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An investigation into employees' factors of flexible working hours (FWH) for productivity in Saudi: a mixed qualitative triangulation

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One of the most controversial HRM topics that have received extensive attention from academics and practitioners communities over the past two decades is flexible working hours (FWH) and its impact on productivity. Nevertheless, the work is focused almost exclusively on business and organizational aspects neglecting the employees' and social perspectives, and thus far lacks a strong theoretical foundation, particularly social theory. Therefore, unlike other work, the present study focuses heavily on the employees' perspective based on a social theory; namely: social exchange theory (SET). This study aims to explore and evaluate the antecedents for requesting FWH, mainly: employee and social-related factors, which affect their productivity. SET was found valuable to serve the aim of the research because it magnifies the importance of the employee as a partner who is in reciprocal social relations. Two mixed triangulated sets of qualitative data were collected, namely: semi-structured interviews and document analysis (cross-sectional and longitudinal). Thirty-two interviews were conducted with employees and with management. Document analysis is a novel source of data that was extracted from the company's internal technological platform and contains employees' first-hand computerized typewritten comments about FWH. The analysis of the findings reveals that the most significant factors found affecting employees' decision to demand FWH for productivity are midday breaks, traffic/transportation, schooling, and social life. Moreover, the findings suggest that HR practitioners need to recognize employees' social factors before applying FWH practice. This present research makes an original and important contribution to HRM scholarship and reflects theoretical rigor (social exchange theory), methodological (mixed triangulation methods), empirical, and practical. For example, theoretical contributions regarding SET's reciprocity "black box" were highlighted. Moreover, the implication of the findings assists HR, in particular in Saudi organizations, to ensure the FWH contributes to overcoming these identified employees' related antecedents.

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Introduction and research background

Although the work about flexible working hours (FWH) and its impact on productivity have received extensive attention from HRM academics and practitioners within the past decade (e.g., Soga et al., 2022; Austin-Egole et al., 2020; Pavlova, 2020; Guest, 2017), the implications of requesting FWH are unclear and poor to understood (Munsch, 2016). Most importantly, the existing FWH's academic work focused almost exclusively on business organizational and job perspectives neglecting HR and employees' social needs which are not directly work-related reasons (Mohiya, 2021; Mohiya, 2023). For example, existing HRM studies have focused on the impact and consequences of FWH on organizations by measuring productivity and performance, which is what businesses care about the most (e.g., Mohiya, 2023; Austin-Egole et al., 2020; Pavlova, 2020). FWH encompasses a spectrum of arrangements. During the design and implantation of FWH, organizations must take into account employees' issues to make FWH addresses employees' issues. If the FWH is designed and implemented to overcome employees' social issues, then the organization will benefit by increasing its productivity.

The social and employee-related antecedents/factors behind the demands for FWH which they believe have affected their productivity are still unfolding remain scarce, and lack theoretical clarity. This present HRM research addresses this gap by focusing on employees' perspectives to identify and investigate the antecedents of social issues of FWH that affect productivity.

The first objective of this research is to explore, identify, and investigate the antecedents/factors of FWH, mainly: employee and social-related factors, to establish why employees demand FWH. Unlike many others who focused on work-related factors of FWH, the research is positioned to focus on employees related social reasons behind employees' requesting for FWH, such as parenting issues including children's schooling. The second objective is to understand how the FWH program will resolve these social issues/factors and how it will contribute to their productivity in a large Saudi corporation. Moreover, the third objective of this research is to evaluate these antecedents altogether based on employees' reactions and the redundancy of their comments to determine the varying degrees of significance.

Theoretically, due to a lack or absence of a strong theoretical foundation in FWH research with relation to productivity, mainly social theory, this research adopts social exchange theory (SET) for several reasons. First, SET is one of the most influential theories in HRM mainly found useful in explaining the relationship between employees and employers which is based on reciprocity conveying benefited resources (Cropanzano et al., 2017; Cropanzano and Mitchell, 2005; Saks, 2006). The approach has the distinct advantage of recognizing employees' interpersonal and social issues. Second, SET is relational to the context and aim of the present research. As FWH's issues are social issues not directly job-related factors, SET is a 'social' theory that sees antecedents/factors behind requesting for FWH as 'social' because it recognizes the social aspect through employees' social experience.

Third, this current research is a qualitative study driven by social theory that has been adapted in advance of the data collection. The role of theory is fundamental as a vehicle in the present research. However, qualitative scholars often use theory as something that emerges from the data collection and analysis. Fourth, the theoretical lens of SET assists in serving the main aim of this research by offering a clearer explanation and better understanding to identify and investigate FWH's factors that affect employees' productivity. SET sees the FWH's factors that contribute to productivity as resources. In general, the relationship between reciprocity and resources in SET is interdependent

(Blau, 1964). Resources in FWH are essential for productivity. Employees will choose to produce in response to the resources they receive from their employer (Saks, 2006). According to Cropanzano and Mitchell (2005), once employees receive socio-emotional and economic resources from their employer, they, in return, feel obliged to respond in kind and repay the employer. Therefore, the resources/factors of SET assist in investigating the types of resources that employees expect to receive from employers in FWH and how this contributes to productivity.

