On the Uptake of Flexible Working Arrangements and the Association with Human Resource and Organizational Performance Outcomes

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The aim of this study was to identify bundles of flexible working arrangements (FWAs) from data provided by 1,064 organizations in seven EU countries, and to relate bundle membership to demographic variables and human resource (HR) and organizational performance outcomes. Using Ward’s hierarchical clustering algorithm we identified four distinct bundles of FWAs based on the uptake of twelve individual FWAs across the sample of organizations. Bundle 1 represents organizations engaging in a high level of annual hours contracts; bundle 2 represents more traditional work practices; bundle 3 represents organizations mainly offering shift-work and bundle 4 represents organizations with a high uptake of flexi-time. The demographic profile of organizations recorded across each of the four bundles was significantly different. Finally, significant associations were found between the bundle membership and employee turnover \(p < 0.001\), absenteeism \(p < 0.001\) and productivity \(p < 0.015\). The implications of these results are discussed and directions for future research are proposed.

Keywords: performance; HRM; employment contract; productivity; flexible work arrangements; absenteeism; employee turnover; CRANET

Introduction

Growing interest in the use of flexible work arrangements (FWAs) among scholars over the past 20 years (Kalleberg, 2000; Haar and Spell, 2004; Stavrou, 2005; Beltrán-Martín and Roca-Puig, 2013; Stavrou et al., 2015) reflects the increasing use and importance of flexibility in the workplace. Studies to date have focused on employee and employer related reasons for using different forms of FWAs, as well as the effects of different FWAs on various outcome measures such as attrition, job satisfaction, burnout, employee retention and absenteeism in addition to a range of organizational performance measures (Dalton and Mesch, 1990; Konrad and Mangel, 2000; Perry-Smith and Blum, 2000; Valverde et al., 2000; Stavrou, 2005). Up until 2005 empirical studies examining FWAs focused on individual FWAs, however, since then there has been increasing efforts to examine the use of multiple FWAs at once (Stavrou, 2005; Stavrou and Kilaniotis, 2010; Stavrou et al., 2010; Kassimis and Stavrou, 2013). Despite these research efforts, the relationship between FWA bundles and organizational outcomes remains under explored, with further research merited in a number of areas. Firstly, little is known about the exact formation and make-up of FWA bundles. By exploring the formation of FWA bundles we can build a deeper understanding of how best to bundle FWAs to ensure maximum returns for the organization. Second, a number of researchers in this area have highlighted the importance of context when investigating the use of FWAs, noting that the extent to which FWAs may be universally applied or remain context specific remains underexplored (Resnick, 1997; Solomon, 1999; Stavrou and Kilaniotis, 2010; Stavrou et al., 2010). As a result

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we do not know whether or not there are patterns and variations of organizations following similar or different FWA strategies, or if indeed FWA bundles are universally applied. Furthermore, Stavrou et al. (2010) highlight the importance of contextual factors when explaining the relationship between FWAs and organizational outcomes, noting the relationships deciphered may be misleading if contextual factors are not taken into consideration. Finally, following a systematic review of literature on FWAs, de Menezes and Kelliher (2011) concluded that there was a lack of clear evidence in support of a universal FWA bundle. In doing so, it provides both scholars and practitioners with a deeper understanding of the profile of organizations offering FWA bundles, the formation of FWA bundles and whether and how each of the FWAs bundle are associated with organizational outcomes.

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows; in the next section we develop a series of research questions based on the literature to date. Following on from this we introduce the data collection method and our data handling techniques. We then introduce the results and discuss these in the context of the enfolding literature. We outline the implications of our findings for practice, the limitations and possible directions for future lines of enquiry.

**Literature background and development of the research questions**

**Introduction to FWAs**

To date numerous terms have been used interchangeably within the literature to describe workplace flexibility, for example, flexibility in the work environment (Hill et al., 2008), flexible schedules (Kossek et al., 1999) flexible employment (Abraham, 1990), atypical employment (Mihail, 2003) non-standard work arrangements or contingent employment (Polivka and Nardone, 1989) and FWAs (Zeytinoglu, 1999; Cohen and Single, 2001). FWAs differ from traditional office hours usually thought of as a seven to eight-hour day, five days per week and instead refer to patterns of work including weekend work, shift-work, overtime, annual hours contracts, part-time work, job sharing, flexi-time, temporary/casual work, fixed term contracts, home based working, teleworking and compressed working week. This statistical technique aims to group respondents so that respondents in the same group or bundle are more similar to each other, based on the uptake of each individual FWA in each organization, than they are to other bundles, generating a greater understanding of the formation and make-up of FWA bundles. The use of a cluster analysis algorithm also allows us to identify the profile of organizations offering these bundles of FWAs, meaning we can determine whether or not these bundles of FWAs are universally adopted or, if indeed they are only adopted in particular organizational, industry and national contexts, providing us with a greater insight into the profile of organizations offering the various bundles of FWAs. The countries included in this study represent varied labor market structures, national provisions pertaining to maternity, paternity and parental leave, legislative structures, economic systems and industrial sectors. Finally, we test the association between each FWA bundle and HR (employee turnover and absenteeism) and organizational performance (productivity and profitability) outcomes. As this study uses such a large number of organizations, with a large array of FWAs and contextual variables simultaneously it adds significantly the on-going debate related to the organizational benefits linked to the use of FWA bundles. In doing so, it provides both scholars and practitioners with a deeper understanding of the profile of organizations offering FWA bundles, the formation of FWA bundles and whether and how each of the FWAs bundle are associated with organizational outcomes.
triggered high unemployment (particularly in Europe) and changes to labor laws and government regulations (Kalleberg, 2000), all of which have transformed the employment relationship globally. This relationship has changed from one of full-time, full-life, full employment (male) and full welfare entitlements (Barbieri, 2009) to one with increasing FWAs, more frequent changes between jobs and an increase in the number of female and older workers (Kalleberg, 2003). Gareis and Korte (2002) summarize these changes as a shift from a ‘regular employment relationship’ characterized by full-time permanent jobs, with an even and stable distribution of working hours over a fixed number of days, towards the most recent job paradigm which is characterized by greater flexibility of labor deployment, contributing to greater spatial, contractual and temporary flexibility. This shift has led to a more flexible workforce, allowing for labor to be allocated when and where needed.

Although flexibility is inherently an attribute of the workplace, the demand for such flexibility may be on the one hand employee-oriented in response to the changing needs of the workforce brought about by changes to traditional gender roles and increasing demands for greater work/life balance, family supportive work environments and individual lifestyle preferences (Allen, 2001; Wang et al., 2013), and on the other employer-oriented in response to market demands and the changing needs of the marketplace, which has been mainly influenced by globalization and changing economic circumstances (Brewster et al., 2004; Camerman et al., 2007; Ryan and Kossek, 2008; Galea et al., 2014). The former classification indicates flexibility offered by organizations with an emphasis on meeting employees’ multiple needs (Albion, 2004; Stavrou et al., 2015), while the latter classification indicates flexibility mainly enforced to serve organizational needs, such as to bring the supply of human capital in line with the temporal requirements based on customer demand, machine running times and optimal utilization of the capital invested (Gareis and Korte, 2002; Albion, 2004; Stavrou et al., 2015). While the demand for flexibility differs between employees and employers, so too do the various benefits to employees and employers as a result of implementing FWAs (Haar and Spell, 2004). Employees are said to benefit through greater job satisfaction (Ezra and Deckman, 1996; Judge et al., 1994; Saltzstein et al., 2001), reduced stress (Mason, 1991; Hand and Zawacki, 1994) and improved morale (Martinez, 1993; McCampbell, 1996). Among the potential benefits to employers may be increased performance (Mason, 1991), reduced employee turnover (Collins and Magid, 1989) and reduced absenteeism (Kaufeld, Jonas, and Frey, 2004; Golden, 2012). However, although FWAs can be divided into those that cater for the needs of workers versus those that cater for the needs of the organization, employers ultimately only implement FWAs when the perceived benefits outweigh the costs of introducing such practices (Plantenga and Remery, 2005).

