

## Flexible Workforce Management. An exploratory Study

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**Abstract.** A flexible workforce is a key competitive advantage to deal with a constantly changing environment, such as order fluctuations and filling knowledge gaps due to a shortage of skilled staff. So far, only few empirical results are available on how companies successfully manage the “Flexible Workforce”. In the present exploratory study, we examine the flexible workforce practice and management in Swiss organisations using a quantitative approach. Data were collected through an online survey, in which 224 HR professionals of Swiss companies took part. The results suggest that organisations engaging in a flexible workforce benefit from outcomes like dealing with peaks in workload, filling knowledge gaps, implementation of new ideas and succession planning. The extent to which companies can benefit from the use of a flexible workforce depends, among other things, on the complexity of the tasks and organisational characteristics such as the culture of trust and the practice of knowledge management.

**Keywords:** Flexible Workforce Management · Contingent Worker · External Flexibility · Survey

### 1 Introduction

The world of business is changing and the shape of the workforce with it [1]. Organisations must be flexible to be successful in the fourth industrial revolution. Organisations change to become more flexible and in order for organisations to be flexible, a flexible workforce might be a good option [2].

Already since the mid-70s [3], organisations have been interested in flexible organisations and alternative work arrangements to face challenges like uncertainty, technological change like the spread of the internet, globalisation or market stagnation [4-6]. Back then, Lynch [5] claimed organisational flexibility is not an option but a necessity. This is still true more than 30 years later. Flexibility gains momentum in the course of the debate about so-called “megatrends” [7]. Technology, demography and globalisation are drivers for the future of work [6] and underlie the need for organisations to have greater flexibility of employment systems [8]. Organisations see flexibility potential increasingly within the organisation’s human resources [9]. A sustainable fit in dynamic and competitive environments can only be achieved by a flexible organisation,

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which is also part of strategic HRM to promote [10]. Kalleberg [8] further emphasises the importance of human resources practices that enable organisations to adapt quickly to social and economic changes.

At the same time, there are not only positive but also negative voices with regards to flexibility [11]. The concept of flexibility is discussed controversially in terms of negative effects on employees and society [12]. Part of the problem might be the wide use of the term flexibility and lack of specification or assuming only one-sided benefits [12]. Paradoxically, flexibility from the organisations' perspective might lead to restrictions from the employee's perspective and vice versa [11]. There is a distinction between having flexibility or being flexible [13], with typically the organisation having flexibility and the employee being flexible [11]. Reilly [12] argues that of course there are some areas with benefits for one side only, however, there are also areas where benefits for both parties exist, for example multi-skilling: Organisations may benefit from improved productivity and employees from enhanced skills [12].

Yet, there is still only little research on flexibility strategies resulting in mutual advantages for both employees and organisations.

The aim of the present study with an exploratory character is to gain insights into labour flexibility strategies of Swiss organisations, analysing potential flexibility benefits and dipping deeper into success factors for the management of a blended workforce. The results of the study might provide a starting point for HR professionals to strengthen flexible workforce practice in Swiss organisations.

## 2 Flexible Workforce

### 2.1 Strategies of Labour Flexibility

Flexibility can be described as “a firm's abilities to respond to various demands from dynamic competitive environments” [14]. It is the ability of a firm to adapt to environmental changes by quickly reconfiguring activities and resources [10]. Based on this definition and from an organisational perspective, labour flexibility relates to the allocation of the workforce in accordance with varying requirements of production and customers [11]. For an organisation to be flexible, a flexible workforce might be a good option [2]. Researchers have focused on two different flexible labour utilisation strategies [8]: internal vs. external flexibility [15] functional vs. numerical flexibility [4,12], organisation-focused vs. job-focused [16] or resource vs. coordination flexibility [14]. Either organisations focus on the ability of employees to perform a variety of different jobs or limit the involvement of employees within the organisation by hiring temporary employees [8]. Coordination flexibility, external flexibility, job-focus flexibility or numerical flexibility describe the use of external employment to enhance firm performance and allow organisations to reconfigure, resynthesize and redeploy human capital as needed [17]. Resource flexibility, internal flexibility, organisation-focused or functional flexibility describe the flexibility based on the existing pool of human resources in an organisation [9] and the encouragement of employees to adopt to expandable work roles [18]. It is about enhancing employees' skills to perform a variety of different jobs [8].