The relationship between reciprocity and resources in SET is interdependent. Employers need to provide employees with resources that will oblige them to reciprocate in kind with engagement (Mohiya, 2019; Saks, 2006). Ultimately, reciprocity in FWH contains and conveys resources. Therefore, resources in FWH are essential for productivity. Employees will choose to produce in response to the resources they receive from their employer (Saks, 2006). According to Cropanzano and Mitchell (2005), once employees receive socioemotional and economic resources from their employer, they, in return, feel obliged to respond in kind and repay the employer (Pereira and Mohiya, 2021). Therefore, the FWH's resources/factors of SET assist in investigating the types of resources that employees expect to receive from employers. It is based on this theoretical perspective that it is assumed that employees will be willing to trade their high productivity with the resources of FWH offered by the employers (Mohiya, 2023). Ultimately, this mutual trade-off could facilitate enhanced productivity for the organization.

Methodologically speaking, most existing HRM studies about FWH about productivity use wither single quantitative method which indicates there is a qualitative methodological gap, particularly mixed qualitative methods. This research adopts two mixed qualitative methods, namely: semi-structured interviews and document analysis. These two qualitative methods help to uncover unknown FWH's social and non-social factors. Based on the evaluation of relevant empirical HRM studies, I realize that the approach drawn from the research objectives and questions and the overall strategy of the research required a need for qualitative triangulation research methods, compared to a quantitative method. The advantage of mixed qualitative research (semi-structured interviews and document analysis) is that it allows me to gain a greater perspective on the insights of the participants because it provides the opportunity for the power of rich words to prevail. An example is a semi-structured interview and document analysis. Instead of tick boxes and Likert scales (quantitative research), qualitative research asks for self-expression and an interpretation of how the subject feels and understands. A qualitative approach seeks answers to questions that stress what and how social experience is created and given meaning. In contrast, quantitative studies emphasize the measurement and analysis of causal relationships between variables, not processes.

The two mixed triangulated qualitative methods that will be used in the present study are semi-structured interviews and a document analysis approach (combined longitudinal and cross-sectional designs). The two qualitative methods are equal and parallel which can be viewed as exact equivalents to serve the purpose of the study by addressing the research questions. Most importantly, these two triangulated methods will help improve objectivity, validity, and credibility. Moreover, the two qualitative sources offer rich data to answer the research questions sufficiently. Additionally, using triangulation methods will minimize the common method bias.

The two approaches tend to be available for data collection in research studies: longitudinal and cross-sectional research—this research uses both. The obtained document contains employees'

thoughts and reactions about the reasons for demanding FWH over a period of two years, which typically fits the description of longitudinal research. For example, the document analysis covers two years and the semi-structured interview covers three months. For the present research, both cross-sectional and longitudinal provide rich accounts of the employees' accumulative experience with FWH.

Contextually, FWH should not be copied from one organization or country to another due to social and cultural differences. Based on the analysis of the relevant literature about FWH in the Middle East, particularly Saudi Arabia, it found limited empirical-based evidence studies are exploring and investigating the FWH's social and non-social factors, such as life and family, affecting productivity. This present research seeks to address this contextual knowledge gap. For example, empirically and contextually, the findings of this research will help organizations, in particular Saudi organizations, by taking employees' issues into consideration during the design and implementation of FWH to ensure it overcomes these employees' related antecedents.

Review of literature

Conceptualization and types of FWH. Arrangements for flexible working hours (FWH) are '*reciprocally advantageous accords*' that employees and organizations enter into to enhance the productivity of employees and produce higher profitability for organizations (Ramakrishnan and Arokiasamy, 2019). Conceptually, FWH is known by different names such as, among others, 'Flexible Work Arrangement', 'Flexible Working Time Arrangement', 'Staggered Working Hours', and 'New Ways of Working'. FWH is a positive work feature that permits workers to "... *efficiently reconcile the demands that originate from different life domains*" (Uglanova and Dettmers, 2018). FWH provides employees with a certain element of options regarding when, where, and how long to perform their duties at the workplace (Jeffrey Hill et al., 2008). Uglanova and Dettmers (2018) considered making working hours flexible to be a positive work feature that could facilitate employees to have efficient reconciliation of various demands that originate from their different life domains.

Practically, FWH is perceived by employees as an opportunity to perform their jobs with a choice of where and when to work (Jeffrey Hill et al., 2008). Based on the analysis of FWH literature, there are two common types of FWH practices within organizations. The first is referred to as irregular FWH, which allows employees to complete irregular amounts of tasks over a certain period (Uglanova and Dettmers, 2018). The second is regular FWH refers to daily work where workers can choose their starting and finishing working times (Jeffrey Hill et al., 2008). For this study, the second type of FWH is selected during the investigation, mainly because this type of FWH may affect employees' social and family life.

There is no universally applicable structure of FWH that can be applied to all forms of vocations and organizations. Organizations may, based on individual requirements, choose to use various combinations of different arrangements. Ciarniene and Vienazindiene (2018) found flexible beginning and end of working time to be a form of compressed work week, and flexible vacation to be the most preferred type of FWH. It was also found that employees preferred temporal rather than place flexibility. Pitt-Catsouphes and colleagues (2009) are of the firm conviction that specific types of FWH that are successful in one organization could be ineffective in another. As such, it would be advisable to design FWH based on the unique contextual needs and situations, such as social and cultural needs in a particular, and thus, FWH should not be copied from one organization to another.

