

Part-time and flexible working

A new approach

Gwyn Williams considers the growth of part-time and flexible working in the UK labour market and how attitudes have changed over the last 25 years

The first time I heard the words 'part-time' was as an impressionable young football fan on the terraces of West Bromwich Albion. 'Part-time supporters' (sung to the same tune as that old classic 'Robson for England') was one of the milder ways of taunting opposing fans along the same lines as 'you're not singing any more' or 'you only sing when you're winning'. Maybe those early football-supporting days gave me the view that being part-time was something undesirable. However, now that I am a part-time worker myself, I think my attitudes, along with those of the rest of society, have changed.

Record figures

Over the last year, the number of part-time workers in the UK has risen to nearly 8 million people, the highest figure since records began in 1984. In recent months, part-time jobs have grown at a similar rate to the disappearance of full-time jobs. There are 7.8 million part-time workers in the UK economy compared with 18.2 million full-timers; in other words, 30% of the UK workforce is now in part-time employment.

The increasing number of part-time employees is one of the ways in which the nature of the UK workforce has changed, reflecting the more diverse nature of our society. Part-time working is now just one element of 'flexible working', a broad term which covers any non-standard working arrangement. Flexible working refers to a wide variety of situations, including part-time working, working from home, working for an employment agency, term-time working, job sharing, annual hours and many other variations. This is a far cry from the days when most people joined a company at 16 and left at 65, having worked nine to five, 5 days a week.

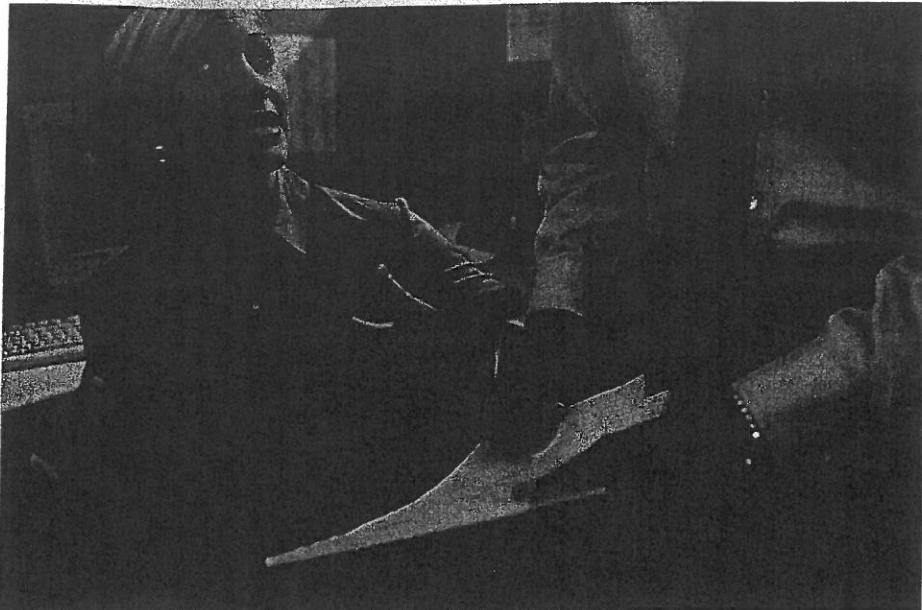
Previous attitudes

When I joined Royal Mail as a fresh-faced graduate in the late 1980s, as with most other companies at the time, the status of part-time workers was low and they were subject to worse terms and conditions than full-time staff. Part-time employees were viewed with suspicion; full-timers believed they lacked loyalty and would abandon ship as soon as another firm offered more attractive pay and conditions. Many full-time staff

felt Royal Mail should provide all employees with a full-time 'job for life' and anything which threatened that was to be feared and resisted. The concept of moving to another job, or, even worse, flitting from one part-time job to another, did not sit easily with the average Royal Mail employee.

In my view, this suspicion of part-time employees stemmed in part from sexist attitudes in society, as many of the part-time staff were female. Within most companies, men dominated the company boardrooms and union committees; hence it was to be expected that most company decisions favoured the males in the workforce. I met a number of people in Royal Mail, sometimes powerful individuals like union representatives, who disliked part-time women workers filling jobs, as they felt this reduced full-time opportunities for men.

Such negative attitudes towards part-time staff were commonplace. Until the modernisation of employment legislation in the 1990s, many companies in the UK were able to apply different, and invariably worse, terms and conditions to part-time staff. They often suffered in comparison with full-time colleagues on arrangements



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As many part-time workers were women, sexual discrimination and discrimination against part-time workers went hand in hand

for sick leave and pensions, for example being denied access to a company final salary pension scheme. In many Royal Mail delivery offices, part-time staff would only get to pick their annual leave dates when all full-timers had first picked theirs (leaving the least attractive holiday weeks for the part-timers). Part-timers also faced discriminatory treatment on bonus and overtime arrangements.

Regulation

Nowadays, the law provides full protection for part-time staff. The Part-Time Workers (Prevention of Less Favourable Treatment) Regulations came into force in the UK in July 2000 to make sure that part-time

workers had parity with their full-time counterparts. Furthermore, any employee who has worked for more than 26 weeks in a job now has a right to request a flexible working pattern. This right becomes statutory for any employee who has parental responsibility for a child aged under 16, or a disabled child under 18, or who is a carer for an adult. Under the law, an employer must seriously consider any application for flexible working and can only reject it if there are good business reasons for doing so.

Shamrock organisations

In the mid-1980s, the growth of flexible working in the UK and other developed

economies was predicted by the business writer and analyst Charles Handy. He put forward his concept of the 'shamrock organisation', the three leaves of the shamrock reflecting Handy's belief that modern firms would increasingly be composed of three elements: core workers, contracted specialists and a flexible workforce, including part-time staff. Handy also coined the term 'portfolio worker' for a freelancer who draws a living from several sources. This is another variant of flexible working. Clearly, there is less certainty in having a portfolio career than in seeking to forge a long-term career path with a single employer. However, on the positive side, there are potential benefits for portfolio workers in terms of intellectual stimulus, personal freedom and breadth of opportunities.

Involuntary part-timers

Of the 8 million or so workers in the UK who are currently part-time, 1.1 million did not choose to become so. In the current economic climate, many companies have been forced to cut back on the hours they can offer to their staff. The fact that unemployment has not risen to quite the extent feared in the recession has been helped by the flexibility of the labour market and the willingness of workers to cooperate with employers in reducing their hours. Clearly this has been a painful process for many employees who have financial commitments and lifestyles based on full-time employment. When the economy shows a sustained upturn once again, then businesses will have to be careful that they do not lose skilled individuals whose part-time status is involuntary to competitors offering better terms and conditions.

Summary

As a part-time teacher, and happy to be such, I am pleased that attitudes and practices related to part-time working within business and wider society have changed beyond recognition since the 1980s. The movement towards an ever-more flexible workforce in the UK appears to be an unstoppable one. This would suggest that students leaving school and university in the next few years are likely to have a portfolio career themselves, which may well include spells of part-time employment.

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Flexible working hours allow parents to hold down a job while bringing up their children