Workforce planning appears to be one of the top challenges for organisations [19] and labour flexibility became an increasingly important research topic in the past years [20].

## 2.2 The Flexible Firm

In the past, studies primarily focused on either one or the other flexible labour utility strategy [8]. Concerning functional flexibility, scholars described correlates of high-performance work systems [8] as well as positive outcomes on labour productivity and innovation performance of organisations [21], and reduced involuntary and voluntary turnover [15]. However, organisations seem to prefer numerical flexibility [21]. Research on numerical flexibility was mainly about cost reduction and increased competitiveness through externalisation [8] or effects on employees [22-25]. However, only a few studies focused on the interplay between functional and numerical flexibility [8] like the “flexible firm”. The “flexible firm” or the core-periphery model is the most popular model combining both flexibility strategies and was introduced by Atkinson [4]. However it is criticised for mainly focusing on an accurate representation of numerical and functional flexibility and for being too narrow [8]. In addition, it meets mainly the needs of organisations with many low-skilled but not high-skilled employees [26]. There are other studies regarding blended workforce models [27,10] but these are criticised for primarily focusing on economic benefits for organisations [11].

## 2.3 Flexible Employees

In 2019, more than 26 million employees in the European Union were temporary employees [28]. Temporary engagement as part of flexible work arrangements are likely to play an increasingly important role in the future [29]. However, labour market theorists are sceptical about this development [30]. The accusation arises that in case of flexible employment relationships, contingent workers bear the costs in the form of fragile employment biographies [25]. The loss of stability, short-term employment, uncertain future prospects and financial uncertainties are seen as problematic [31]. On the other side it is argued that contingent work does not necessarily lead to precarious biographies [32,30]. Contingent employment plays an important role concerning labour market integration [7,33] and reduces the risk of long-term unemployment [32]. Flexible work is trendy and an increasing number of employees consciously decide to work as contingent workers [34].

Overall, the research focus of flexibility strategies seems to be more on the employee side and less on the organisational side [19]. Besides the studies about organisational flexibility from an organisational perspective and concerning the “flexible firm”, a large body of research about organisation flexibility focused on the socio-economic level and dealt mostly with discussions about flexibility and precarious employment [35,36,12,13,23,37]. In addition, platform economy and gig economy are among the very trending research topics [38-40] in terms of numerical flexibility.

Yet, there is only limited research on flexible workforce strategies and practices, especially with a focus on Swiss organisations.

With the present study, we intend to examine the flexible workforce management of Swiss organisation to make a first, exploratory step to close the research gap. Within the framework of this study, we start by focusing on external flexibility. The study was guided by the question of how Swiss companies deploy contingent workers in the company, what strategies they are following in this regard and what advantages they can benefit from.

### **3 Method**

#### **3.1 Sample**

In total, the final sample included 224 participants indicating that they work with contingent workers in their organisation: 66% females and 34% males contributed to the study. 80% of the participants worked in HR, 22% were members of the Management Board, owner or CEO of the company and 10% worked in another division of the company (multiple answers possible). 41% of the respondents indicate their function as HR Director, 16% as HR Manager, 12% as Managing Director and 12% as HR Business Partner, 11% as HR Specialist and 8% work in other functions. With regards to professional experience, 49% have more than 20 years, 34% have 10 to 20 years and 9% have 8 to 10 years of professional experience. Due to this response, it is assumed that the respondents are experts in the respective companies and were able to give well-founded information about the management of the flexible workforce in their organisations. Slightly more than half of the respondents (53%) work in large companies (250 and more employees), 23% in medium-sized enterprises (50-249 employees) and 12% each in small (10-49 employees) and micro enterprises (1-9 employees).

#### **3.2 Measures**

The questionnaire included almost 70 content-related questions about flexible workforce management and 10 questions regarding descriptive data. Since we did not find adequate scales measuring a flexible workforce, new items have been formulated. The survey was split into four parts: the deployment of contingent workers, the Flexible Workforce Management, the integration, collaboration, leadership and culture contingent workers face in the organisations, as well as advantages organisations benefit from by working with a contingency workforce.