FWH's relevant empirical studies. FWH has been the subject matter of empirical examination across the world (e.g., Soga et al., 2022; Austin-Egole et al., 2020; Pavlova, 2020; Guest, 2017; Uglanova and Dettmers, 2018). The benefits of offering FWH to employees are manifold. It has multiple benefits to employees, including reduced work-life conflict, stress, and burnout; better physical and mental health; positive attitude; enhanced levels of performance, efficiency, engagement, effectiveness, and productivity (Mohiya, 2023; Mohiya, 2019; Austin-Egole et al., 2020; Pavlova, 2020). It is also found to facilitate enhanced levels of job execution (Pavlova, 2020).

Another significant benefit is that it functions as an enabler of work-life balance (Shagvaliyeva and Yazdanifard, 2014 and Pitt-Catsouphes et al., 2009). It was also found to significantly reduce fatigue and distractions that could affect productivity (Glass, 2004). A recent study by Ramakrishnan and Arokiasamy (2019) found that FWH arrangements positively influence employee performance.

The earlier notion that working additional hours could help enhance productivity has now been empirically proved wrong (Ruderman et al., 2017). Evidence exists to show that it could adversely affect employee well-being and could create health issues for the employees which could, in turn, impede productivity resulting in decreased effectiveness (Ruderman et al., 2017). Many research HRM studies have indicated that poor employee well-being could result in a multitude of problems including high turnover, reduced performance, and productivity. These findings highlight the need for due and adequate attention given by employers to their employees' well-being.

Mindfulness has been identified as an aspect that is capable of exerting a positive impact on the overall health and wellness of employees (O'Brien, 2018; Lieberman, 2015). As this highlights the importance of mindfulness at the workplace, it is now pertinent to have a discussion on the need for mindfulness at the workplace.

Mindfulness is generally defined to include "... *focusing one's attention in a non-judgmental or accepting way on the experience occurring in the present moment*" (Marlatt and Kristeller, 1999). Mindfulness has been found to result in improved performance and enhanced productivity (Lieberman, 2015; Rossy, 2013; Schooleman, 2014). According to Baer and colleagues (2004), mindfulness facilitates improved self-observation skills which, in turn, could lead to enhanced emotional states and the resultant improved ability to respond skilfully to any situation. Research conducted during the last few decades has found that mindfulness is capable of reducing the adverse impact of many modern stressors at the workplace and acting to increase productivity (Rossy, 2013). It is also found to exert a positive impact on the overall health and wellness of employees (O'Brien, 2018; Ruderman et al., 2017). However, there is limited research to identify the factors of mindfulness that make employees request FWH. This research addresses this knowledge gap by exploring and investigating the factors that affect employees' mindfulness which makes employees demand for FWH.

Family responsibilities, in particular, parenting and childcare found to be one of the factors that make employees request FWH. Munsch (2016) found that childcare is the most important reason for American employees. However, as the present research is conducted in a different country, Saudi, there might be other unexplored reasons behind requesting for FWH. Therefore, this research seeks to address this contextual knowledge by exploring and identifying employees' reasons for demanding FWH in a Saudi organization.

In summary, there are several deficits identified in the HRM studies examined above the theoretical base, clarity of concept and context of FWH, and a general lack of qualitative

methodology, mainly triangulation. Moreover, the substance of FWH's non-work contextual factors from the employees' and social perspectives were neither identified nor examined to find out their impact on productivity. The studies reviewed found to serve areas of the organization; they do not incorporate HR or employees' social issues in the Middle East, specifically Saudi Arabia.

The purpose of the present study is to identify and investigate employees' related and social antecedents of FWH that could contribute towards productivity or the resultant productivity. Unlike other HR studies that mostly focus on organizational issues, the present research heavily focuses on the employees' perspective, mainly because they are the ones who demand FWH for certain needs. Based on this purpose, the research question is framed as:

“What factors related to FWH contribute towards employees' positive attitude to productivity in a Saudi organization?”

The study has been undertaken using a qualitative methodology, which is detailed in the following section.

Methodology

The present study adopts a qualitative approach to address the developed research question. Generally, scientists and philosophers have emphasized that all knowledge is theory-laden (e.g., Guba and Lincoln, 1994) and that all of the methods are theory-driven (Morgan, 1983). Qualitative research is used to enhance the understanding of theoretical knowledge (Parse, 1987). Based on that, SET will be challenged in the present study to identify and investigate the factors of FWH in relation to productivity which can be seen as a resource in SET. This will be achieved using qualitative methodology.

There is a lack of empirical studies using a mixed qualitative methodology to identify the FWH's factors and their impact on productivity. Therefore, this research addresses this methodological gap by using a qualitative approach. Within the context of the current research, a qualitative approach is not only appropriate but also needed. Based on the evaluation of relevant empirical studies, I realize that the approach drawn from the research question and the overall strategy of the research required a need for qualitative triangulation research methods, compared to a quantitative method.

In answering the research question, a mixed triangulation of the qualitative approach seems to be the most appropriate course of action for choosing appropriate methods to collect data (Blaikie, 1991). In considering the advantages of the triangulation approach, proponents of the case for triangulated methods believe that this approach opens up avenues for inquiry, thus allowing researchers to better answer the research question. It is widely agreed that triangulation assists in compensating for the shortcomings of using one single method (Steckler et al., 1992), thus enhancing data quality and producing a richer tapestry of information from which to conclude.

