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Balance between work and life: A qualitative study of German contract workers

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Work-family interface;
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Summary In recent years, the number of contract workers has increased considerably – especially in the IT sector and the media sector. There is some evidence that the specific characteristics of contract working have consequences for the work-life balance of contract workers. However, there is a lack of empirical research on these consequences. This article reduces the existing research gap by presenting findings of an exploratory study of contract workers. These findings show that on the one hand contract working is challenging the individual work-life balance when it comes to long working hours, absences from home due to travel and flexibility requirements regarding time and place of work. On the other hand, for some individuals contract working offers the possibility to work flexibly with regard to time and place and therefore enables a better reconciliation of work and private life. These results suggest that a differentiated evaluation of the consequences of contract working for work-life balance, in which the specifics of the sector, demographic characteristics and working conditions (e.g. flexibility requirements) are considered, is necessary.

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1. Introduction

Far-reaching structural changes in organising work can be observed in recent years. Companies are changing their personnel structures by replacing their permanent workforce with atypical employees, or by awarding contracts to contract workers. Thus, temporarily required manpower is employed on a short-term basis and no longer integrated permanently into the company (Broschak, Davis-Blake, & Block, 2008, p. 4). Flexible forms of employment especially

exist in knowledge-intensive sectors where new and creative knowledge can be bought short term in the form of services by contracting with external specialists who act as contract workers. Through such flexibilisation, companies hope to be able to better adapt to changing market situations and to realise savings potentials (Storey, Quintas, Taylor, & Fowle, 2002, p. 2).

These structural changes also apply to the German employment market, which contrary to the liberal market economies of the US or the UK, is strongly regulated by laws and institutions (e.g. trade unions), and where most employees still work in permanent employment (unlimited full-time employment of employees subject to directives from the company). However, gradual deregulations open

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the way for flexible employment forms which are used by companies for flexibility reasons. As a result, the German employment market is undergoing profound change, which is reflected in particular in the increase of flexible employment forms and the simultaneous reduction in permanent employment. Studies by the Federal Statistical Office show that between 2000 and 2010, the number of standard and permanent employment contracts fell by 3% to a total of 66%, while the number of atypical forms of employment increased by 33%. The number of self-employed increased as well by 15% in this period. While the number of self-employed with employees remained relatively constant, the number of solo self-employed persons (self-employed without employees) increased by 28% (Destatis, 2012a). The growth in self-employment in Germany can thus be attributed in particular to the increase in solo self-employment, which includes contract workers. A further increase in the number of contract workers is also predicted for the future.

As is currently being discussed by academics and in the press, the flexibilisation of employment forms has effects not only at the company level, but also at the individual level (e.g. Batt, Christopherson, Rightor, & van Jaarsveld, 2000; Beutell, 2007; Davis & Kalleberg, 2006; Henninger & Gottschall, 2007; Kossek, Lautsch, & Eaton, 2006; Süß & Kleiner, 2010). Individuals who work in a flexible form of employment are confronted more quickly and more often with new workplaces, conditions and locations. This affects contract workers in particular, who work as solo self-employed persons parallel for different clients on projects, which are temporary and may also be in different locations and therefore have to be flexible with regard to time and location. Consequently, they experience a loss of stability that results among other things from the short-term nature of the work, uncertain future perspectives and financial insecurity. Stability is reduced in the private sphere as well, because long-term planning is made considerably more difficult through project work. At the same time, possible absence from home increases the necessity to make arrangements with family and friends. Coordination of the discontinuities of (professional) life that result from project work thus becomes one of the central problems of everyday life.

Parallel to the flexibilisation of the employment market, discussions have increased greatly in recent years in research, politics and society on the challenges and significance of the compatibility of work and life (work-life balance) (e.g. Abendroth & Dulk, 2011; Blair-Loy, 2009; Darcy, McCarthy, Hill, & Grady, 2012; Ford, Heinen, & Langkamer, 2007; Whitehead, Korabik, & Lero, 2008). Work-life balance is not a new subject. However, the flexibilisation of employment forms and societal changes represent new challenges for individuals and underline the current importance of the question of how the main life areas of work, family and leisure time can be coordinated to meet individual preferences (Hildebrandt & Littig, 2006, pp. 215–219; Parcel, 2006). For example, the increasing number of women in employment, and in self-employment, is important here. In addition, there are changing family constellations, such as dual-career couples. The career orientation of both partners poses questions regarding their responsibilities for family and household, which can result in (time) conflicts (Aryee & Luk, 1996; Hammer,

Cullen, Neal, Sinclair, & Shafiro, 2005; Parcel, 2006). Moreover, as a consequence of demographic changes, new obligations arise in the form of care for older family members, which can be emotionally burdening and time-consuming. Along with these challenges, new technical developments facilitate constant availability, which is combined with an erosion of the boundaries between work and private life (Whitehead, 2008, p. 22). In the same way, new information and communication technologies enable decoupling from the workplace in terms of time and location. On the one hand, these technologies can lessen the need for travel, thus enabling career and family/household responsibilities to be combined more easily. On the other hand, social relationships with colleagues, which can reduce stress and thus contribute to a better work-life balance, become less intensive when people work from home.

In spite of the increasing interest of academics in work-life balance, reflected in the number of publications, up to now the discussion has tended to neglect contract workers. There are studies considering the health consequences of contract working (Ertel et al., 2005; Siebecke, 2010). However, questions concerning the work-life balance of the increasing number of contract workers have not yet been tackled. This is surprising because contract workers represent a large and relevant employment group that can be expected to grow further in the future. Moreover, the discussion on work-life balance is particularly relevant for contract workers, because their greater need for flexibility coupled with reduced stability compared to permanent employees creates special challenges in trying to achieve compatibility between working life and private life. Against this background, our paper discusses an explorative empirical examination of the work-life balance of contract workers. An explorative approach is necessary because to date little is known about the work-life balance of contract workers. In Section 2, the much used, but not clearly defined concepts “contract worker” and “work-life balance” are discussed in more detail. Section 3 then analyses the findings of the exploratory study on the work-life balance of contract workers. The discussion focuses particularly on findings related to perceived work-life balance and the expectations that contract workers have with regard to their work-life balance. The paper concludes by identifying future research areas.

2. Key terms

2.1. Contract worker

In Germany, the term “contract worker” has not been clarified either legally or in business terms. The basic feature of the contract worker is independence, whereby they do not have any employees, but work as solo self-employed persons on a project-related basis for various clients – either parallel or in succession. They are sometimes referred to as (independent) contractors (Barley & Kunda, 2006; Bidwell & Briscoe, 2009). Contract workers are awarded a contract for work and services, or a service contract, which regulates the specifics of their work, their pay and other components of the commission. Therefore they are not paid a fixed monthly income, but are compensated exclusively on the

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