

FLEXIBLE WORK ARRANGEMENTS AS A STRATEGY FOR REDUCING JOB STRESS: EMPIRICAL INSIGHTS FROM SERBIA

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Abstract: Flexible work arrangements have become an integral part of almost every organization due to various internal and external challenges, which further create new opportunities and serve as a means through which organizations can reduce job stress among employees. The subject of the research is focused on determining the effects that flexible work arrangements have on job stress among highly educated millennials in the service sector of Serbia. The research was conducted on a sample of 448 highly educated millennials in the service sector of Serbia. To test the effects, the PLS-SEM method was used. The results of the research indicate that flexible work arrangements significantly reduce stress among employees, allowing them greater control over working hours, establishing a work-life balance, and having a positive impact on employees' work attitudes and behaviors, which leads to improved organizational performance. Service organizations should consider the possibilities of implementing such work arrangements according to their capabilities, which would contribute to mutual

satisfaction, in line with social exchange theory. Research on the effects of flexible work arrangements in reducing job stress provides answers regarding the situation in developing economies, with a special focus on Serbia, and fills a gap in the literature. Future research will focus on a larger number of respondents, comparisons with other generations, with an emphasis on Generation Z, which differs in characteristics from Generation Y, and on investigating the establishment of work-life balance, etc..

Key words: flexible work arrangements, job stress, millennials, highly educated, service sector, Serbia

JEL classification: J81, J28, M12, M54

1. INTRODUCTION

Due to internal and external factors, flexible work arrangements have become a necessary phenomenon in today's digital society, in which organizations are transforming their traditional ways of operating and adopting new approaches

through the implementation of various forms of flexible work arrangements (Kumar, Sarkar & Chahar, 2023). Some of the challenges that organizations face include the development of information technologies, globalization, digitalization of business, increased market competition, and various crises such as energy, economic, and political crises (e.g., the war between Ukraine and Russia) (Allam, Bibri & Sharpe, 2022). Additionally, health crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, have significantly contributed to the emergence of different forms of flexible work arrangements and generally increased workplace stress due to their psychological impact on employees (Gašić, 2024). These challenges have required organizations worldwide to adapt their behavioral patterns and find appropriate ways to retain existing and attract new talented employees. One of the key strategies aimed at attracting, motivating, and retaining top talent is the implementation of flexible work arrangements (Ardi, Cahyadi, Meilani & Pramono, 2024).

Russell, O'Connell & McGinnity (2009) emphasize that flexible work arrangements significantly reduce employee stress by enabling them to establish a better balance between work and personal life, gain greater control over their working hours, and reduce pressure that could lead to burnout. Additionally, they help mitigate stress related to daily commuting and traffic congestion. As a result, employees who are less exposed to stressors experience improvements in overall well-being, productivity, motivation, and positive work attitudes and behaviors (Almer & Kaplan, 2002). Moreover, flexibility in work often leads to better workload management, reduced work-life conflicts, and a greater sense of control over one's work. All these factors positively affect employees' psychological well-being, reducing chronic stress and its negative consequences on health and job performance.

This research consists of three parts. The first part focuses on the theoretical background of the research, explaining the main research variables: flexible work arrangements as the independent variable and job stress as the dependent variable. This section also provides an overview of previous theoretical and empirical findings on the impact of flexible work arrangements on job stress, leading to the formulation of the research hypothesis. The second part explains the research methodology, including the development of an electronic survey aimed at collecting data necessary for analysis and hypothesis testing, followed by a description of the research sample. The third part presents the analysis, results of the findings obtained using the

PLS-SEM method. Finally, the conclusion summarizes the research, presents the main findings, and provides recommendations for companies and employees, as well as suggestions for future research and study limitations. The research concludes with a presentation of the scientific and professional literature used in the research.

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

2.1. Flexible work arrangement

Mas and Pallais (2020) emphasize that flexible working arrangements represent alternative work models within organizations that provide employees with the ability to better organize their working hours, job activities, and work locations. The primary goal of implementing flexible working arrangements is to enhance productivity and positively influence employees' work attitudes and behaviors, such as job satisfaction, engagement, commitment, innovative work behavior, and reduced turnover intention (Berber, Gašić, Katić & Borocki., 2022; Gašić & Berber, 2023). Consequently, these factors contribute to improved employee performance, which in turn positively impacts overall organizational performance (Austin-Egole, Iheriohanma & Nwokorie, 2020; Gašić, Berber, Slavić, Strugar Jelača, Marić, Bjekić & Aleksić, 2024). This enables companies to develop and thrive in a highly dynamic environment that faces constant internal and external challenges. Improved business performance allows organizations to expand and enter new markets, while for employees, this can serve as an additional motivator, particularly when accompanied by appropriate financial rewards. Moreover, this mode of work facilitates better work-life balance, which is another crucial motivational factor for employees, regardless of their job position or the organization they work for.