The two triangulated qualitative methods that will be used in the present study are semi-structured interviews and document analysis. The two qualitative methods are equal and parallel which can be viewed as exact equivalents to serve the purpose of the study by addressing the research question. To the best of my knowledge, this is the first research about FWH and productivity in a Middle Eastern organization, particularly Saudi Arabia, that uses two qualitative triangulation methods (cross-sectional and longitudinal), namely: interviews and documentary analysis.

There are several reasons for using these two triangulation methods in this research. Firstly, using the two triangulation

methods to improve objectivity on the limitations of qualitative methodology is low objectivity. As a result, the best way to improve objectivity is to triangulate across multiple fallible perspectives. Secondly, triangulation methods in this present research offer rich data to answer the research question sufficiently. Thirdly, using triangulation of two data sources enhances validity and credibility by cross-examining results from one form of data collection with another. For example, the document contains employees' 278 comments over two years, and thirty-two interviews cover most of the employees' issues about FWH. For this research, the data triangulation can help create greater confidence and confirmation in the overall results of the research (Bogdan and Biklen, 1997).

Fourthly, the two triangulated qualitative methods decrease the researcher's bias (Denzin, 1978). Multiple qualitative methods are employed to the collecting of data as a means of minimizing the common method bias and limitations inherent in each method (Denzin, 1978). For example, unlike semi-structured interviews, the document analysis method used in the current research contains 278 comments written first-hand by employees with no involvement by the researcher, which consequently, decreases the bias. Fifthly, two approaches tend to be available for data collection in research studies: longitudinal and cross-sectional research—this research uses both. The present research, through having data from the document that provides reactions accumulative of employees' reactions over a period of two years, typically fits the description of longitudinal research. For example, the document analysis covers two years and the semi-structured interview covers three months. For the present research, both cross-sectional and longitudinal provide rich accounts of the employees' accumulative experience with FWH in relation to productivity.

The semi-structured interview is a method used to collect data by using a series of questions typically designed to address the research question. It was acknowledged that there was a need to explore deeply into understanding what and how the FWH's social and contextual factors affect employees' productivity. Semi-structured interviews provide the flexibility to probe further when the participants express something of importance to them. The list of interview questions was in English and the interview questions were short, simple, clear, and direct.

Using semi-structured interviews for the present study provides an opportunity to ask interviewees explanatory questions that the document analysis does not cover. Moreover, the use of semi-structured interviews in the present research is aligned not only with the research aim but also with the theoretical lens of SET, mainly the reciprocity process and resources, which were taken into account during the development of interview questions. These theoretical elements of SET were important because the present research is theory-driven.

The documents used in the present study were obtained from a novel source as they were obtained from the internal technological platform containing employees' interactions and discussions about FWH. The organization invited its employees to voluntarily interact with each other and comment about FWH. The document analysis has been produced from the first-hand computerized typewritten comments of employees, with no involvement by the researcher, which minimizes the possibility of bias. All documents contain unabridged text taken verbatim from the platform and unaltered by the researcher. This method is the only study undertaken in Saudi Arabia using this methodology.

“Documents of all types can help the researcher uncover meaning, develop understanding, and discover insights relevant to the research problem” (Merriam, 1988: 118)

The total number of conducted interviews is thirty-two with an average duration of 40 min. Two reasons for conducting thirty-

two interviews with employees. First, from interview number twenty-nine and onwards, most of the information started to become repetitive. Second, the day of the last interview was the expiry date of the permission given by the access company. All interviewees had agreed to the use of an audio recording device in advance before being utilized in the data collection. All of the recordings were subsequently transcribed by the researcher. All of the interviewees are full-time employees working at the company. In addition, all interviews were in English and all interviewees were fluent which helps to avoid any risks of any mistranslation. The semi-structured interviews were conducted in a single period of three months.

For the document analysis, purposive sampling was used to focus on comments written by employees in the document about their needs and demands of FWH. The researcher should analyze the relevance of documents to the research problem and aim. As the received document was divided into subjects/topics that the employees commented on, the researcher focused on the relevant topic which was entitled: "Flexible Work Schedule". This topic is rich as it has 278 comments with an average of 80 words for each comment submitted by one employee which means there are 278 employees participated in the document.

For the present research, the coding process was done manually. Unlike electronic computerized software, manual coding allows the researcher to reflect on analysis (Wicks, 2017). One of the disadvantages of using manual doing, in particular with large datasets, is less efficient or manageable (Saldaña, 2015). As a result, this may lead to missing important aspects of the data. However, for the present research, I spent a large amount of time and effort to organize and read the data multiple times ensuring there are no missing key relevant factors.

"The coding manual for qualitative researchers addresses an important aspect of many qualitative research traditions, the process of attaching meaningful attributes (codes) to qualitative data that allows researchers to engage in a range of analytic processes" (Wicks, 2017:169)

All of the interviews were transcribed by the researcher, ensuring that there were no errors and that the data was accurate. The interviews' transcriptions and documents were used equally weighted and parallel. I read the transcriptions three times to determine that they were free from any mistakes or other possible misinterpretations to ensure that they were sufficient and clear in addressing the research aim and question. The purpose of reading the transcript more than one time is not only for familiarization but also to avoid any possible misinterpretations to ensure a clear understanding of the meaning.