FWA bundles

While studies to date have predominantly considered the use of individual FWAs, a number of studies have investigated the synergies generated from the use of multiple FWAs (Stavrou, 2005; Stavrou and Kilianiotis, 2010; Stavrou et al., 2010; Kassinis and Stavrou, 2013). The importance of investigating multiple arrangements at once has been highlighted by researchers to date. For example, MacDuffie (1995) argues that the most appropriate unit of analysis for studying the link between different HR practices and various outcomes is interrelated and internally consistent ‘bundles’ of practices, rather than individual practices, a view which has been echoed by a number of other researchers in this area (MacDuffie, 1995; Perry-Smith and Blum, 2000; Hogarth et al., 2001; Stavrou, 2005). Stavrou (2005) was the first to investigate the use of bundles of FWAs using principal components analysis (PCA) with Varimax rotations to identify bundles of FWAs based on the use of 12 individual FWAs. Her analysis yielded four distinct bundles: bundle 1, non-standard work patterns (B1) – annual hour contracts, part-time work, job sharing, flex-time and fixed-term contracts; bundle 2, work away from the office (B2) – home-based work and teleworking; bundle 3, non-standard work hours (B3) – weekend work, shift work and overtime; bundle 4, work outsourced (B4) – temporary employment and subcontracting. Kassinis and Stavrou (2013) conducted further research into the use of FWA bundles and identified two distinct bundles of FWAs using PCA with Varimax rotations: flexibility patterns (consisting of flex-time, teleworking and compressed working weeks) and part-time options (part-time and job sharing). While these studies give us an insight into the formation of FWA bundles, as the individual FWAs are treated as binary variables, that is, the FWA is either used or not used, the analysis does not give us an insight into whether or not each FWA contributed equally to the formation of the FWA bundle. More recently, Stavrou et al. (2010) was one of the first studies to use Kohonen’s self-organizing maps (SOM) to identify bundles of FWAs based on groups of organizations that followed a similar FWA strategy. A total of nine bundles were identified, which could be further grouped into four larger FWA bundles because of common FWA characteristics. Overall, their analysis indicated that annual-hour contracts were the most important variable in the determination of cluster one. Weekend work was the most important variable for cluster three. Shift-work was the most important variable of
clusters two, three, four and five compared to the remaining clusters. Flexitime was important for the creation of clusters eight and nine on the one hand and five, six and seven on the other: the values of flexitime in clusters eight and nine were very high while those in five, six and seven were very low. Part-time was the most important variable for the creation of cluster five. Home-based work and telework contributed to the formation of clusters eight and nine to a lesser extent. The rest of FWAs do not seem important to the formation of the SOM clusters. To build upon these studies and to advance our knowledge in this area we assess the uptake of twelve individual FWAs, using five different classifications of uptake (0 = not used, 1 = used by 5% of the workforce or less, 2 = used by 6–10% of the workforce, 3 = used by 11–20% of the workforce, 4 = used by 21–50% of the workforce and 5 = used by more than 50% of the workforce). Through the use of Ward’s hierarchical clustering algorithm we can identify the exact uptake of each individual FWA in each FWA bundle, allowing us to draw conclusions about the exact formation of each bundle, determining whether or not all FWAs contribute equally to the formation of the FWA bundles. In this way, we can attempt to answer the following questions:

**RQ1.** Do distinct bundles of FWAs exist across the 1,064 organizations included in this study?

**RQ2.** Do all FWAs contribute equally to the formation of each FWA bundle?

**FWAs and organizational demographics**

To date little is known about the profile of organizations offering FWA bundles, a concern echoed by Resnick (1997), Solomon (1999), Stavrou and Kilaniotis (2010), Stavrou et al. (2010), meaning the importance of context when grouping FWAs is not fully understood. A number of studies highlight the importance of contextual factors when studying the relationship between FWAs and organizational outcomes such as: organizational size, proportion of females employed by the organization, trade union representation and recognition of collective bargaining, the profile of the host country, industry sector and markets served (Perry-Smith and Blum, 2000; Cooper and Kurland, 2002; Stavrou et al., 2010), with Stavrou et al. (2010) concluding that country and industry were significant contextual variables in the use of FWAs. Organizational size may influence management’s decision to adopt FWAs, because it is harder for a small organization to readily and easily respond to the increased cost of FWAs (Scheibl and Dex, 1998; Ashford et al., 2007). Many researchers argue that because of their size and visibility, larger organizations are under more pressure to be more socially responsible than smaller organizations (Scheibl and Dex, 1998; Ashford et al., 2007). As such, larger organizations are more likely to offer a wider range of FWAs as they are more likely to experience problems arising from employees’ inability to manage the work-family interface (Kossek et al., 1994; Goodstein, 1994; Glass and Fujimoto, 1995; Ingram and Simons, 1995; Osterman, 1995; Bardoel et al., 1998). In addition to the size of the workforce Bardoel et al. (1998) suggest that the greater the number of female employees in the organization, the greater the need for family friendly work practices. Balancing work and family is inherently, although not exclusively, a gender issue. Although the nature of men’s and women’s contributions to the household has changed in recent decades (Lewis and Campbell, 2007), the majority of family and caring duties are fulfilled by women (Borrill and Kidd, 1994; Shelton and John, 1996; Greenhaus and Parasuraman, 1999; Konrad and Mangel, 2000; Drew and Humbert, 2012; Ralph, 2016; Ryan and Wallace, 2016). As a result female employees may demand more FWAs within the workplace making it advantageous and/or necessary for an organization to provide them.

Studies have also shown that trade unions may play a key role in developing FWA policies and practices (Miller and Mulvey, 1992; Ferner et al., 2005; Stavrou and Kilaniotis, 2010). For example, Miller and Mulvey (1992) note that union presence can be linked to improved fringe benefits, including FWAs. Furthermore, a study carried out by Glass and Fujimoto (1995) concluded that trade union status is one of the strongest predictors of family-friendly benefits, with Bardoel et al. (1998) reporting that trade unions are positively associated with leave options, however, they did not find any association between trade union representation and the provision of other FWAs such as work options or child care.

FWAs may also be more beneficial in some countries than others as the institutional context may predetermine, facilitate or obstruct their use (Whitley, 1999; Stavrou and Kilaniotis, 2010). Organizations operating in lightly regulated contexts, such as liberal market economies (LMEs) are freer to redeploy people as and when managers choose, even if it is not in accordance with employees’ preferences. Such economies are characterized by lower levels of regulations, lower trade union involvement, greater levels of decentralized wage bargaining and modest unemployment benefits (Hall and Soskice, 2001). Conversely, the use of FWAs may be more attractive in regulated contexts, such as coordinated market economies (CMEs), where flexible hours may give organizations more scope to adjust the relative workforce size without having to make premature hiring or redundancies (Hall and Soskice, 2001). Finally, Mayne et al. (1996) report that organizations offering a high level of flexibility are more global than local and are
concentrated in certain industries such as services rather than production oriented.

