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THE FLEXIBLE ORGANISATIONAL BEHAVIOUR OF EMPLOYEES (FOBE): THE RESULT OF EMPIRICAL RESEARCH CONDUCTED IN POLAND

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ABSTRACT

Flexibility constitutes a desired attribute of contemporary organisations. However, organisational solutions aimed at making human capital more flexible are, most often, of a universal nature, which does not take diversity or the needs of particular groups of employees into account. Therefore, to improve the effectiveness of implemented solutions, it appears necessary to precisely identify and describe the flexibility of employees' organisational behaviours. At a theoretical level, the goal of this article is to demonstrate the FOBE notion – the conceptually coherent and methodologically unified description of employees' organisational behaviours at a practical level – to identify differences in the levels of flexible behaviours within particular groups of employees (age, sex, position held). The article presents the results of research conducted in Poland on a sample group of 2274 employees from 40 organisations. The results of this research will be useful from a management practice point of view, by making it possible to better adjust organisational solutions to the specific needs of particular groups of employees.

Key Words: flexibility, organisational behaviour

INTRODUCTION

Alterations in modern organisations have an impact on the way an individual functions while pursuing his/her career. The necessity for a prompt reaction to changes in the environment forces the organisation to apply solutions aimed at making human capital more flexible (Bailey, 1993; Bhattacharya, Gibson and Doty, 2005; Osbert-Pociecha, 2011). Some of these are of a direct nature, and refer to HR policy; others are designed mainly to make organisations more flexible (e.g. by changing the structure or the technology), and have an indirect impact on employees, unquestionably changing the nature of the employee–organisation relationship (Volberda, 1996). Flexibility of an organisation is the factor which determines its competitive advantage, while for an individual it becomes a key characteristic defining the way that individual functions while pursuing his/her career (Bodie, Merton and Samuelson, 1992).

Organisational solutions aimed at making human capital more flexible are usually of a homogenous nature and do not take into consideration the differences with respect to flexibility levels of particular groups of employees (Wright and Snell, 1997). One can expect, though, that flexibility is not of a homogenous nature (Bond, Hayes and Barnes-Holmes, 2006) and is diversified depending on age, sex, position held or seniority. For instance, readiness to alter one's behaviour is different for the employees at the beginning and at the end of their career path. Therefore, the solutions which may prove effective for one group of employees may not bring desired results for another group. A lack of dedicated solutions that take into account these differences may decrease their effectiveness, extend the process of adjusting to them and/or significantly increase the psychological costs which employees' flexible behaviours entail (Januszkiewicz, 2012).

For a better alignment of the solutions, the nature of flexible organisational behaviours should be clearly identified, and differences between the behaviours in particular groups of

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employees according to sex, age and position held should be examined. At a theoretical level, the goal of this article is to use the EZOP concept –the conceptually coherent and methodologically unified description of flexibility of organisational behaviours of employees at a practical level – to identify differences in the levels/inclinations to act flexibly within particular groups of employees (age, sex, position held). This knowledge will be useful from management practice point of view, by making it possible to better adjust organisational solutions to the specific needs of particular groups of employees.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND OF THE EZOP CONCEPT

Within the scope of management sciences, organisational behaviours constitute a specific subject of research, since they combine two essential research perspectives: an organisation and an individual. Difficulties in defining the scope in a homogenous way are reflected in definition variants, so in terms of the concept analysed, the scope of the research was narrowed to *employees' organisational behaviours*, meaning individuals employed in an organisation (contrary to individuals working in accordance with the new career paradigm, who maintain no relations with an organisation on a permanent basis), whereas the subject of the research refers to organisational behaviours of the employees, narrowed to flexible behaviours.

Organisational behaviours

The EZOP concept defines organisational behaviours as the behaviours of an individual in a situation of work² as a result of the impact of internal factors (factors on the individual side) and external factors (factors on the organisation side):

- Internal factors refer to the development of individual-specific patterns of behaviours, determined by psychological variables (personality, temper, intelligence, cognitive processes, emotions and motivation) as well as biographical-professional variables; and
- External factors refer to organisation-specific working conditions, which are determined by an organisational environment in a broad perspective.

These interactions are of bilateral nature, but the strength and the direction of the correlation are defined as the case may be, giving these behaviours different attributes (Ivancevich, Konopaske and Matteson, 2011; Robbins and Judge, 2013; Feldman and Pentland, 2003). Flexibility is one such attribute.