For the present research, the process of analyzing the qualitative data involved: preparation of data; familiarization with data; generating initial codes; collating similar codes into pre-existing or emerging themes; re-reading and reviewing themes that related to the research question; and refining themes. This process was done through creative engagement with the data and following intuition (Mohiya, 2019; Wicks, 2017; Saldaña, 2015; Braun and Clarke, 2006).

Manually, the analysis of interviews was completed through the use of Thematic Analysis (TA) by starting with coding key factors. Through the identified themes, the data will be allowed to capture an explanation of possible reality through evidence, which ultimately helps address the research question sufficiently, as suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006). Through the coding process of TA, the entire data set is used to explore meaningful, frequent, and relevant patterns that emerge (Saldaña, 2015; Braun and Clarke, 2006). A similar approach was applied to the document.

The document contains 278 comments which are remarkably large data to organize, manage, and analyze. However, TA helps

to ease this problem. This method of analysis minimally organizes, describes, and analyses the data set in rich detail. The coding process in the document started by looking for the pre-existing while taking into consideration SET's lens (reciprocity and resources). The researcher's reasons for using a coding of thematic analysis are: that it creates a space of flexibility, identified factors can be applied to this process, it saves time and effort, and it is well-suited to large datasets.

Findings analysis and discussion

The 32 semi-structured interviews and 278 specific comments pertaining to FWH and productivity were identified and subjected to detailed analysis to arrive at the findings. The present study focuses on input from employees since productivity through FWH relies heavily on employee social issues. A consensus was observed among the employees that while FWH is provided by the organization, it would positively contribute towards higher levels of productivity from the side of the employees, thereby pointing towards the general assumption of SET (Nammir et al., 2012; Homans, 1958). The findings of the study show that the vast majority of employees opined that productivity is likely to increase mainly due to FWH offering higher levels of mindfulness and the resultant physical and mental well-being.

The findings of the study have been derived from a rigorous and systematic qualitative approach, wherein earlier literature was thoroughly reviewed, and recommendations of the doyens (e.g., Munsch, 2016; Stone and Hernandez, 2013), in the field were closely followed. The key findings and themes and the identified factors of well-being/mindfulness and quality of time in FWH that affect productivity are presented in Table 1 below, followed by a detailed analysis of each main and sub-factor.

Mindfulness/well-being. The major key themes of mindfulness/well-being that emerged from the literature analysis which could be dealt with by FWH include traffic/transportation, school and children, and medical reasons.

"FWH provides the employee the peace of mind"
Comment#13

"FWH will increase productivity and efficiency because when an employee has less stress he/she can be more efficient and give high productivity"
Comment#53

Each of the mindfulness/well-being's sub-themes is detailed below:

Traffic and transportation. The analysis found that employees perceive traffic and transportation as the major issue that adversely affects productivity. Studies by Askenazy (2004) and Fagnani and Letablier (2004) found that fatigue arising out of commuting could negatively affect the productivity of employees.

Table 1 Factors that influence FWH toward productivity (developed by the author).

Key factors of FWH enhance productivity		Redundancy no.
Mindfulness/well-being	Traffic/Transportation	162
A total of 328 comments	School and Children/Kids	155
	Hospital/Medical	19
	Mid-break	274
Quality of time A total of 432 comments	Morning and evening person	79
	Sleeping and tardiness	73
	Social life	137

The TA revealed that the vast majority of comments (162) show that employees strongly believe that FWH could significantly influence productivity positively, as staggering working hours could help in adjusting their commuting time to be in tune with the normal rush hours. Many studies have pointed towards this possibility (Lister and Harnish, 2011). Stephens and Szajna (1998) found one of the benefits of FWH to be reduced commuter stress. Lister and Harnish (2011) observed that FWH is beneficial to the employees as well as society. While for the employees it could help to provide mindfulness, society as a whole stands to benefit due to fewer drivers on the road during rush hour and the resultant reduced traffic pollution.

During regular working hours, the vast majority of employees are compelled to spend large periods negotiating the traffic before arriving at the workplace. It was also opined by many that during rush hours there is a possible higher risk of accidents. This was found to induce stress in the minds of commuting employees, thus affecting their mental and physical health and well-being and thereby impairing their quintessential productivity and effectiveness. Hurriedness induced due to undue pressure on employees is a major problem in the workplace (Anttila et al., 2015). However, employees are capable of absorbing time pressure to a certain extent. It could also have an impact on employees' emotions and lead to increased stress, fatigue, and exhaustion. There is also the possibility of its after-effects spilling onto family lives, thereby having adverse consequences on performance (Voydanoff, 2004). A few comments expressed by the employees about FWH and traffic are presented below:

"FWH will help both the employee and company, especially at this time, due to peak traffic and the long time that the employee is required to spend getting to work locations. It will reduce traffic and allow more time to get from/to work and it will increase employee productivity" Comment#43

"To begin with it will eliminate the traffic jams and congestion which we face each morning and evening (hundreds if not thousands using the same road/gates at the same time). FWH will help increase productivity as people will try to focus on work rather than following a timetable." interview#17

"The biggest advantage of FWH is to avoid traffic jams on the roads" interview#8

School and children. The next factor that emerged from the analysis was about school and children. A total of 155 comments were found to be made about school and children. The comments pointed towards the direction that with FWH, the parent employees would be capable of dealing with the stress of dropping and picking up the children, which would both directly and indirectly help in enhancing the level of mindfulness. Many scholars have examined this aspect and found childcare to be one area that would be influenced by FWH (Clarke and Holdsworth, 2017).