Instead of developing hypotheses to determine the importance of contextual factors as antecedents for FWAs, we explore the organizational demographics that are associated with the provision of the different FWA bundles within our sample to determine whether or not these bundles are determined by distinct groups of organizations, or, if indeed they are universally applied. In doing so, a greater insight into the homogeneity or heterogeneity of organizations offering various FWA bundles is provided. In this study we make no assumptions about the profile of organizations prior to analysis. Therefore we put forward the following research question:

RQ3. Do distinct bundles of organizations exist based on FWAs offered among this sample?

Once context is identified, the relationship between bundles of FWAs and HR outcomes and organizational performance will be examined.

FWAs and organizational outcomes

Employee turnover. Raghuram and Wiesenfeld (2004) note how organizations around the world have increasingly used FWAs to attract a desirable labor pool and reduce employee turnover. Grover and Crooker (1995) found that individuals with access to FWAs reported significantly lower turnover intentions than employees without access to these policies. In addition, their study indicated that companies offering FWAs were successful at retaining employees, even if they did not use the policies themselves. This may be explained by Rhoades and Eisenberger (2002) who note that organizations offering employee oriented FWAs provide a signal to employees that they care about their employees’ well-being, promoting greater psychological commitment and lower tendency to quit. Perceived organizational support in exchange theory may be relevant in explaining the relationship between FWAs and employee turnover (Stavrou, 2005). Based on the principle of social exchange theory it can be argued that employees with access to FWAs, which serve their personal needs, will feel as though they are fortunate to have such flexibility, valuing the benefits generated from such flexibility and as a result are less likely to leave the organization due to greater perceptions of employer support for non-work commitments.

On the other hand, it must be recognized that not all FWAs yield employee benefits. Employer-oriented FWAs that facilitate the organizations need to adjust to seasonal effects on demands and fluctuations in the economy or business cycle often involve part-time, temporary/casual, shift work and annual hours contracts. While these arrangements serve the needs of the organization, they provide little flexibility to employees and in certain cases may place more demands on their time due to their schedule inflexibility for employees. As a result employees may feel less supported by their organization resulting in employees feeling less of a need to give back to the organization.

Absenteeism. Studies to date have suggested that companies using FWAs will benefit from substantial reductions in absenteeism (Dalton and Mesch, 1990; Baltes et al., 1999). While numerous studies have shown that unscheduled absences occur because employees need to deal with sickness or other family issues (Dalton and Mesch, 1990; Scheibl and Dex, 1998), further studies have demonstrated that the availability of individual FWAs have been successful in reducing absenteeism (Golembiewski et al., 1974; Krausz and Freibach, 1983; Dalton and Mesch, 1990; Baltes et al., 1999). Raghuram and Wiesenfeld (2004) note how organizations around the world have increasingly used FWAs to reduce labor costs, increase employee retention and attract a desirable human resource pool, as well as reducing absenteeism. In order for employees to balance the demands of work and non-work commitments systematically, employees need their employers to adapt greater flexibility in the workplace, for example, through the use of employee oriented FWAs, to reduce the interference of non-work responsibilities on work responsibilities. This notion is consistent with perceived organizational support in social exchange theory, according to which employees seek a balance in their exchange relationship with organizations by engaging in behaviors that support the organizations goals in return for support and care to be shown towards individual goals (Wayne et al., 1997; Stavrou, 2005). As such the benefits generated from FWAs create a feeling of obligation towards the employer, and as a result employees will be less likely to misuse sick days to deal with non-work commitments, resulting in lower absenteeism.

On the other hand by virtue of their status, employees governed by employer-oriented FWAs are less likely to be able to adjust their time and place of work to meet the demands of caring/non-work responsibilities, creating greater pressure on the demands of employees time. Studies to date have demonstrated that unscheduled absences occur because employees need to deal with non-work commitments, family issues, personal needs, or even stress from excessive workloads (Scheibl and Dex, 1998; Dalton and Mesch, 1990). As employer-oriented FWAs emphasize flexibility on the part of the organization with only secondary regard for employees, arguably employees will not feel as though they have benefited from the FWAs and therefore will feel less
obliged to ‘give back’ or return benefits to the organization, and as a result may be more likely to misuse sick days to deal with non-work commitments.

**Organizational performance**

**Productivity.** Boyer (1988) claims that ‘flexibility and productivity go hand in hand’. Past studies have indicated that a good balance between work and life boosts morale and enhances productivity (Ezra and Deckman, 1996; Konrad and Mangel, 2000; Perry-Smith and Blum, 2000; Scandura and Lankau, 1998; Scheibl and Dex, 1998). A persistent pattern of work/life conflict may run the risk of stifling worker productivity and economic competitiveness (Dex, 1999). Against the backdrop of increasing competition in the marketplace, diminishing operating profits, business closures, redundancies and high degrees of uncertainty, organizations need to be able to adjust to changes in demands and changes in their environment in order to succeed (Albizu, 1997; Valverde et al., 2000). These demands have led to a greater need for organizational flexibility in terms of production, financial resources, the design and organization of work and labor flexibility.

From an organizational perspective there is evidence that FWAs can increase productivity (Bélanger, 1999; Konrad and Mangel, 2000). For example, early research efforts by Schein et al. (1977) found that the introduction of flexible working hours had no adverse impact on productivity, with Golembiewski et al. (1975) reporting negligible effects between flexi-time and performance and productivity. In a meta-analysis conducted by Baltes et al. (1999) it was reported that flexible work schedules favorably impacted productivity. Similarly, Eaton (2003) concluded the presence of formal or informal work-family practices was significantly associated with higher productivity, although the relationship is stronger when these practices are perceived as useable. Finally, Barker (1995) argues that when employees are given discretion over when and where work is completed, they will generally work during their most productive hours, allowing employees to deal with non-work demands during the work day. The principle of social exchange theory can be used to explain these results; employees will appreciate the flexibility generated from the availability of FWA which serve their needs and are therefore most likely to repay the organization in the form of increased productivity. In terms of FWAs which are introduced to serve the needs of the organization, it can be argued that they will also increase productivity as labor is available, when needed, to deal with peaks in market demands, for example, through the use of annual hours and shift-work.

**Profitability.** Finally, in terms of profitability, Den Hartog et al. (2004) explain that when modeling the relationship between HRM practices, such as FWAs, and organizational performance, HRM practices are typically expected to increase employees’ organizational commitment and motivation, which in turn affects their performance and ultimately organizational performance (Becker et al., 1997; Guest, 1997; Paauwe and Boselie, 2005). Within these models HRM practices are assumed to result in HRM outcomes such as employee commitment and workforce flexibility. Such HRM outcomes then result in employee behaviors such as efforts and cooperation. These behavioral outcomes impact performance outcomes in areas such as productivity and innovation. The final step in the causal chain is formed by financial outcomes such as profits. In line with social exchange theory these models would imply a positive relationship between the value generated from HRM practices, such as FWAs, and organizational profitability. Studies to date have recorded a positive relationship between FWAs and organizational profitability (Bélanger, 1999; Konrad and Mangel, 2000). For example, Baltes, et al. (1999) and Valverde et al. (2000) found that labor flexibility had a positive relationship with organizational profitability, placing the organization in a better position within the marketplace. Overall, FWAs can increase organizations revenues through attracting higher quality candidates and increasing the marginal productivity of existing employees (Konrad and Mangel, 2000; Drago and Golden, 2006). Based on the principle of social exchange theory it can be argued that the availability of FWAs may engender a reaction in employees, resulting in them expending greater effort in return for employees being able to manage work and non-work responsibilities. From an employer oriented perspective, it can be argued that employer oriented FWAs can yield higher profits as employees are only hired when needed, giving organizations more scope to adjust the relative size of their workforce and at the same time reduce costs associated with premature hiring or redundancies.