In his doctoral dissertation, Gašić (2024) identifies 11 types of flexible working arrangements, categorized into four groups based on the factor analysis conducted by Berber & Slavić (2019). The first group includes weekend work, shift work, and overtime. The second group consists of flexi-time, home-based work, and teleworking. The third group comprises compressed working week, job sharing, and part-time work, while the final group includes fixed-term contracts, temporary/casual work, and annual hours contracts.

The most common forms of flexible working arrangements include flextime, where employees can adjust their start and end work hours within predefined limits; remote work (or telework),

which involves performing job tasks outside the traditional office setting, typically from home or another location of the employee's choice; compressed workweek, where work hours are distributed over fewer days, such as a four-day workweek with extended daily hours; job sharing, where two or more employees share one job position and responsibilities; part-time work, where employees work fewer hours than a standard full-time schedule; and hybrid work, which has become particularly relevant after the COVID-19 pandemic, combining in-office and remote work (Gašić, 2024).

Flexible working arrangements are becoming increasingly important in the modern business environment as they contribute to higher employee satisfaction, reduced stress levels, and improved productivity. At the same time, they enable organizations to adapt more easily to market changes and remain competitive.

2.2. Job stress

Jamal (1984) states that job stress is a physiological and psychological response to work demands that employees perceive as challenging, threatening, or excessive in relation to their abilities, resources, or needs. It arises due to an imbalance between work and personal life, excessive job expectations, and the employee's capacity to meet them. If not managed properly, job stress can negatively affect employees' health, job satisfaction, and overall work performance, ultimately leading to reduced organizational effectiveness.

Various factors contribute to job stress, including organizational, interpersonal, and individual elements. High workload, tight deadlines, lack of job autonomy, and unclear job roles often create pressure that employees struggle to manage. Additionally, conflicts with supervisors, colleagues, or clients, as well as workplace bullying and unfair treatment, further intensify stress levels. Employees who lack sufficient support from their organization or coworkers may experience heightened frustration, anxiety, and reduced engagement in their work (Jeyaraj & Ramamoorthy, 2013; Bulińska-Stangrecka & Bagieńska, 2021).

The consequences of job stress can be severe, manifesting in different ways (Jain, Torres, Teoh & Leka, 2022). Physically, employees may suffer from exhaustion, insomnia, headaches, high blood pressure, or even more serious health conditions such as cardiovascular diseases and diabetes. Psychologically, prolonged exposure to stress can lead to anxiety, depression, burnout, and decreased

motivation. On an organizational level, high job stress contributes to absenteeism, deteriorating workplace relationships, lower commitment, and a higher turnover rate, all of which negatively impact productivity and overall business performance (Sharma, Cooper & Pestonjee., 2021).

To mitigate job stress, organizations need to develop comprehensive strategies aimed at improving workplace conditions. Implementing flexible work arrangements can help employees manage their work-life balance more effectively, reducing stress caused by rigid schedules and excessive commuting (Shifrin & Michel, 2022). Furthermore, providing clear job expectations, enhancing managerial support, and fostering an organizational culture that encourages open communication and employee well-being are essential in creating a healthier work environment (Monteiro & Joseph, 2023).

Given its complexity, job stress remains a significant challenge for both employees and employers. If left unaddressed, it can lead to serious consequences at both an individual and organizational level. Therefore, proactive stress management strategies are crucial to maintaining a motivated and productive workforce while ensuring long-term organizational success (Berger & Czakert, 2022).

2.3. Relationship between flexible work arrangements and job stress

To determine the impact of flexible work arrangements on job stress, a systematic literature review was conducted, highlighting the most relevant studies aligned with our research topic and sample.