The findings of Clarke and Holdsworth (2017), who did extensive work in this area, are that proper childcare is one area that would be facilitated by FWH. This would help employees to be more productive at the workplace. A few comments about school and children which were expressed by the employees in relation to FWH and productivity are presented below:

"Almost all employees have to take their kids to school in the morning before 7:00 AM. This will delay employees arriving at his work location on time and therefore affects his productivity and mode." interview#9

"I agree that starting and ending at a different time (i.e., 7:30 am–4:30 pm, 8:00 am–5:00 pm) increases productivity

and efficiency of the employees, especially for the employees who have kids at school" Comment#79

"Yes, FWH helps the employee with his children by taking them to school during the school period and this extends the social engagement with his children through delivering them to their schools, this one-hour change in schedule time maybe will increase employee productivity and efficiency of the work" Comment#157

Hospital and medical reasons. Opinions (149 comments) were also expressed about the need for FWH to deal with hospital and medical emergencies. Ciarniene and Vienazindiene (2018) found this aspect to be more gender specific, claiming that women employees stand to benefit considerably if FWH is provided. Further, women need to attend to others' health requirements, not just for their personal health needs. They have to take care of the health requirements of the family (spouse and kids) as well as the extended family (parents and in-laws). Taking the unique collectivist social situation prevalent in Saudi Arabia where extended family is the norm and each family has multiple children, this is of prime importance for working women. Some comments about medical and hospital needs which were expressed by the employees in relation to FWH and productivity are presented below:

"FWH is a great idea as it gives the employee a small space of freedom where he/she can perform other mandatory duties such as attending a hospital appointment." interview#13

"FWH will be of particular benefit for those with families or who have suffered in health." Comment#82

"FWH is an advantage for both employer and employees that have a positive impact on productivity, quality, and efficiency and, in return, on social health" Comment#15

Quality of time. One of the advantages of qualitative research, particularly document analysis, is it provides the flexibility to interrogate the data to allow new patterns or themes to emerge from the analysis that have not been discovered in the literature (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Thus, a new major theme and sub-themes that emerged and were coded based on the theoretical lens of the SET were grouped and termed as 'quality of time'. Quality of time has been found to be of paramount importance rather than the quantity of time spent at the workplace by Puech and Durand (2017). Better quality of time has the potential to positively influence engagement and increase the productivity of employees (Mohiya, 2019; Askenazy, 2004; Fagnani and Letablier, 2004). The new sub-themes that emerged from the study under this domain include breaks for lunch, sleeping and tardiness, and night/morning people. They are detailed in the following sub-sections.

"The bottom line is to have an employee performing his/her duties with quality and promptly, while maintaining a good balance between work and family" Comment#301

Mid-break. The factor that received the highest number of frequencies regarding FWH and productivity was mid-break. These employees were of the strong conviction that having continuous work time and avoiding a break in between would be advantageous to them in many ways. This could help them to have a late lunch with their family members, thereby making it possible to spend more quality time with their families. Employees strongly believe that mid-break during regular working hours has a

negative impact on their productivity. This is a new finding that has emerged from the study.

Previous literature has not examined this point, which highlights the possibility of FWH enabling employees to produce high-quality and mindful work and resultant productivity for them and the organization. As stated by Braun and Clarke (2006), it is the advantage of TA that it permits new patterns or themes to emerge from the data. The present study has thus made a new contribution to FWH literature that employees perceive mid-break as an impediment towards mindfulness and the resultant productivity and they prefer to avoid it. Some examples of those comments are presented below:

“I would prefer to work without one one-hour break. Productivity after the break is less than before.” interview#19

“If we talk about productivity, we should redesign the work with no breaks.” Comment#258

“I agree to make the work schedule without lunchtime. I believe it will increase productivity.” Comment#203

Morning and evening. In many developed countries, free evenings associated with temporal and spatial flexibility are now a common practice (Fagan et al., 2012). They consider this as a transition from the rest of the industrial regime to the recent “... *post-industrial working-time regime*” (Anttila et al., 2015). This new regime provides for various FWH options like diversification concerning the length and pattern of working time, “... work intensity and time squeeze”, as well as narrowing down the boundaries between work and leisure time (Rubery et al., 2005). Some comments that were expressed by the employees in relation to FWH and productivity are presented below:

“FWH schedules are something the company should consider in this day and age. Some have different needs and some have different times during the day that they have peak or slump periods. Not everyone is a morning person and many have issues with this which is reflected by a wasted number of hours the person does not even get started with actual work until he/she is alert. Giving a flexible time would let the person start at his own pace” Interview #14

“The normal person’s active mental and physical productivity starts at the early morning hrs till noon time.” Comment#153

“Allows people to work [at a time] that they accomplish the most, feel their freshest and enjoy working (e.g., morning person vs. night person).” interview#24

“Each person has a different time when he/she is most productive. For me, as such, I become more productive during the evening time and least productive during the early morning.” Comment#146

The analysis of the data found 79 participants about the advantages of working either in the morning or evening. These employees expressed their opinion that FWH which permits the option to work either morning or evening time would help in bringing in the required mindfulness and the resultant productivity. This substantiates the findings of Ruderman et al. (2017), who observed that providing temporal flexibility would deliver employees the opportunity for rejuvenation and recharging. Further, a form of “... working-time mosaic” has been found by Anttila et al.