Overall, therefore, when employees perceive that their organization is helping them manage their work and non-work responsibilities, through the introduction of employee oriented FWAs, a feeling of obligation towards the employer is generated and the feeling of organizational support compels the return of favorable actions from employees (Aryee et al., 2005; Wayne et al., 2006). This in turn may be reciprocated in the form of reduced employee turnover intentions and reduced absenteeism, in addition to increased levels of productivity and profitability. In this context workers feel obligated to display extra effort in return for the extra benefit provided by the organization. However, as previously discussed, it must be recognized that not all FWAs are voluntary (Tomlinson, 2007) and as such do not necessarily generate positive benefits for employees. For example, certain
FWAs may be implemented as part of a policy to reduce the number of full-time employees and create a flexible workforce to deal with the demands of the organization. In this context FWAs do not necessarily generate benefits for employees, leaving employees with little choice over their working time and location, and as a result employees may feel less committed to the organization and feel less compelled to give back to the organization. Therefore, as a final research question, we seek to determine whether or not different FWA bundles yield different organizational outcomes.

**RQ4.** Does the association with HR outcomes and organizational performance differ across bundles?

**Method**

We use data from the 2008–10 round of the CRANET survey in this study. The CRANET survey is the largest and most representative independent survey of HRM policies and practices in the world (Parry et al., 2011). Since its inception in 1989, universities and business schools from over 40 countries have joined the network. Data are collected every four years by a scholar within each member country. The unit of analysis of the survey is organizational, with the highest ranking officer in charge of HRM completing the survey (Stavrou and Kilaniotis, 2010). The sample of organizations in each country is identified using lists provided by national federations or similar bodies. When collecting the data, researchers endeavor to ensure that all sectors of the economy are represented in the data. Doing so ensures that the CRANET database is demonstrative of the countries industry structures (Stavrou, 2005) (For further details of the survey and methodology see Brewster et al., 2004; Lazarova et al., 2008; Steinmetz et al., 2011.) For this study, data from 1,064 private sector organizations in seven EU countries (France, Germany, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Sweden and the UK) were analyze with the aim of identifying distinct groups of organizations, based on the uptake of 12 individual FWAs, and examining associations between bundle membership and HR outcomes (employee turnover and absenteeism) and organizational performance (productivity and profitability) outcomes.

**Avoiding common method bias**

The questions asked in the CRANET survey were designed to rely on factual self-report information relating to HRM policies and practices within the organization and subjective measures of organizational profitability. Subjective measures have become a popular method of assessing organizational data, particularly in the management field (Ndofor and Priem, 2011; Camps and Luna-Arcas, 2012). This is mainly due to the difficulties arising when gathering data across countries, for example, data completeness, quality of the data, availability of data and the lack of directly comparable objective measures (Hult et al., 2008; Richard et al., 2009). As a result, in many inter and intra-industry and country studies, subjective measures may be the only feasible means of gathering the necessary data (Singh et al., 2016). While a number of studies conclude that self-report data and subjective measures can lead to common method bias, inflating the relationships between variables (Organ and Ryan, 1995 et al., 2003), Singh et al. (2016), following a comprehensive review of the key literature on the use of objective and subjective measures concluded that carefully collected subjective data could be equally valid. Be that as it may, we used established measures where possible to minimize any such issues. As per Podsakoff et al. (2003), in order to avoid common method variance, and to decrease the likelihood that respondents would artificially answer each question in the same way, respondents were guaranteed anonymity and demographic information, potential independent variables and outcome variables were drawn from different sections of the survey. In addition, the CRANET survey design takes account of Huselid and Becker (2000) who explain that the validity of single-source measures depends on the size of organizations in the sample, the expertise of the source responding to the questions and the clarity of items comprising the survey. The CRANET survey meets these requirements: the mean number of employees in the organizations included in this study was 422 (min = 200, max =1,100); the respondents were members of the corporate HR team; and the International CRANET team took great care in the methods and procedures used to make the survey specific and clear, leaving little room for ambiguity.

**Measures**

**Flexible working arrangements.** Organizations were asked to indicate the approximate proportion of employees availing of 12 individual FWAs; weekend work, shift-work, overtime, annual hours contracts, part-time working, job share, flexi-time, temporary/casual work, fixed term contracts, home based working, teleworking and compressed working week. Responses were coded on an ordinal scale where 0 = not used, 1 = 5% or less, 2 = 6–10%, 3 = 11–20%, 4 = 21–50% and 5 = more than 50% of employees.

**Organizational demographic variables.** Country: Responses from the following seven countries were included in the sample: France (14%), Germany (32%), Hungary (9%), Ireland (8%), Italy (13%), Sweden (15%) and the United Kingdom (9%).
Industry sector: This variable was originally a categorical variable with 16 industrial sectors taken from NACE (National Générale des Activités Economiques dans les Communautés Européennes). In order to reduce the number of categories, organizations were allocated to three industrial sectors: manufacturing (44%), services (44%) and other (12%).

Trade union representation: Organizations were asked what percentage of their organization were members of trade unions. The ordinal variable was coded as 0 – no representation (22%), 1 – less than 50% representation (54%), 2 – more than 50% representation (24%).

Market conditions: Organizations were asked if the market currently being served by the organization was (1) declining (34%), (2) same (29%) or (3) growing (37%).

Market: Respondents were asked to describe the main market(s) for their organization’s products or services; (1) local, (2) regional, (3) national, (4) continent wide and (5) world-wide. This variable was recoded allocating codes 1, 2, 3 to group 1 – national markets, and codes 4, 5 to group 2 – international markets. 42% of Organizations served national markets, while 58% of organizations served international markets.

Size of the organization: The size of the organization was measured by the total number of people on the payroll.

Percentage of female employees: This variable measured the overall percentage of female employees on the payroll.

Percentage of employees aged less than 45 years: This variable measured the percentage of the organization’s employees that are aged less than 45 years old.

Human resource outcomes. Employee turnover: This continuous variable indicated the annual employee turnover within the organization, that is, the percentage of employees who left the organization in the past year, either voluntary or involuntary.

Absenteeism: This continuous variable indicated the average number of days employees are absent per year within the organization.

Organizational performance. Despite the fact that organizational performance is one of the most important constructs in management research (Richard et al., 2009), the definition of organizational performance is surprisingly muddied with few studies using consistent definitions (Kirby, 2004). Moreover, no uniform measure of organizational performance exists (Kouzmin et al., 1999). Further difficulties arising from performance measures used to date, and in particular when gathering data across countries include: data completeness, quality of the data, availability of data and the difficulty in obtaining directly comparable measures (Richard et al., 2009). To overcome these difficulties we use perceptual measures of performance in this study, this is in line with previous studies carried out by Delaney and Huselid (1996), Smith and Barclay (1997), Perry-Smith and Blum (2000), Jap (2001), Stavrou (2005) and Nikandrou et al. (2008). We believe this to be an appropriate approach to take as past studies report a high degree of correlation between objective and perceptual measures of performance (Delaney and Huselid, 1996; Perry-Smith and Blum, 2000; Wall et al., 2004).

The CRANET survey measured organizational performance compared to other organizations. Respondents were asked: compared to other organizations, how would you rate the performance of your organization in relation to the following: level of productivity and level of profitability. The response options were as follows: (1) poor or at the low end of the industry, (2) below average, (3) average or equal to the competition, (4) better than average and (5) superior. Productivity and profitability were recoded as 1 = average or below average and 2 = better than average or superior.