#### **3.3 Procedure**

The University of Applied Sciences Northwestern Switzerland FHNW conducted the study in cooperation with HR Today, the largest Swiss HR magazine. Data gathering was obtained through a questionnaire distributed to a wide group of HR professionals. The questionnaire was distributed in summer 2020. Participants of the given random

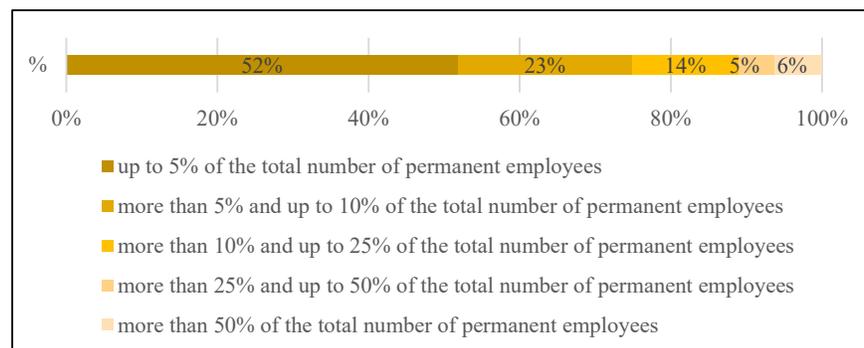
sample completed the questionnaire online through an online survey service. The survey was promoted through HR Today, social media channels and business networks. The survey was distributed to subscribers of the HR Today newsletter, through social media channels and company networks. Furthermore, the survey was sent to alumni of selected further education programmes of the University of Applied Sciences Northwestern Switzerland FHNW.

## 4 Results

To describe the results, different types of statistical indicators and forms of visualisation were used, such as frequencies, tables and charts. To determine the correlations, we performed bivariate correlations (Spearman correlation tests). All statistical analyses were performed using IBM SPSS software. The tables and diagrams were created in Microsoft Excel. Prior to the assessment of the data, we reverse-coded negatively keyed items.

### 4.1 Descriptive Statistics

Descriptive results indicate that most of the surveyed organisations work with a very small number of contingent workers (see Figure 1). More than half of the participants (52%) indicate that only 5% or less are contingent workers in their organisation. In 23% of the companies, between 5% and 10% additional contingent workers work there. Only a small proportion of the respondents (6%) work with more than 50% contingent workers in addition to their permanent workforce. Three quarters of these are small or micro enterprises.



**Fig. 1.** Number of contingent workers in addition to the total number of permanent employees (N=191).

The majority of companies hire contingent workers for complex tasks (77%). 57% of the respondents benefit from contingent workers for simple tasks. In 34% of the cases, participants indicate that contingent workers handle both simple and complex tasks. Figure 2 indicates that most of the companies engage contingent workers for project-related assignments as well as for specialised tasks. In 47% of the companies, contingent workers form a continuous part of the organisational workforce.

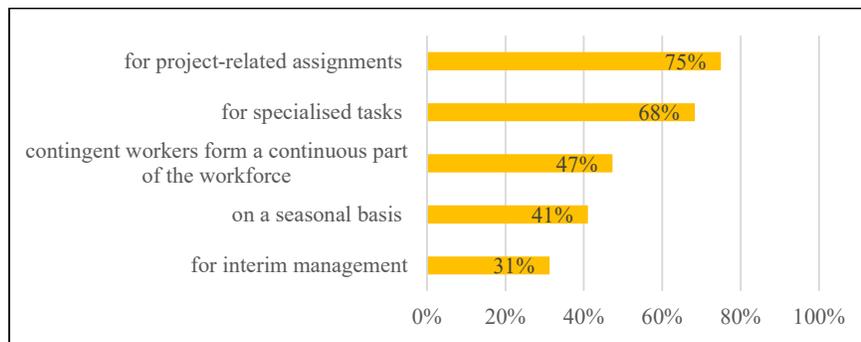


Fig. 2. Tasks for which contingent workers are deployed (N=224; multiple answers possible).