(2015) to provide employees with a form of autonomy, which could result in better productivity. Many earlier studies have also identified a positive relationship between temporal flexibility and various aspects related to the time available for personal, family, and social life (Bianchi and Milkie, 2010), wellness, and health.

Sleeping and tardiness. As many as 73 employees commented that FWH which is capable of offering better sleeping patterns and higher energy could result in higher levels of productivity. Many studies, for instance, Ciarniene and Vienazindiene (2018) and Williams (2010), found that the lack of proper sleep and tardiness would result in reduced mindfulness. Glass (2004) found that fatigue and distractions could be significantly reduced and productivity enhanced through allowing temporal FWH. This aspect has unique applicability in Saudi society, which is highly collectivist in nature (Mohiya, 2021). Many previous studies have identified the uniqueness of Saudi society in various aspects including culture and tradition (Mohiya, 2023; Mohiya, 2021; Alessa, 2017; Algumzi, 2017).

“I believe FWH is necessary from my viewpoint. Sleep deprivation impacts productivity without a doubt and could cause serious traffic accidents for those who commute.” Interview#5

“Needless to say, inadequate sleeping time will have an adverse effect not only on productivity levels” Comment#95

“FWH gives employees the flexibility to select their schedule based on their circumstances, and this surely will impact the productivity of employees once they feel that they can satisfy their desires through selection of the time they sleep and the time they work and the time they allocate for their families and obligations.” Interview#23

“FWH increases productivity and efficiency or will it have a positive improvement on employees by avoiding traffic and tiredness” Comment#171

Social life. A total of 137 employees believe that FWH would offer a better social life. Saudi society has various unique aspects including the value it assigns to social life and the prevalent collectivist culture (Alessa, 2017; Algumzi, 2017; Hofstede et al., 2008). According to Hofstede (2008), collectivists stress the “we” rather than “I”. They rely heavily on maintaining group harmony and welfare, ahead of the individual. Evidence show that Saudi Arabia ranks high in collectivism as they value traditional customs and societal values (Long, 2005). From the analysis, it is found that employees have a view that FWH would offer the employees the opportunity for better quality time with their family and friends, as well as meeting their social requirements. A few comments expressed by the employees about FWH and productivity are presented below:

“Starting at 7:00 is not practical for employee productivity since the current lifestyle is different than what it was years ago. A big percentage of people stay late at night to stay in harmony with social life that includes friends and family visiting, shopping, keeping that at night time to relax at day time after work” Comment#94

“Other benefits might be indirect, like productivity and morale increase as employees will be able to work during the hours that fit their personal life and style.” Comment#88

“I think it is a great idea. FWH will allow employees to work with less conflict with other life commitments.” Comment#218

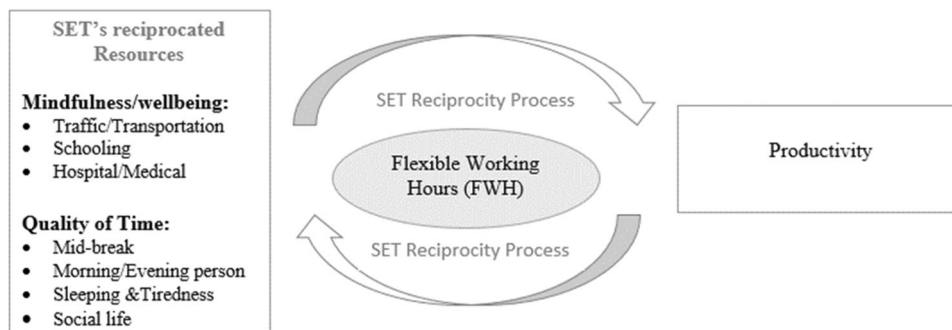


Fig. 1 Conceptual Model. Conceptual model based on SET (developed by the researcher).

"It provides better work/ life balance for employees and allows them to manage their own time in a better way which will eventually increase productivity." Interview#4

The findings of the study are in perfect alignment with SET. As early as 1959, Thibaut and Kelley propounded that parties who are involved in the exchange process weigh the benefits and costs of achieving a particular goal, which determines the level of commitment and satisfaction towards the particular relationship. In the organizational context, SET expounds the exchange of resources between two parties in the form of 'imperfect' markets through a social process. Thus resources, irrespective of their tangibility, enable interactions or relationships between the parties (Nammir et al., 2012). In the present research, the employees expressed their willingness to exchange positive attitudes and the resultant productivity for FWH from the side of the employer. Through the theoretical lens of SET and based on the analysis of the findings, the below model was developed (Fig. 1).

Research contributions and limitations

The present work contributes substantially to academic and corporate research: empirically, theoretically, and methodologically. From the analysis of results, this research revealed significant theoretical contributions, mainly regarding the reciprocity process of social exchange (the so-called 'Black Box'). Social exchange theory is one of the most influential theories in HRM (Cropanzano et al., 2017; Cropanzano, Mitchell, 2005; Saks, 2006). Although FWH is more related to employees' social lives, there is a very limited number of HRM studies about FWH based on a social theory. This research takes SET to a new and different context, FWH with relation to productivity. The theoretical analysis of the present research findings has found that most of the antecedents of FWH that affect employees' productivity are social issues. This supports the earlier justifications regarding the choice of SET as a theoretical foundation.