Statistical analysis

Descriptive statistics were computed and are presented as mean (SD), median (25th percentile, 75th percentile) or count (percentage) as appropriate (SPSS Statistics, version 20, IBM, Armonk. NY). All continuous variables were assessed for normality using formal tests of normality and through visual inspection of histograms.

Hierarchical cluster analysis was carried out to identify groups of organizations with similar FWA patterns. Ward’s clustering algorithm was applied to the 12 FWA variables and the squared Euclidean distance was the measure of distance. The optimum number of bundles was identified using visual inspection of the dendrogram and rescaled distances in the dendrogram. The final solution was selected based on conceptual interpretation and maximizing variability between bundles.

Bundle membership was tested for association with organizational demographics; size of the organization, percentage of female employees, percentage of employees aged less than 45 years, country, industry sector, trade union representation, markets served and market conditions. Differences between bundle groups were also examined for the outcome variables of interest; employee turnover, absenteeism, productivity and profitability. Statistical analysis used the chi-square test for categorical
data and Kruskall-Wallis or Mann–Whitney non-parametric tests for skewed or ordinal data. A 5% level of significance was used for all statistical tests.

Results

The cluster analysis identified four distinct bundles using the FWA variables at a rescaled squared Euclidean distance of 10. In Table 1, the FWA ordinal variables are summarized as median (25th percentile, 75th percentile) for each of the four bundles, and the statistically significant differences between bundles for the FWA variables support the bundle solution. The FWA bundle characteristics define bundle 1 as having a high uptake of annual hours contracts (>50%), in addition to a medium uptake of shift-work, overtime and flexi-time (11–20%) and a low uptake of weekend work, part-time working, temporary/casual work and fixed term contracts (1–10%); bundle 2 has more traditional work practices with low uptake of overtime, part-time working, temporary/casual work and fixed term contracts (1–10%); bundle 3 is characterized as having a medium uptake of shift-work (21–50%), in addition to a low uptake in weekend work, overtime, part-time working, flexi-time, temporary/casual work and fixed term contracts (1–10%) and bundle 4 has a high uptake of flexi-time (>50%), in addition to a low level of uptake in weekend work, overtime, part-time working, temporary/casual work and fixed term contracts (1–10%).

Table 1 also gives us a detailed insight into the composition of each FWA bundle, highlighting the uptake of each individual FWA within the bundles. Looking at the individual FWAs, the uptake of weekend work, shift-work, overtime, annual hours contracts, part-time working, flexi-time, fixed term contracts and teleworking is significantly different across each of the four bundles. The difference in uptake of job sharing, temporary/casual work, home working and compressed working weeks was not significantly different across the four bundles; however, it is worth noting that the uptake of these individual FWAs was less than 10% across all bundles. In addition to comparing the results across all bundles, we compare the results of bundle 2 to bundle 4 and the results of bundle 1 to bundle 3. Both bundles 2 and 4 represent more traditional working hours, with a median score of 2 or less for all FWAs across both bundles, with the exception of flexi-time in bundle 4, where a median score of 5 (>50%) was recorded for the uptake of flexi-time (compared to a median score of 0 recorded for flexi-time in bundle 2). Both bundles 1 and 3 show a medium to high uptake of shift-work, with a median score of 3 (11–20%) recorded by bundle 1 and a median score of 4 (21–50%) recorded by bundle 3, with the difference between the two bundles being significantly different ($p < 0.001$). In addition bundle 1 recorded a median score of 5 (>50%) in the uptake of annual hours contracts, compared to a median score of 0 being recorded by bundle 1, with this difference also being significantly different between the two bundles ($p < 0.001$).

Table 2 outlines the demographic profile of organizations associated with each of the four bundles, in addition to testing for demographic differences across all four bundles and between bundles 2 and 4 and bundles 1 and 3. Of the demographics explored growth in main market was the only demographic variable not significant in determining bundle membership. Industry sector, trade union membership, markets served, size of the workforce, percentage of females employed and age of the workforce (percentage of the workforce aged less than 45) were significantly different across the four bundles ($p < 0.001$).

Overall, the results of this analysis indicate that there are distinct novel clusters of organizations based on the FWA strategies pursued. Organizations in bundle 1 are

| Table 1 FWA uptake variation across bundles |
|--------------------------------------------|
| Bundle 1 | Bundle 2 | Bundle 3 | Bundle 4 | p-value$^c$ | p-value$^b$ | p-value$^a$ |
| n = 173 (19.2%) | n = 216 (24%) | n = 312 (34.7%) | n = 199 (22.1%) |          |          |          |
| Weekend work | 1 (0.3) | 0 (0.1) | 2 (0.4) | 1 (0.1) | 0.031 | <0.001 | 0.031 |
| Shift work | 3 (1.5) | 0 (0.1) | 4 (3.5) | 0 (0.1) | <0.001 | 0.314 | <0.001 |
| Overtime | 3 (1.4) | 2 (1.3) | 2 (1.3) | 2 (0.4) | 0.090 | 0.590 | 0.090 |
| Annual hours contract | 5 (4.5) | 0 (0.0) | 0 (0.0) | 0 (0.0) | <0.001 | 0.016 | <0.001 |
| Part-time working | 2 (1.3) | 1 (1.2) | 1 (1.2) | 2 (1.3) | 0.014 | 0.054 | 0.014 |
| Job share | 0 (0.1) | 0 (0.0) | 0 (0.1) | 0 (0.1) | 0.171 | 0.767 | 0.171 |
| Flexi time | 3 (0.5) | 0 (0.1) | 2 (0.4) | 5 (5.5) | 0.006 | <0.001 | 0.006 |
| Temporary/casual work | 1 (1.2) | 1 (0.2) | 1 (1.2) | 1 (0.1) | 0.403 | 0.003 | 0.403 |
| Fixed term contracts | 1 (1.2) | 1 (0.2) | 1 (0.2) | 1 (1.2) | <0.001 | 0.001 | <0.001 |
| Home based work | 0 (0.1) | 0 (0.0) | 0 (0.0) | 0 (0.1) | 0.057 | <0.001 | 0.057 |
| Teleworking | 0 (0.1) | 0 (0.0) | 0 (0.1) | 0 (0.1) | 0.030 | <0.001 | 0.030 |
| Compressed working week | 0 (0.0) | 0 (0.0) | 0 (0.0) | 0 (0.1) | 0.855 | 0.003 | 0.855 |

$^a$Difference between all bundles (chi-square test or Kruskal-Wallis),
$^b$difference between bundles 2 and 4,
$^c$differences between bundles 1 and 3.
more likely to be in the manufacturing sector, with less than 50% of their employees represented by trade unions, serving international markets, with a median of 425 employees, a median of 31% females employees and a median of 60% of the workforce aged less than 45 years. Bundle 2, which represents more traditional working hours was predominantly made up of organizations in the service sector, with less than 50% of their employees represented by trade unions and serving national markets. The organizations in bundle 2 were significantly smaller in size than the other three bundles (median = 325, \( p < 0.001 \)), with a significantly younger workforce compared to the other three bundles (median percentage of employees aged under 45 = 72%, \( p < 0.001 \)), and a median of 35% of female employees. Organizations in bundle 3 were more likely to be manufacturing organizations, with less than 50% of the workforce represented by trade unions and serving international markets. These organizations were also significantly larger than organizations in the other three bundles (\( p < 0.001 \)), with a significantly smaller proportion of female employees (median percentage of female employees =29%, \( p < 0.001 \)) and a median of 64% of the workforce aged less than 45 years. Finally, membership of bundle 4 can be characterized as organizations form the services sector, with less than 50% of their employees represented by trade unions, serving international markets with a median workforce of 362 employees, of which a median of 35% are female employees and a median of 65% of the workforce are aged less than 45 years. In addition to organizational demographics, we tested for the significance of country across all four bundles.