Flexibility as an attribute of organisational behaviour

Flexibility as an attribute of organisational behaviour refers to the way individuals deal with changes, which either results in maintaining the position held by an employee or developing the employee within the scope of potential he/she possesses, as well as within the potential of the organisation itself. A few important features of this definition are worth highlighting:

- Flexibility does not possess any value judgment; one cannot objectively determine whether high flexibility is better than low flexibility. The value of an action is provided by the reference point; an employee acting flexibly in a situation of change may be a very valuable resource for the organisation, but an individual who is susceptible to frequent changes may bear high psychological costs;
- Flexibility is the way an individual deals with broadly understood changes both in the organisational environment and in the individual's life; at subsequent phases of their career path, an individual needs to take up various development challenges, i.e. family-

² In a situation, not a place – since it refers both to individuals who pursue their careers based on the contemporary model, not linked to one organisation or one employment agreement. Differentiating the concepts of “organisational behaviours” and “employees' organisational behaviours” comes as a consequence of changes in the career path model pursued by individuals. In the first case, the subject of the review is the behaviour of an individual in a work situation, providing services *inter alia* for a few employers at the same time. In the second case, the subject of the study are the persons working in a given organisational environment.

life related or referring to defining one's professional identity. In the organisational context, at particular phases of the organisation's life cycle, various types of employees are needed;

- An individual deals with changes in either an adaptive or an evolving way. This means that flexibility of behaviours may result from the reactive actions (responding to changes of the conditions), active actions (playing a role in the process of changes) or proactive actions (creating new conditions) of an individual; and
- Flexibility refers to behaviours of an individual in a situation of work and is subject to determinants resulting either from the potential an individual possesses or from the conditions the organisation creates and the features of the work itself.

Within the EZOP concept, a feature is understood as a hypothetical construction, consistent with the approach of J. Strelau. According to this author, the feature is reflected in behaviour, in the level at which the tasks are executed, in the state of mind and in the natural processes taking place in an organism, although there is more to it than this. The feature is conditioned by internal (innate or learned) mechanisms, but it cannot be limited to such. The feature is the result of a peculiar interaction between multiple internal mechanisms; it has a specific status expressed either in the tendency to act in a certain way, or in the possibility of dealing with specific tasks or solving problems. These tendencies and possibilities, although relatively permanent in nature, innate or learned, can be modified by external circumstances (Strelau, 1987).

Assumptions of the EZOP concept

In terms of organisational behaviours, flexibility should be understood as a kind of *tendency* (readiness) in the behaviour of an individual, for whom organisational environment is the catalyst (or inhibitor). Following this approach, the FOBE concept adopts four basic assumptions:

1. *Flexibility of employees' organisational behaviours is latent.*

Flexibility is a feature of a latent (hidden) type and, unlike the permanent qualities of human behaviour (such as their individual or group-related character), it can be observed in the way an employee acts and, more specifically, in the changes an individual is subject to. Its existence can be proved by the indicators that refer to selected forms of employees' organisational behaviours, which from a behavioural point of view may be consistent with the cognitive and/or emotional components of an individual's attitude towards work.

2. *Flexibility of employees' organisational behaviours is polymorphic.*

Treating flexibility as a general feature of organisational behaviours is too simplistic and an abuse. Both the form and the extent to which an individual participates in the organisational reality can vary. Therefore, it appears opportune to distinguish among four basic forms of behaviours in employees: *task flexibility* (changing the scope of tasks while working), *functional flexibility* (changing the roles taken in an organisation), *time flexibility* (changing the form of employment and/or working arrangements), and *spatial flexibility* (changing the workplace).

3. *Flexibility of employees' organisational behaviours is characterised by polydeterminism.*

An employee's organisational behaviours are influenced by two groups of factors: internal factors, which are related to the qualities an individual possesses, and external factors, which are related to organisational circumstances. Flexibility, when treated as a feature of behaviour, remains influenced by these interactions. In the EZOP concept, flexibility determinants of employees' organisational behaviours are described using features from the following three

categories: an individual (features: sensitivity and stability of behaviours), characteristics of work (features: complexity and diversity of work) and organisational conditions (features: standardisation and formalisation of procedures).