Mohanty, Parida, Kumar, Hota & Debyani (2024) examined the impact of job satisfaction and job stress on employees among Millennials in the banking sector. The authors emphasized specific strategies that can enhance job satisfaction and reduce stress through the implementation of flexible work arrangements, a supportive work environment, and continuous skill development. Subramaniam, Rozlan, Putit & Maniam (2022), based on a sample of 400 millennials in the service sector during the COVID-19 pandemic, found that flexible work arrangements influence millennials' well-being, productivity, and mental health, as they value job autonomy and a friendly work environment. The report also indicated that millennials in Malaysia have been facing various challenges over the past decade and struggle with stress and well-being at work, suggesting that the implementation of appropriate forms of flexible

work arrangements would bring multiple benefits. Almer and Kaplan (2002) found that certified public accountants (CPAs) who utilize certain forms of flexible work arrangements (FWAs) report higher job satisfaction and lower turnover intentions compared to those who do not use FWAs. They also found that FWAs have a positive effect on reducing stress and the risk of burnout, with the presence of a mentor playing a significant role in enhancing the sense of personal accomplishment. Mache, Servaty & Harth (2020) found that flexible work arrangements in open workspaces (ABW) reduce mental demands and increase workload in a sample of employees in a technology company. In addition, there is an increase in job autonomy, communication satisfaction, teamwork, and a significant contribution to the reduction of occupational stress over time. Chandola, Booker, Kumari & Benzeval (2019) investigated whether the availability and use of flexible work arrangements are associated with lower levels of allostatic load in a large representative study of British adults working reduced hours. Among women caring for two or more children under the age of 15, a difference of nearly one unit in the allostatic load index (an additional biological risk) was found between those who used reduced hours arrangements and those who did not. Consequently, it was concluded that part-time work could enable women to balance work and family roles, thereby reducing levels of chronic stress. Russell, O'Connell & McGinnity (2009) found from data from the 2003 national survey in Ireland that flexible work arrangements (part-time job and flexi-time) reduce work pressure and work-life conflict, while working from home can increase both factors. The authors conclude that it is important to distinguish between different types of flexible work arrangements in order to fully understand their effects on reducing work pressure and work-life conflict.

Based on the results highlighted by the authors, the following research hypothesis has been proposed:

H₀: Flexible work arrangements have a positive impact on reducing job stress among highly educated millennials in the service sector of Serbia.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Survey

After reviewing the standardized survey, an electronic version was created, which consisted of three parts. The first part focused on control questions regarding gender and education level. The second part consisted of 11 statements about

the independent variable, Flexible Work Arrangements, taken from Albion (2004), where FWAs1, FWAs5, FWAs6, and FWAs7 refer to FWAs Family, and the others refer to FWAs Job. The third part contained six statements measuring the dependent variable, Job Stress, taken from Lait & Wallace (2002). Respondents answered the statements using a Likert scale from 1 to 5.

3.2. Sample

To collect the sample, an electronic version of the survey was created with the aim of reaching as many respondents as possible who use flexible work arrangements. Data were collected in multiple waves, the first in May 2023, the second in February 2024, and the third in July 2024, which contributed to the higher accuracy of the data. Of the 448 respondents, the majority are female (56%), while the remaining are male (44%). Analyzing the age structure, the largest number of them have between 25 and 34 years old (43%), then between 35 and 44 (39%), and under 25 (18%). Comparing education levels, it is evident that the sample consists of highly educated employees, with the majority holding a bachelor's degree (56%), master's degree (35%), and Ph.D. (9%). In this study, we did not consider the older population above 44 years of age because our focus was on young, highly educated employees who use flexible work arrangements, aligning with the specific needs of the contemporary business environment.