| Industry | Bundle 1 | Bundle 2 | Bundle 3 | Bundle 4 | p-valuea | p-valueb | p-valued |
|----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| Services | 70 (41.2%) | 130 (60.5%) | 85 (27.2%) | 99 (49.7%) | <0.001 | 0.042 | 0.002 |
| Manufacturing | 77 (45.3%) | 54 (25.1%) | 193 (61.9%) | 72 (36.2%) | | | |
| Other | 23 (13.5%) | 31 (14.4%) | 34 (10.9%) | 28 (14.1%) | | | |
| Number of employees in a Trade union | 22 (16.3%) | 60 (30.5%) | 34 (12.2%) | 64 (37.6%) | <0.001 | 0.315 | 0.346 |
| 50% or less | 77 (57.0%) | 103 (52.3%) | 154 (55.4%) | 77 (45.3%) | | | |
| More than 50% | 36 (26.7%) | 34 (17.3%) | 90 (32.4%) | 29 (17.1%) | | | |
| Growth in main market | 31 (18.7%) | 65 (30.7%) | 71 (23.1%) | 39 (20.1%) | 0.093 | 0.033 | 0.447 |
| Declining | 65 (39.2%) | 80 (37.7%) | 122 (39.6%) | 76 (39.2%) | | | |
| Stagnant | 70 (42.2%) | 67 (31.6%) | 115 (37.3%) | 79 (40.7%) | | | |
| Growing | 68 (40.0%) | 119 (55.3%) | 106 (34.2%) | 83 (41.9%) | <0.001 | <0.006 | 0.206 |
| Market | National | 402 (60.0%) | 96 (44.7%) | 204 (65.8%) | 115 (58.1%) | | |
| International | 425 (245, 1028) | 325 (130, 700) | 550 (300, 1550) | 362 (142, 990) | <0.001 | 0.440 | 0.044 |
| Percentage female employees | 31 (17, 46) | 35 (17, 52) | 29 (17, 46) | 35 (25, 54) | <0.001 | 0.216 | 0.605 |
| Percentage of the workforce who are under 45 | 60 (50, 75) | 72 (60, 85) | 64 (50, 76) | 65 (50, 80) | <0.001 | 0.003 | 0.274 |

*Difference between all bundles (chi-square test or Kruskal-Wallis),
bdifference between bundles 2 and 4,
cdifferences between bundles 1 and 3.

The profile of bundle membership across the seven countries is presented in Table 3, highlighting the significant association between country and bundle membership (\( p < 0.001 \)). Finally, differences in the HR outcomes (employee turnover and absenteeism) and organizational performance (productivity and profitability) across the four bundles are presented in Table 4. The variables employee turnover (\( p < 0.001 \)), absenteeism (\( p < 0.001 \)) and productivity (\( p < 0.015 \)) were found to be significantly different across the four bundles. In addition, bundle 4 had significantly lower employee turnover (\( p < 0.001 \)) and significantly higher productivity (\( p = 0.006 \)), when compared to bundle 2. No significant differences were found when bundle 1 was compared to bundle 3.

**Discussion**

Using a cluster analysis algorithm we identified four distinct bundles of FWAs based on the pattern of uptake of the twelve different FWAs across the sample of organizations included in this study. The demographic profile of organizations across each of the four bundles and the associations between each of the bundles and HR outcomes and organizational performance were subsequently tested for significance.

In response to RQ1 we found a four bundle solution, indicating that yes, distinct bundles of FWAs exist across the 1,064 organizations included in this study. Bundle 1, which can be classified as employer-oriented, recorded a high uptake of annual hours contracts (> 50%), in addition to a medium uptake of shift-work, overtime and flexi-time (11–20%) and a low uptake of weekend work,
FWA Bundles and Organizational Outcomes

Table 3 Variation in bundle membership by country

| Outcome Variables | France | Germany | Hungary | Ireland | Italy | Sweden | United Kingdom | p-value<sup>a</sup> | p-value<sup>b</sup> | p-value<sup>c</sup> |
|-------------------|--------|---------|---------|---------|-------|--------|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|
| Bundle 1          | 39 (41.9%) | 67 (22.2%) | 8 (8.4%) | 11 (14.1%) | 1 (0.8%) | 38 (28.8%) | 9 (11.0%) | <0.001 | <0.001 | <0.001 |
| Bundle 2          | 35 (37.6%) | 16 (5.3%) | 24 (25.3%) | 38 (48.7%) | 51 (43.2%) | 5 (11.4%) | 37 (45.1%) | <0.001 | <0.001 | <0.001 |
| Bundle 3          | 16 (17.2%) | 108 (35.8%) | 37 (38.9%) | 21 (26.9%) | 59 (50.0%) | 45 (34.1%) | 26 (31.7%) | <0.001 | <0.001 | <0.001 |
| Bundle 4          | 3 (3.2%) | 111 (36.8%) | 26 (27.4%) | 8 (10.3%) | 7 (5.9%) | 34 (25.8%) | 10 (12.2%) | <0.001 | <0.001 | <0.001 |

<sup>a</sup>Difference between all bundles (chi-square test or Kruskal-Wallis),
<sup>b</sup>difference between bundles 2 and 4,
<sup>c</sup>differences between bundles 1 and 3.

Table 4 Associations between HR outcomes and organizational performance across bundles

| Outcome Variables | Bundle 1 | Bundle 2 | Bundle 3 | Bundle 4 | p-value<sup>a</sup> | p-value<sup>b</sup> | p-value<sup>c</sup> |
|-------------------|---------|---------|---------|---------|----------------|----------------|----------------|
| HR Outcomes       |         |         |         |         |               |               |               |
| Annual employee turnover | 5 (3,10) | 8 (3,15) | 5 (2, 10) | 5 (3,9) | <0.001 | <0.001 | 0.468 |
| Number of days absent (per employee) | 7 (4,10) | 5 (3, 7) | 7 (5,11) | 6 (4, 9) | <0.001 | 0.128 | 0.210 |
| Organizational Performance |         |         |         |         |               |               |               |
| Productivity (% Above average) | 86 (53.1%) | 90 (43.5%) | 139 (45.1%) | 107 (57.2%) | 0.015 | 0.006 | 0.101 |
| Profitability (% Above average) | 79 (48.8%) | 77 (38.1%) | 127 (41.5%) | 85 (45.0%) | 0.192 | 0.169 | 0.132 |

<sup>a</sup>Difference between all bundles (chi-square test or Kruskal-Wallis),
<sup>b</sup>difference between bundles 2 and 4,
<sup>c</sup>differences between bundles 1 and 3.

part-time working, temporary/casual work and fixed term contracts (1–10%); bundle 2 represents more traditional work practices with a low uptake of overtime, part-time working, temporary/casual contracts and fixed term contracts (1–10%); bundle 3, which can also be classified as employer-oriented, recorded a medium uptake of shift-work (21–50%), with a low uptake in weekend work, overtime, part-time working, flexi-time, temporary/casual contracts and fixed term contracts (1–10%) and bundle 4 represents a very high uptake of flexi-time (>50%) and a low level of uptake in weekend work, overtime, part-time working, temporary/casual contracts and fixed term contracts (1–10%) and can be classified as an employee-oriented. In answering RQ2, the structure of bundles across the FWA variables identifies key FWA variables that distinguish the four bundles, meaning not all FWAs contribute equally to the formation of the four bundles, allowing us to draw conclusion about the significance of each individual FWA in the formation of the different bundles. The results highlight that in three of the four bundles, bundles 1, 3 and 4, there is one FWA scoring medium or high uptake of an individual FWA, but the use of all other FWAs within these bundles, where applicable, is low (<2 0% uptake). In bundle 2, all FWAs recorded a median score of 2 or less, indicating the level of usage of each individual FWA to be less than 10%. Bundle 1 represents organizations with the highest degree of variation with 1 FWA scoring a high uptake, three FWAs scoring a median of 3, and the remaining FWAs recording a median score of 2 or below. Overall, these results advance our knowledge in this area by highlighting the contribution of each individual FWA, in terms of their level of uptake in the formation of each bundle, indicating the not all FWAs contribute equally to the formation of FWA bundles.