The setting of these factors could be compared to functioning of a force field, the settings of which are changed depending on the situation, which the employee encounters at a time. This volatility is related to understanding flexibility of organisational behaviours in terms of situations, which, unlike the attitude one has for work, refers to a given specific employment and its conditions. Seen from this angle, categories are both of an individual nature (the strength of mutual impacts is specific to a given individual) and of a universal nature (they are characteristic of all flexibility types).

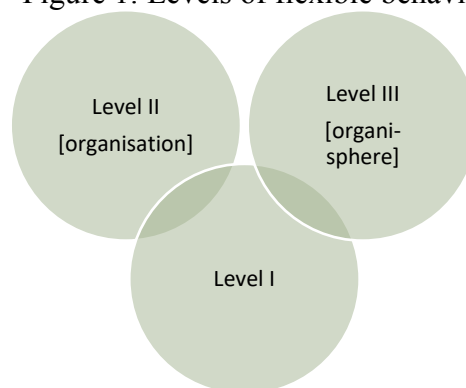
4. *Flexibility of employees' organisational behaviours is asynchronous (non-homogenous)*

Changes of behaviours within the scope of flexibility patterns, as described by the EZOP concept (task, functional, time, spatial), are not homogenous in nature. The composition of forces and the scope within which particular determinants have an impact varies, which results in heterogeneity characterising both individuals (higher inclination to act in one way, lower to act in the other way) and organisations (they use solutions focused on one/two types of flexibility).

Flexibility levels

By adopting the aforementioned assumptions, one can analyse the flexibility of employees' organisational behaviours in several dimensions, taking into consideration both quantitative aspects (the number of flexible behaviours in a period of time) and qualitative ones (placing behaviours on a continuum line: flexibility–lack of flexibility). The scope of considerations in this article was limited to the second perspective by defining three levels of flexible behaviours (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Levels of flexible behaviours



Source: own study

The behaviours within Level I are not flexible in nature. The employees are keen on performing only the tasks they are well acquainted with (no task flexibility) in a well-known organisational environment (no spatial flexibility).

The behaviours within Level II are characterised by task flexibility (spatial flexibility is limited), which means that these employees are keen on being involved in performing new tasks but only in a well-known organisational environment.

The behaviours within Level III are characterised by spatial flexibility and concurrent task flexibility, which means that these employees are keen on working in a new organisational environment, although only within a well-known scope of tasks.

It should be underlined that in the adopted model, flexibility is not a variable based on a gradation. Level I should be read as “no flexible behaviours”, whereas Levels II and III should be read as “flexible behaviours”, although they differ in terms of quality characteristics. Their diversity, following the definition of organisational behaviours quoted above, is determined *inter alia* by factors of an internal type (individual-related). In this situation, it is worth asking the question of the nature and the involvement of biographical-professional factors in development of employees’ flexible behaviours.

METHODS

To identify differences with respect to the level of flexibility in particular groups of employees, the article used the data derived in course of realisation of a research project entitled “Multi-dimensional Analysis of Organisational Behaviours [WAZO] – methodology and the measurement tool”.³ The research was conducted on a sample group of enterprises with at least 50 employees. The sample was selected randomly within the scope of groups selected based on an employment figure criterion (medium/high) and the type of business (trade, industry and services). Due to over-representation in the sample of commercial enterprises and under-representation in the sample of service enterprises, and also due to the varied responsiveness from particular groups of entities, the structure of the sample was levelled to the structure of medium and large enterprises populations in Poland, by adopting the values of analytical weights. The results presented in the article are taken from the second phase of the research, in which 2274 employees took part from 40 organisations (selected from the sample that took part in the first phase of the research). The sex ratio in the group was 36% women and 64% men. The persons in managerial positions constituted 24% of the population and the persons in non-managerial positions constituted 76% of the population. The average age of the respondents was 38.2 years (STD = 10.7 years). Half of the employees were not older than 36. The youngest was 15 and the oldest was 83. Of the respondents, 25% were not older than 30, and 25% were 45 or older. The most numerous groups were aged 24–25 (27.6%) and 35–44 (24.4%); the youngest group was much less numerous (under 25: 4.1%), as was the group that was at least 55 years old (8%). About every fourth person did not disclose their age.⁴

In the presented research model, the level of flexibility of organisational behaviours (I, II, III) is a dependent variable, while age, sex and the position held (managerial, non-managerial) are independent variables.

FINDINGS

The results obtained in course of the research prove that employees in Poland demonstrate behaviours which are characteristic for all of the abovementioned flexibility levels. Level III (54%) turned out to be the most numerous, then Level II (33.8%), whereas the behaviour characteristics for Level I are typical only for 12.2% of the studied population (see also Table 1).