Companies working together with contingent workers benefit from different advantages (see Figure 3). For 81% of the companies, the main benefit is dealing with workload peaks. Filling of knowledge or skills gaps is also an important reward of contingent workers (more than 50% agreement). Remarkably, the reduction of personnel costs through contingent workers does not seem to be a central advantage for a large part of the surveyed companies. Furthermore, respondents were asked about the implementation of new ideas and about the selection of employees from the contingent worker pool. For these questions, the results are rather balanced.

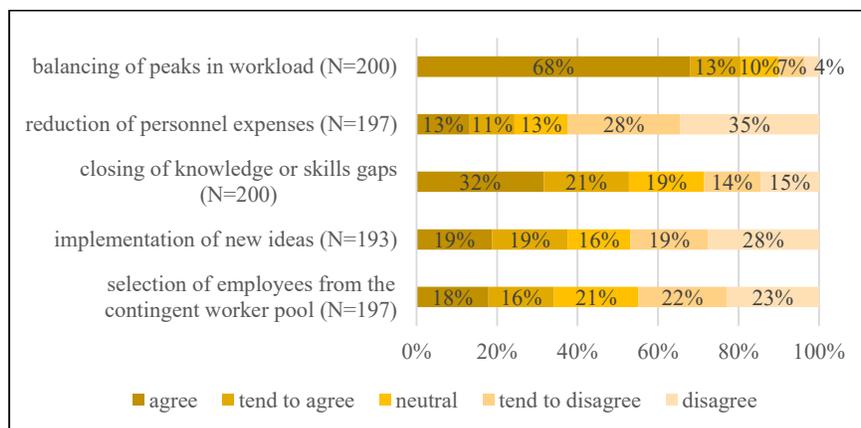


Fig. 3. Advantages through the deployment of contingent workers.

## 4.2 Bivariate Correlations

In addition to descriptive statistics, we investigated correlations between the above presented benefits and conditions of the company like task complexity level, organisational characteristics, and instruments.

### Type of Task

Depending on how contingent workers are engaged, companies benefit from different advantages. The data shows that companies that use contingent workers for simple tasks can benefit from balancing peaks in workload (see Table 1). Companies that deploy contingent workers for complex or specialised tasks as well as for project-related assignments are more likely to succeed in filling their knowledge and competence gaps and to implement new ideas. The same applies to companies with contingent workers for interim management. In addition to the above-mentioned advantages, these companies are also able to reduce personnel costs and gain contingent workers for succession planning. Companies hiring contingent workers on a seasonal basis mainly succeed in covering workload peaks. The picture is somewhat different for organisations in which contingent workers form a continuous part of the workforce. Except for filling knowledge or skills gaps, these companies benefit from all of the examined advantages.

**Table 1.** Benefits of companies that use a contingent workforce depending on the type of task (Spearman correlations).

Companies that hire contingent workers...	...can benefit from				
	the balancing of peaks in workload	the reduction of personnel expenses	the closing of knowledge or skills gaps	the implementation of new ideas	the selection of suitable employees
...for simple tasks	0.34***				
...for complex tasks			0.50***	0.39***	
...for specialised tasks			0.44***	0.42***	
...for project-related assignments			0.34***	0.34***	
...for interim management		0.17*	0.25***	0.27***	0.21**
...on a seasonal basis	0.31***				
...as a continuous part of the organisational workforce	0.19*	0.21**		0.21**	0.25***

### Organisational Characteristics

The results show that certain organisational characteristics are associated with greater use of benefits (see Table 2). Companies in which employees trust each other and share their knowledge are particularly successful in dealing with workload peaks through contingent workers. Inviting contingent workers to important meetings also seems to be relevant, because it appears to allow knowledge or skills gaps to be covered, as well as implementing new ideas. The same is true in companies that are concerned about keeping the knowledge of contingent workers within the firm.

**Table 2.** Organisational characteristics and how companies benefit from flexible workforce management (Spearman correlations).