The analysis of the findings of this study makes several theoretical contributions. First, this research has contributed to theoretical knowledge about the process of the social exchange "black box" in general, and within the FWH context in particular. The exploration of the "process" of reciprocity of social exchange has been neglected in the HRM literature. Several scholars have stressed a strong need for theoretical knowledge regarding the process of reciprocity "black box" of social exchange (Cropanzano and Mitchell, 2005). The analysis of the present research has found that the lack of providing recourses (social factors) negatively affects the reciprocity process which ultimately affects productivity. In other words, effective reciprocity is based on the continuous of exchanging needed resources. The research found effective reciprocity needs to be supported and facilitated smoothly.

The second significant SET's theoretical contribution concerns how transactions/interactions in the FWH context are generated.

Cropanzano and Mitchell (2005: p. 876) say of the generation of social interaction in the workplace: "The process begins when at least one participant makes a 'move', and if the other reciprocates, new rounds of exchange initiate". The analysis of the findings found that employer's neglecting employees' demands about FWH affect their productivity. As the relationship depends on the reciprocal interactions of the employees, employees' productivity is found to be contingent on the employer's action to reciprocate employees' FWH social needs with the resources that the employee expects to receive.

The research also makes a new methodological contribution. The first methodological original contribution is that the two methods used in the present research combined longitudinal and cross-sectional designs. The document analysis method covered a two-year period (longitudinal) which helped to address the research question, in particular. On the other hand, semi-structured interviews (cross-sectional) were conducted over three months. These two approaches tend to be available for data collection in research studies: longitudinal and cross-sectional research, but this research uses both. The present research, however, through having data from the document that covered multiple points in time.

Second, the present research draws on exceptionally rich data which were explored deeply through two qualitative methods (triangulation methods). As a result, several interesting and new themes emerged from the findings. For example, document analysis is relevant to the present research and contains 278 first-handed computerized typewritten comments by employees with no involvement from the researcher, which consequently decreases the subjectivity and researcher's bias. Third, these two qualitative triangulated methods were interrogated to allow several key themes to emerge from the data which contribute to the body of literature. The new sub-themes that emerged from the study under the quality of time include midday breaks, sleeping and tardiness, and night/morning people. For example, midday was found to be one of the new results of the FWH study that significantly impacted productivity. The relevance of this method to FWH itself is something that is not easily viable with quantitative methods.

Empirically, the results of this research help HR practitioners in the Middle East, particularly in Saudi Arabia because FWH is contextual taking into consideration employees' social aspects. HR practitioners in the Middle East, particularly in Saudi Arabia, could benefit from the identified factors of FWH that this research has produced and applied. The implication of the results of this research will help organizations, in particular Saudi organizations, to make sure the design and implementation of the FWH program contribute to overcoming these employees' related antecedents

The first limitation of the present research relates to the cultural issues. Hence, it might be argued that the results may be unique to the Saudi organization, or may not apply to other cultures and countries. Second, the empirical findings cannot be generalized because they are based on a single organization in Saudi; therefore,

a comparison of two or more organizations would offer a general understanding and identification of undiscovered and common factors of FWH that affect productivity. Third, future studies could be undertaken in a broad cross-sectional of multiple types of organizations and industries in different countries. Such HRM studies would undoubtedly provide further interesting results that could be beneficial for employers and employees. The outcomes of these HRM studies would also contribute substantially to the bountiful HRM literature on FWH.

Despite the present work being the outcome of research conducted in a single corporation, it does facilitate the drawing up of multiple general inferences in a unique and undiscovered context, Saudi Arabia, regarding the need and demand for FWH among employees. It also provides some implications to HR managers for implementing FWH. Being the first such study to be conducted in the Middle East, and especially in Saudi Arabia, it has enabled the exposition of the region and culture-specific aspects of FWH. The employees strongly perceive that FWH would benefit them in multiple ways. Further, the employees are of the strong conviction that FWH will enhance their mindfulness and the quality of their time for higher organizational productivity. It is expected that the present work will act as a trigger for further in-depth studies in this area.

Data availability

The datasets generated during and/or analyzed during the current study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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Author contributions

MM made his contributions in conceptualization, designing methodology, investigation, supervision, visualization, writing the original draft, analyzing the data, and project administration.

Competing interests

The author declares no competing interests.

Ethical approval

The ethical issues were seriously taken into account during the research process with the purpose of maintaining integrity and ensuing compliance with Ethics Committee requirements at King Khalid University. In the present research, all of the participants' information were anonymous.

Informed consent

Informed consent was obtained from all participants. To reduce any potential concerns, the initial email sent to the accessed company to forward it to prospective interviewees

clearly mentioned the purpose of the research and asked receivers to read the plain language statement along with the consent form. Additionally, the email also included a confidentiality statement. The email also stated that the interviewees' information would remain confidential and used solely for the purposes of the study. All participants were asked whether they consented voluntarily to be a participant in this study. They were told they could refuse to answer any question and could withdraw from the study at any time, without needing to justify their decision and without prejudice. From the received document analysis, it was impossible to determine how each individual (employee) has participated as the commenters' names and information are completely anonymous, including their job titles.

Additional information

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