The context in which FWAs are more or less conducive has been largely ignored in studies to date (Stavrou, 2005; Stavrou and Kilaniotis, 2010). As a result we do not know whether or not there are distinct groups of organizations following similar or different FWA strategies. In response to RQ3, the results of this study indicate that, yes, context does matter. Size of the workforce, percentage of female employees, percentage of employees aged less than 45, industry sector, percentage of employees represented by trade unions, markets served and country were all significant in determining bundle membership. By examining organizational demographics we can confirm that bundles of FWAs are not universally applied, highlighting the importance of context when researching FWAs. Our analysis yielded four novel groups of organizations based on the uptake of twelve different FWAs. The findings also indicate that there are different patterns of FWA across the seven EU countries included in this study.

In response to RQ4 we found significant associations between the bundles of FWAs and employee turnover, absenteeism and productivity. In terms of employee turnover, the strongest association was recorded with bundle 2 where organizations offering more traditional working hours recorded significantly higher levels of employee turnover compared to organizations in the other three bundles. Furthermore, organizations in bundle 2, where more traditional working practices are represented, recorded significantly higher employee turnover.
compared to organizations in bundle 4, which represents employee-oriented FWAs, where a median score of 5 was recorded for flexi-time. This finding may be explained by Rhoades and Eisenberger (2002) who note that organizations offering FWAs provide a signal to employees that they care about their well-being, promoting greater psychological commitment among employees resulting in a lower tendency to quit. Based on the principle of social exchange theory, employees with access to FWAs may feel as though they are fortunate to have such flexibility and as a result experience greater perceptions of employer support for non-work commitments. This in turn means that employees are more likely to repay the organization through employee loyalty and reduced employee turnover. In addition, the results highlight that bundles 1 and 3 were also associated with significantly lower levels of employee turnover, compared to bundle 2, despite the fact that the FWAs used to form these bundles primarily serve the needs of the organization.

Interestingly, a significantly weaker association was recorded between absenteeism and bundle 2 compared to the other three bundles. Studies to date have suggested that companies offering FWAs benefit from substantial reductions in absenteeism (Dalton and Mesch, 1990; Baltes et al., 1999). Organizations may choose to offer FWAs as an employee’s inability to deal with the demands of work and non-work responsibilities may manifest itself in the form of increased absenteeism (Fernandez, 1986; Perlow and Kelly, 2014; Schultz and Henderson, 1985; Van den Broeck et al., 2010). In theory, a greater ability to vary or delay start times of the working day, as allowed by bundle 4, should discourage absenteeism and tardiness (Golden, 2012; Munsch et al., 2014). As such, Pierce et al. (1989) propose that organizational attendance (i.e. reduced absenteeism) should increase as the amount of discretionary time increases. Based on the principle of social exchange theory we expected that FWA bundles would generate value and benefits for employees, for example, they allow employees flexibility around when and where work is completed, making it easier for employees to manage their work and non-work lives. This in turn should generate a feeling of obligation towards the employer, resulting in a reduction of the misuse of sick days to deal with non-work commitments, resulting in lower absenteeism. Given the high uptake of flexi-time in bundle 4 we would have expected a stronger association between bundle 4 and absenteeism, as employees should be better able to balance work and non-work commitments. Although on one level the results of this study appear to be counter intuitive, there are a number of empirical studies going back to the 1980s that have failed to exclusively report a significant relationship between flexi-time and reduced absenteeism. A meta-analysis conducted by Baltes et al. (1999), investigating the effects of flexible schedules, reported a reduction in absenteeism in three quarters of cases. Within the extant literature several studies have reported mixed findings, for example, Kim and Campagna (1981), Zippo (1984) and Swart (1974), while studies carried out by McGuire and Liro (1986) and Thomas and Ganster (1995) found no relationship between absence rates and flexible scheduling.

The context in which bundle 2 are offered may also go some way in explaining the association between bundle 2 and significantly lower levels of absenteeism. Organizations in bundle 2 were significantly smaller in size than the other three bundles, in addition to having a younger workforce (the median percentage of employees under the age of 45 was 72%) and a higher proportion of male employees (median number of female employees was 35%).

Furthermore, it should be noted that some FWAs serve the needs of the employer, as in the case of bundles 1 and 3, meaning employees are less likely to be able to adjust their time and place of work to meet the demands of caring/non-work responsibilities, creating greater pressure on the demands of employees time. Studies to date have demonstrated that unscheduled absences occur because employees need to deal with non-work commitments, family issues, personal needs, or even stress from excessive workloads (Dalton and Mesch, 1990; Scheibl and Dex, 1998). In the case of annual hours contracts, Gall and Allsop (2007) note a number of potential disadvantages for workers, for example, restriction of choice of when to take holidays and inflexible shift rotas and unconventional shift patterns, with the possibility of more unsociable hours. Furthermore, in terms of benefits gained by employees from the use of annual hours, Ryan and Wallace (2016) note that if the use of reserve hours is high, then the gain of increased leisure time does not materialize and instead workers are at a disadvantage due to working hours without additional pay. Such restriction and inflexibility associated with annual hours contacts may go some way towards explaining the association recorded between bundle 1 and absenteeism. Similarly, in the case of bundle 3, where a median score of 4 (21–50%) was recorded for the uptake of shift-work; these practices may not fully meet the needs of employees. In terms of the level of uptake, we do not know whether or not employees have the option of choosing shift-work. Some employees may ‘choose’ shift-work, for example, evening shifts as they can reduce childcare costs, allowing their partners or other family member to look after children instead of incurring high childcare costs (Gambles et al., 2006). While this might alleviate childcare problems, it does not necessarily turn evening shifts into employee-friendly working practices. In the case of bundles 1 and 3, it can be argued that flexibility in these instances serve the need of the organization, with
only secondary regard for employees. Based on the principle of social exchange theory employees may not feel as though they have benefited from use FWAs and therefore feel less obliged to ‘give back’ or return benefits to the organization, and as a result are more likely to misuse sick days to deal with non-work commitments.