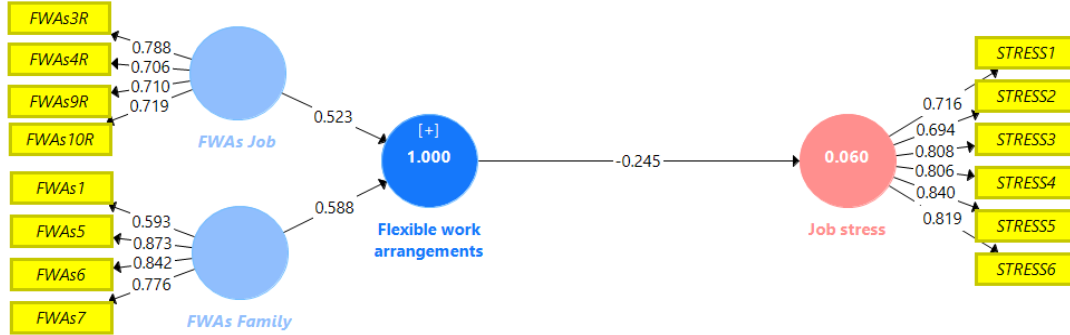
4. RESEARCH RESULTS

The analysis of the effects that flexible work arrangements cause on job stress was conducted using the SmartPLS 3 software for data processing, applying the PLS-SEM model. A model was created in the software, where the dependent variable, named flexible work arrangements, was formed as a second-order formative construct, consisting of two first-order reflective constructs (one focused on job-related aspects and the other on family-related aspects). The dependent variable is a first-order reflective construct, which is reflected through its indicators. By analyzing the outer loadings, it was determined that certain indicators exhibited a loading level beyond the acceptable criteria and therefore had to be removed from the model (FWAs2R, FWAs8R, FWAs11), while all others were retained. Hair et al. (2021, p. 77) emphasize that indicators with an outer loading above 0.708 should be retained for analysis, whereas Hair et al. (2011) states that items with a loading level between 0.40 and 0.708 should be considered for removal if their deletion increases internal consistency reliability or

convergent validity above the recommended threshold. Accordingly, indicators with lower

loadings should sometimes be retained. The results of the path analysis are presented in the Figure 1:

Figure 1. Results of path analysis



Source: Authors of research

The analysis of the formative construct "Flexible work arrangements" confirmed that all criteria

were met, allowing for further analysis to be conducted.

Table 1. The analysis of formative constructs FWAs

	Outer Weights	St. Dev.	T Stat.	p	VIF
FWAs Family -> FWAs	0.588	0.022	26.71	0	1.624
FWAs Job -> FWAs	0.523	0.021	25.21	0	

Source: Authors of research

The next section focuses on the analysis of model reliability (internal consistency and convergent validity), where the values of Cronbach's α (criterion >0.6 according to Dakduk et al. (2019, p. 7)), Composite Reliability (criterion >0.7 according to Hair, Matthews, Matthews & Sarstedt (2017)), and Average Variance Extracted (AVE) (criterion >0.5 according to Dash & Paul (2021)) are presented. The results are shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Assessment of the Reliability of the Measurement Model (Internal Consistency and Convergent Validity)

	Cronbach's α	Comp. Rel.	AVE
FWAs Family	0.775	0.858	0.606
FWAs Job	0.711	0.821	0.535
Job stress	0.879	0.904	0.613

Source: Authors of research

Based on the conducted analysis, it can be concluded that all values align with the defined criteria. Accordingly, the Cronbach's α values range from 0.711 (FWAs Job), 0.775 (FWAs Family) to 0.879 (Job Stress). The Composite Reliability values range from 0.821 (FWAs Job), 0.858 (FWAs Family) to 0.904 (Job Stress). The

Average Variance Extracted (AVE) values range from 0.535 (FWAs Job), 0.606 (FWAs Family) to 0.613 (Job Stress). The next step focuses on the analysis of the Variance Inflation Factor (VIF). Based on the obtained results, the criterion has been met, as all values are below 3.3 (Yang, Al Mamun, Hayat, Jingzu, Hoque & Salameh, 2022).

Table 3. Results of Variable inflation factor

VIF	
FWAs1	1.177
FWAs10R	1.383
FWAs3R	1.441
FWAs4R	1.335
FWAs5	3.230
FWAs6	3.097
FWAs7	1.449
FWAs9R	1.384
STRESS1	2.241
STRESS2	1.621
STRESS3	2.085
STRESS4	2.384
STRESS5	2.082
STRESS6	2.664

Source: Authors of research

The subsequent analysis confirmed that the results meet one of the strictest criteria for discriminant validity, namely the HTMT (Heterotrait-Monotrait) ratio, as all values are below 0.9 (Gašić et al., 2024a).

Table 4. Results of HTMT (discriminant validity)

	FWAs Family	FWAs Job	Job stress
FWAs Family			
FWAs Job	0.818		
Job stress	0.181	0.308	

Source: Authors of research

After successfully conducting the initial analysis, the next step is testing the structural model using bootstrapping analysis.

Table 5. Results of direct effect of flexible work arrangements on job stress according to bootstrapping analysis