Table 1: The flexibility levels of employees

FLEXIBILITY LEVEL	FREQUENCY	PERCENT OF VALIDITY
LEVEL I	274	12.2
LEVEL II	757	33.8

³ The project was financed by a National Centre of Science award based on the number of decisions DEC-2013/09 / B / HS4 / 02722.

⁴ The category of managerial positions includes employees from the “senior executive” and “medium executive” groups. The remaining groups were classified as non-managerial positions (specialist, technician, office worker, service worker, industrial worker, operator, others).

LEVEL III	1208	54.00
Total	2239	100%

Source: own calculations, based on individual results from the study on employees [n = 2274].

The most frequently encountered behaviours, irrespective of the age of respondents were the behaviours allocated to Level III, whereas the lowest rate of these behaviours could be found among employees between 55–64 years of age (43.9%), and the highest among the employees over 64 years of age (66.7%), whereas the rate of behaviours allocated to Level I was the highest in this age group (22.2%). The behaviours allocated to Level II were most often indicated between the employees aged 35 to 34 (40.6%), and the least often in the age group of over 64 years (11.1%). These differences are statistically significant ($p = 0.000$). Detailed data is shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Employees' flexibility levels based on age

	Age						Total
	Below 25	25–34	35–44	45–54	55–64	over 64	
LEVEL I	10.2%	7.8%	10.5%	15.4%	19.9%	22.2%	11.2%
LEVEL II	23.5%	40.6%	34.3%	35.8%	36.3%	11.1%	36.3%
LEVEL III	66.3%	51.6%	55.2%	48.8%	43.9%	66.7%	52.5%
Total	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

$p = 0.000^*$; p – probability in the independency test chi-square; * - statistically significant variable ($\alpha = 0.05$).

Source: own calculations, based on individual results from the study on employees [n = 2274].

Irrespective of sex, the most frequently found are the behaviours allocated to Level III, whereas the least frequently found are the behaviours allocated to Level I. It should be noted, however, that a slightly higher number of women declared behaviours consistent with Level II (36.6%), and men with Level III. However, these differences are not statistically significant ($p = 0.110$). Both men and women are at a similar level reluctant to take on new tasks in a new environment (Level I 12.8% and 11.8%, respectively). Detailed data is shown in Table 3.

Table 3: Employees' flexibility level based on sex criterion

Flexibility level	Sex	
	Women	Men
Level I	12.8%	11.8%
Level II	36.6%	32.9%
Level III	50.06%	55.4%
Total	100%	100%

$p = 0.110$; p – probability in the independence test chi-square; * - statistically significant variable ($\alpha = 0.05$)

Source: own calculations, based on individual results from the study on employees [n = 2274].

In light of the results obtained, it could also be stated that from statistics point of view, the flexibility level of organisational behaviours is closely correlated with the position held ($p = 0.003^*$).

Table 4: Employees' flexibility levels in terms of holding a managerial or non-managerial positions

	Position		Total
	Managerial	Non-managerial	
Level I	8.8%	12.9%	11.9%
Level II	31.6%	35.5%	34.6%
Level III	59.7%	51.6%	53.6%
Total	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

$p = 0.003^*$; p – probability in the independence test chi-square; * - statistically significant variable ($\alpha = 0.05$).

Source: own calculations, based on individual results from the study on employees [n = 2274].

Both for managerial and non-managerial positions, the dominant behaviours are the ones characteristic for Level III (59.7% and 51.6% respectively), whereas the behaviours allocated to Level I to a greater extent characterise employees who do not hold managerial positions (12.9%). This group also includes more people from the second level of flexible behaviours (35.5%). Detailed data is shown in Table 4.

DISCUSSION

Disparities in defining the dominant flexibility levels in the behaviour of employees confirm that flexibility is an internally diversified feature. Almost 90% of respondents declared readiness in demonstrating flexible behaviours, although more often this readiness meant change of the workplace (spatial flexibility) more than taking up new challenges (task flexibility). Moreover, a detailed analysis of data confirms that flexibility is a feature clearly related to the biographical-professional characteristics of the employees themselves.