Companies in which...	...can benefit from				
	the balancing of peaks in workload	the reduction of personnel expenses	the closing of knowledge or skills gaps	the implementation of new ideas	the selection of suitable employees
...trust between permanent employees is high	0.28***				
...a culture of knowledge sharing exists	0.23**				
...contingent workers are included in important meetings			0.20*	0.20*	
...the knowledge of contingent workers is adequately secured			0.18*	0.23**	

### Instruments for Flexible Workforce Management

In addition to the organisational-specific characteristics, there are also aspects of flexible workforce management that can be influenced by the HRM department (see Table 3). Companies in which the recruitment process for contingent workers is aligned between HRM and other departments succeed in balancing workload peaks. Organisations that have defined processes for the deployment of contingent workers benefit from the same advantage. Companies using tools to identify contingent employees or include contingent workers in personnel planning tools benefit from the reduction of personnel costs. Organisations that have specific employer marketing for contingent workers in place or provide measures to maintain relationships with contingent workers benefit from the same. Surveyed companies who indicate that they have a designated "FlexManager", who is mainly responsible for the management of the Flexible Workforce, can not only reduce personnel costs, but also adjust for peaks in workload. Moreover, they are more successful in gaining contingent workers for permanent positions. The latter advantage also applies to companies that offer contingent workers access to training and further education.

**Table 3.** Instruments for FlexWork Management and how companies benefit from the HR instruments of flexible workforce management (Spearman correlations).

Companies in which...	...can benefit from				
	the balancing of peaks in workload	the reduction of personnel expenses	the closing of knowledge or skills gaps	the implementation of new ideas	the selection of suitable employees
...the coordination between the HRM department and other departments involved in the search for contingent workers is good	0.18*				
...processes for the deployment of contingent workers are defined	0.16*				
...procedures or tools to identify flexible workforce resources are used		0.20*			
...contingent workers are included in personnel planning tools		0.22**			
...an employer marketing programme for contingent workers is carried out		0.18*			
...measures are in place to maintain relations with contingent workers		0.23**			
...there is one person (or several persons) whose main task is flexible workforce management ("FlexManager")	0.19*	0.21**			0.15*
...contingent workers have access to training and further education					0.23**

## 5 Discussion and Conclusion

### 5.1 Strategies and benefits of Flexible Workforce

The current explorative study examined external labour flexibility utilisation patterns in Swiss organisations and intended to investigate effects on organisation-related outcomes. The majority of organisations rely on a flexible workforce. Contingent workers are a consistent part of the workforce, albeit in rather small numbers. In general, organisations profit from dealing with peaks in workload, filling knowledge gaps, implementation of new ideas and succession planning. Interestingly, we found that the benefits depend on the contingent workers' task complexity. We identified two distinct rewards: for low-level tasks, organisations mainly benefit from dealing with peaks in workload. For high-level and complex tasks, organisations take advantage of filling knowledge gaps and implementing new ideas. Even though the reduction of personnel costs seems to be a main reason to hire contingent workers, we did not find evidence that it is also the main benefit. The extent to which companies can benefit from the use of a flexible workforce depends, among other things, on the complexity of the tasks and organisational characteristics such as the culture of trust and the practice of knowledge management.

## 5.2 Implications

Our results indicate that professional flexible workforce management might be necessary to profit from the full potential of a flexible workforce. We highly recommend organisations to think beyond existing models and to develop an integrated view regarding HR strategies and processes for managing a blended workforce including the idea to introduce a designated “FlexManager”, who is responsible for the management of a flexible workforce.

With regard to HR practices, we propose that a success factor for a flexible workforce practice resulting in benefits for both organisations and employees might be a holistic management of the blended workforce including an integrated view on workforce planning and HR processes.

Contingent employees might benefit from such an approach because it would include contingent workers in organisational processes, developing instruments for the management of contingent workers and establishing a culture and environment where contingent workers feel trusted, included and welcomed. This might also improve the employability of contingent workers.

## 5.3 Limitations and Future Research

There are limitations to this study that guide future research. The exploratory character of the study was important to get a very general idea about flexible workforce practices of HR professionals in Swiss organisations. However, the exploratory design is also a limitation of our study since it does not allow for the generalisability of claims. Further research would benefit from a more hypothesis-driven quantitative approach to investigate the effects of a flexible workforce management on organisational and psychological outcomes.

Second, we only focused on one of the two flexible labour utility strategies: external flexibility. Further research would benefit from also including internal flexibility and a focus on the interplay between both strategies.

In addition, we suggest further investigating and identifying indicators allowing a flexible workforce risk and opportunity assessment from both perspectives, flexible employees and organisations. A currently launched research project explores these issues in companies in the finance, health care and mobility sector.

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