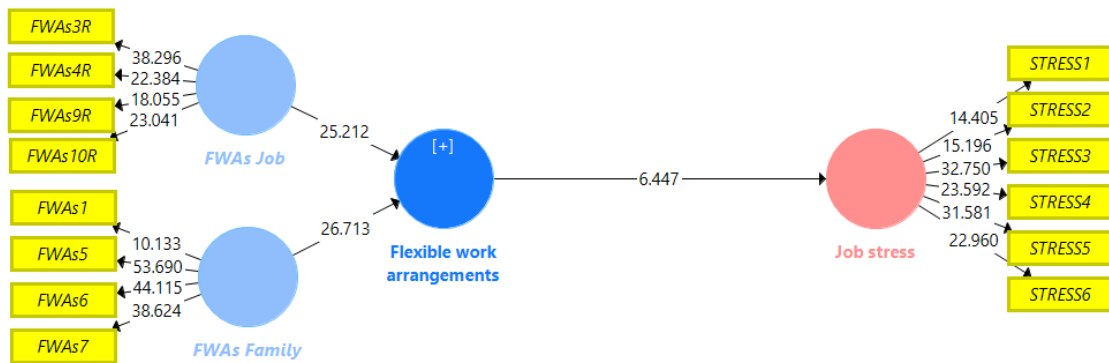
Relationship	β	St. Dev.	T St.	p
FWAs -> Job stress	-0.245	0.038	6.447	0

Source: Authors of research

The results presented in Table 5 indicate a statistically significant negative relationship between flexible work arrangements and job stress ($\beta = -0.245$; $T = 6.447$; $p = 0.000$).

These relationships are shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2. Results of bootstrapping analysis



Source: Authors of research

Based on the research results obtained through the PLS-SEM method on a sample of 448 highly educated millennials, the research hypothesis H_0 can be confirmed: Flexible work arrangements have a positive impact on reducing job stress among highly educated millennials in the service sector of Serbia.

CONCLUSION

The research focuses on determining the effects that flexible work arrangements have on job stress among highly educated millennials working in the service sector of the Republic of Serbia. The results obtained through PLS-SEM analysis showed a statistically significant negative relationship between flexible work arrangements and job stress. These findings align with previous theoretical and empirical knowledge, which indicates that flexible work arrangements positively influence better work-life balance, reduction of pressure, and improvement of overall employee well-being (Russell et al., 2009; Almer & Kaplan, 2002). Additionally, certain forms of flexible work arrangements, such as flexi-time, home-based work, and hybrid work, provide

employees with greater control over their working hours and location, which contributes to reducing stress and the feeling of being overwhelmed, particularly among highly educated millennials who often face high job demands and struggle to establish a work-life balance. The research results indicate that flexible work arrangements significantly reduce stress, which is consistent with findings from other studies that emphasize that work flexibility helps reduce conflicts between work and personal life (Chandola et al., 2019; Mache et al., 2020). In addition to the positive effects on reducing stress, flexible work arrangements also have a positive impact on job satisfaction, loyalty, and employee motivation. As highlighted in the theoretical part, flexible work arrangements contribute to greater employee autonomy, allowing them to better manage their responsibilities and time. This autonomy can lead to higher job satisfaction, lower turnover intentions, and increased productivity (Berber et al., 2022; Gašić & Berber, 2023).

The implementation of different forms of flexible work arrangements as a strategy for today's

organizations represents a key factor in attracting and retaining talented employees, especially when considering the high competition in the labor market. Accordingly, organizations should consider how they can implement flexible work arrangements in line with their capacities and the needs of their employees, which would not only help reduce stress but also improve overall organizational performance.

Some recommendations for implementing flexible work arrangements to reduce employee stress include, for example, introducing flexi-time, which allows employees to choose their working hours instead of adhering to strictly defined office hours, thereby improving work-life balance. Teleworking enables employees to work from home or another location outside the office, giving them greater control over their work environment and eliminating the stress caused by daily commuting. The introduction of shorter work weeks can reduce stress by allowing employees more time for rest and recovery. Organizations can also offer flexible breaks, such as allowing employees to take breaks whenever necessary, which helps reduce pressure and improve mental health. Flexible work arrangements can help employees better balance work and personal life, which reduces stress and increases overall employee satisfaction. Organizations can provide tools and resources to support this balance, such as flexible leave or parental support. Furthermore, managerial support significantly impacts stress reduction, and good alignment of flexible work arrangements with job activities, along with adequate support, can lead to mutual satisfaction for both employees and employers. Managers should be trained to recognize signs of stress in their employees and offer flexible work options when necessary. Additionally, managers can support setting clear expectations and goals, which can reduce uncertainty and stress.

Although the results of the research are promising, there are certainly some limitations to consider. First, the study was conducted on a sample of highly educated millennials in the service sector in Serbia, which limits the generalizability of the findings to other generations or sectors. Future research should include a larger number of participants and focus on comparing different generations, especially Generation Z, which has different characteristics compared to millennials. It would also be useful to explore how flexible work arrangements affect the work-life balance in different cultural and organizational contexts.

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