From an organizational performance viewpoint, organizations in bundle 4 recorded a significantly stronger association with above average productivity, while organizations in bundle 2 recorded a significantly weaker association with above average productivity. Literature to date has argued that flexi-time, as offered in bundle 4, can create an environment and/or a schedule that is conducive to personal productivity, thus improving on the job performance and productivity. Perhaps the autonomy afforded to employees availing of flexi-time, as in bundle 4, increases overall job satisfaction and employee motivation, in addition to reducing stress and the interference of work and non-work commitments, thus increasing overall productivity. Furthermore, Barker (1995) highlighted that when employees are given discretion over when and where work is completed, they will generally work during their most productive hours. These findings are in line with the principle of social exchange theory. These results would indicate that employees feel as though they personally benefited from the actions of their employer, by offering FWAs, affording employees a level of control over their working day, and as a result employees feel morally obliged to ‘give back’ to their employer, in this case through increased effort.

Looking at the differences in association between bundles 1 and 3 and productivity, bundle 1 recorded a stronger association with productivity. From the perspective of annual hours contracts, which is the dominant FWA in bundle 1, annual hours systems are designed so that workers only work when they are needed, thereby reducing idle time. Ryan and Wallace (2016) highlight that annual hours contracts improve productivity and efficiency. While in standard hourly arrangements, peaks in demand might be covered through overtime, or employing temporary workers, annual hours contracts allow for organizations to closer match working hours to organizational demands (Gall, 1996; Bell and Hart, 2003; Arrowsmith, 2007; Gall and Allsop, 2007). Interestingly, organizations in bundle 3, which are characterized as having shift-work as their dominant FWA, reported lower levels of productivity compared to bundles 1 and 4.

Finally, in terms of profitability, the results of this study did not find significantly different associations between any of the bundles and organizational profitability. Looking at the existing research, Dennis (1997) explains that FWAs can have a positive impact on profitability as they provide greater efficiency of operations and increased employee loyalty. Increased profitability attributed to the availability of FWAs can be linked to two sources within the literature: (1) FWAs leads to greater job satisfaction, resulting in higher levels of performance, ultimately yielding higher outputs and profits for the organization (Parker et al., 2003; Wilkin, 2013) and (2) the availability of FWAs is associated with attracting and retaining valued employees, which in turn reduces the costs associated with employee turnover in the form of recruitment and training costs. Furthermore, Kelly et al. (2008) demonstrated that employees in organizations reporting a better quality of work-life balance reported more job satisfaction, growth potential and job security, and these were in turn related to organizational profitability.

Although we cannot explain for certain the non-significant differences in associations with profitability across the four bundles we can offer the following possible explanations. First, and most importantly, the data was collected during a period of economic downturn which may have had an impact on the levels of profitability recorded by organizations. Second, this study does not take into account the length of time since the FWA programs were implemented. FWA policies can be costly to implement and therefore will take time for such programs to pay for themselves. Finally, a precise measurable indicator of profitability may have yielded more accurate results, although finding such a measure has proven difficult.

**Implications for practice**

The results of this study have a number of implications for practice. First, these results indicate that distinct groups of FWAs are commonly grouped together, with the level of uptake of different FWAs varying across the four bundles, allowing us to distinguish between bundles that primarily serve the needs of the employee and bundles that primarily serve the needs of the organization. The formation of these bundles would indicate that organizations tend to either offer employee oriented FWAs or employer oriented FWAs, as opposed to offering both forms simultaneously. In addition, the results of this analysis indicate that bundles of FWAs are not universally applied, and as a result organizations should consider their organizational demographics before introducing FWAs. Furthermore, when comparing the results of previous studies organizational context should be considered before interpreting results.

In terms of the relationship between bundles and organizational outcomes, bundle 2 representing more traditional working hours, was significantly associated with higher levels of employee turnover and lower levels of productivity, indicating that the both employee oriented and employer oriented FWAs have the ability to reduce
employee turnover and increasing productivity. In addition, organizations in bundle 2 recorded a significantly weaker association with absenteeism, compared to the other three bundles, meaning organizations offering more traditional working hours were less likely to experience higher absenteeism levels, indicating that the different bundles of FWAs offered were not successful in reducing absenteeism. The differences recorded across the four bundles and profitability was not significant.

Comparing the results of bundle 2 to bundle 4, these results indicate that employee-oriented FWAs generate benefits to both employees and employers. Benefits generated to employees are in the form of increased flexibility, while benefits generated to employers are in the form of reduced employee turnover and increased productivity. In terms of employer oriented FWAs, while bundle 1 and bundle 3 reported significantly lower associations with employee turnover and productivity, compared to bundle 2, the differences recorded between bundles 1 and 3 were not significantly different, meaning both bundles of FWAs, albeit significantly different in their make-up, recorded the same pattern of results with organizational outcomes.

Finally, based on the results of this study, organizations need to consider the use of FWAs as a means of reducing absenteeism. The overall results of our empirical investigation indicate that absenteeism was significantly lower in organizations offering more traditional working hours compared to organizations offering the various other forms of FWAs, although, as previously discussed, the demographic profile of organizations in bundle 2 may go some way towards explaining this relationship. However, voluntary absenteeism represents one form of behavior that employees engage in as a means of avoiding unpleasant conditions in the work environment (Porter et al., 1974; Steers and Rhodes, 1978). It may be the case that employees were dissatisfied with their work situation, outside of their working hours, for example, may have been experiencing job stress or burnout, which could not be eliminated through the use of FWAs. Within this context, absenteeism is a complex and multifactor phenomenon influenced by a number of interrelated factors (Farrell and Stamm, 1988; Johns, 2002; Darr and Johns, 2008; Farrell and Nguyen et al., 2016). Given the multifaceted and complex nature of absenteeism organizations must first identify and carefully consider the root cause(s) of the problem, before determining the most appropriate course of action to resolve the problem.

Limitations and future research

The findings and conclusions drawn from this research should be interpreted with the following caveats in mind. This study relies on self-report data, however, the use of multiple informants was not practical given the size of the survey research conducted; therefore this is a necessary trade-off in this study in order to allow us to examine the relationship between FWAs and organizational outcomes. Perhaps, further studies could be improved by inputs from multiple sources, such as employees or managers other than those responsible for HRM. Furthermore, a precise measurable indicator of productivity and profitability would have strengthened the study, although finding a measure rigorous enough to use across industries will prove difficult. Further studies will also need to develop and use measures that capture organizational outcomes more rigorously to provide a better understanding of the precise processes and mechanisms through which FWAs impact on organizational productivity and profitability. Finally, when examining the relationship between FWAs and outcome variables the length of time since the FWA was introduced should be taken into consideration so that the potential costs associated with implementation can be considered, in addition to allowing time for the organization to recoup these costs, and for FWAs to yield direct benefits to the organization. A more longitudinal study could help in this regard.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the contribution of this study is threefold; first, presenting evidence from a large sample, this study advances knowledge in the field by empirically identifying the formation of FWA bundles; second, this study confirms distinct groups of organizations offering similar FWA strategies based on bundle membership; and third we assess the association between FWA bundles and organizational outcomes across 1,064 organizations in seven EU countries, confirming a significantly different association between each of the four bundles and employee turnover, absenteeism and productivity. For management, the results of the empirical research reinforce the advantages of the different bundles of FWAs from an organizational perspective. These findings extend the results of previous studies, but also allow us to draw conclusions about the impact of bundles of FWAs on organizational outcomes. The pattern of results recorded also point to the importance of differentiating between FWAs which primarily serve the needs of the organization compared to FWAs which primarily serve the needs of employees. Given the current economic conditions organizations are operating within, organizations need to maximize strategic capabilities to their full potential. While previous studies have focused on the employee benefits associated with FWAs this study focuses on the business case, investigating bundles of FWAs as opposed
to individual FWAs, taking into consideration the level of uptake of each FWA, in addition to recognizing the importance of context when studying FWAs and interpreting the relationships with organizational outcomes.

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