.
Results from 53 separate studies were included.

Overtime work
Overtime work was consistently associated with decreased work-life balance such as feelings of neglecting home matters, work family conflicts, work home interference and work family facilitation. Surprisingly, no studies could support a general association between working overtime and decreased well-being. In one study, less extented time (overtime, weekend work, travel) was associated with increased psychological symptoms.
In two studies, the consequences of overtime work on work-life balance and well-being was, however, dependent of the degree of time pressure and rewards. When rewards were low and/or time pressure high, overtime work was associated with decreased work-life balance and well-being.

Irregular working hours
Working non-standard schedules (other than Monday- Friday 8AM-6PM) were consistently associated with of decreased work-life balance for the employee.
In addition, non-standard hours were associated with different kinds of adverse outcomes in form of poorer cognitive stimulation in the home environment and emotional or behavioural difficulties for the children, lower marital quality and divorce.
With regard to psychological well-being for the employee, the results were mixed. Most studies found decreased well-being associated with non-standard schedules, while others found no association.

Employee flexibility
Employee control over work schedule was almost consistently associated with better work-life balance and improved psychological well-being. However, results indicated that employee flexibility could not compensate for the adverse effects of long and irregular working hours.

Length of working hours
A higher number of working hours was associated with less balance between work and home. The association was most explored and most consistently supported for women. Part-time work did often improve the balance, but was also associated with negative consequences such as decreased career opportunities. Regular, full-time working hours for both spouses seem to be fairly attractive compared with long working hours for both or for one of the spouses. New part time options, not associated with the negative side-effects of ordinary part time arrangements, available and attractive for both men and women, may constitute future directions for development.

A higher number of working hours were in addition associated with decreased wellbeing among women. The results were not conclusive among men. In samples with mixed gender, some studies pointed at decreased well-being and others toward no effect on well-being. The degree of satisfaction with working hours seemed important for the outcome.

Conclusions:
There is strong scientific evidence that long working hours, overtime work and irregular working hours have negative influence on work-life balance. The evidence with regard to measures of psychological well-being is, however, not so consistent. There is some evidence that employee flexibility over working hours is associated with less social and psychological problems, but no indications of moderation effects. With respect to design, prospective studies and studies of effects for the family as an entity are sparse.

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