With regard to the age of respondents, in each age group behaviours allocated to Level III were dominant. The highest rate of employees demonstrating spatial flexibility could be found in the group of employees over 64 years of age (66.7%), an only slightly lower rate in the group of employees below 25 years of age (66.3%). The reasons for readiness to perform well-known activities in a new organisational environment seem to vary in both these groups. In the group of employees who had just begun their professional career, a change of employer seemed natural. Subsequent experiences facilitate professional development and enrich expertise in terms of functioning in organisational systems. However, it is worth noting that these employees preferred to stay in a certain comfort zone, performing well-known tasks. In contrast, spatial flexibility in the group of employees over 64 years of age may be driven by the desire to get to know a new organisational environment, a kind of *ultimate challenge* before retiring. Employees, being assured of their competences, would like to change something. With a wealth of professional experience, they are not anxious to change the workplace, though on

the condition that the tasks assigned will be stable. A low rate of indications for Level II in the employees in this group also confirms a reluctance to take up new challenges.

Employees between 25 and 34 years of age are characterised by the highest level of task flexibility. This is the period when they enter the labour market and are confronted by the reality of a professional career, which often results in disappointment and subsequent change. At this stage of professional career, people often redefine their career path and “test” new tasks with the intention of finding the right way forward. This period, referred to as “establishment”, fosters the taking up of new tasks to find one’s own competence area.

It is also worth paying attention to the correlation between a higher age and an increase in the rate in answers for Level I (with the exception of the group of persons below 24 years of age). Within the last age range (over 64 years of age), the rate of people who are reluctant to make any changes increased three times as compared to the group of employees aged between 25 and 34. With the exception of two extreme age groups, a decrease in the readiness to be flexible in terms of tasks and functionality at subsequent career path stages is clear, and non-flexible behaviours simultaneously become stronger.

The variable that does not influence flexibility levels is the sex of the respondents. Both women and men demonstrate flexibility as the dominant quality (in both groups over 88%). Despite this variable not being statistically significant, as shown above, it should be noted that differences between the levels of flexibility are marginal. A slightly higher rate for women on Level II may be related to the specifics of their professional career path. Acting concurrently as a mother and employee may, to a greater extent, induce women to make necessary changes, but due to levels of security these changes are made more readily in a well-known organisational environment. To maintain a work-life balance, women often take advantage of the solutions of a flexible workplace (workplace flexibility) exactly for this reason.

Differentiation between flexibility levels dependent on functions performed in an organisation is a testimony to the change in perceiving relations with the organisation. In more than half of the cases, both managers and non-managers, by declaring the readiness to perform familiar tasks in a new organisation, demonstrate their identification with the *organo-sphere*, the space in which both current and potential employees are present. Such results seem to show a transformation towards a new paradigm for a career path, in which one of key characteristics is the change itself. These changes are development-orientated and remain of paramount importance for the employees holding managerial positions (Bednarska-Wnuk, 2015).

It seems worth indicating that a majority of employees who hold non-managerial posts, as compared to those who hold managerial ones, declare behaviours that are characteristic for Level I (persons who are reluctant to make any task-related or workplace-related changes) and for Level II (persons ready to perform new tasks but in a well-known environment). Differences in this respect were statistically significant. The conclusion can be made that performing specific functions in an organisation may have an impact on the sense of autonomy and relative independence, which can also be seen in other spheres of professional life, including willingness to change employer. On the other hand, employees in non-managerial positions remain to a higher extent attached to the organisational environment with which they are well-acquainted, and if they need a change, they fulfil the need on a task flexibility level. However, empirical evidence does not allow for confirmation of such a correlation (the study did not take psychological factors into consideration), so this can only be treated as an interpretative suggestion.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

To sum up, organisational behaviours, and specifically their flexibility, are internally heterogeneous. The results of the research confirmed it (statistically significant differences in terms of the flexibility levels of employees in Poland were noted with regard to the age of the

research participants and the position held; no differences in the flexibility level were observed between men and women).

In the view of differences indicated, it seems justified to opt for a readjustment of organisational solutions from those aimed at fostering the flexibility of human capital to the personal features of the employees themselves, i.e. by considering age-related needs or position-related needs in an employee development plan. Lack of such actions may lead to a significant increase in the cost of making human capital more flexible, not only psychologically but also organisationally.

It is worth indicating that the study was performed on a representative group of employees from Polish enterprises, so the results can only be generalised for this population. Formulating specific guidelines for human resources management requires additional studies to take into account the indicators specific to each flexibility level. Due to the increasing significance of flexibility, this review should be performed in the future, considering cultural differences.

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