

More of us could work in part-time roles if they were designed better

Written by Natalie Smith, PhD Student, Queensland University of Technology



Part-time roles become difficult if that employee is the only source of knowledge, contact or sign-off. www.shutterstock.com

Lisa was a young accountant with plenty of experience, solid references and was looking for work. She approached a large accounting firm she had previously worked for in another city in the hope of working with them again.

They were interested, except one thing stood in her way - she could only work part-time. Despite having award winning flexible work policies, this accounting firm wouldn't employ her, citing the role could not be done on a part-time basis.

Lisa (not her real name) is typical of the 24 people I [interviewed as part of my research](#) . These men and women had requested to move to part-time roles in legal, information technology, accounting and consulting firms, having previously worked full-time.

Read more: [Three charts on: how part-time work is growing more slowly, but more men are doing it](#)

The roles for nearly half the participants I studied, and across all industries, had not been changed at all when moving to part-time. Performance targets and workload remained the same; only the pay had changed.

The employees had reduced their hours by getting rid of non-urgent tasks such as networking and meetings, and delegating work to team members. In one case, a female employee had been told by her employer that she wasn't meeting the same high performance ratings she had in her full-time role, despite achieving the same performance targets for less pay.

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My research finds there are actually effective ways to change a full-time role into one that's part-time. The size of an organisation, the industry, gender of employees or complexity of work have little bearing on this.

However businesses are not considering that these roles need to be redesigned in the first place and this causes problems in managing employees' workloads and interacting with other employees.

The problems in redesigning roles as part-time

Even though it is possible to design a full-time role into a part-time role that works, there is little guidance on how to redesign. One of the places to start is reducing the number of people the employee interacts with, for example, the number of clients they look after, or the number of people who directly report to them.

Part-time roles become difficult if that employee is the only source of knowledge, contact or sign-off. For example if the employee is an IT manager who needs to be on call for clients for 37.5 hours a week, when typical part-time hours are less than 30 a week.

To redesign these roles, businesses can assign work to a team rather than individual, or team senior employees with junior employees. Employers can also provide systems to share knowledge rather than having one single point of expertise. I found that hospital pharmacists had a lot more flexibility in their roles because they use systems that allow them to share information effectively and quickly between colleagues.

Contrary to findings from other [studies](#) , deadlines are not necessarily problematic for part-time work. What is problematic is when tasks are both unpredictable and urgent.

One manager I interviewed said that urgent deadlines were often arbitrary and could be rescheduled. If there is urgent work to be done, employees can work in teams or the employer can renegotiate when part-time hours occur to suit the project deadlines.

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The other challenge is that there is little incentive for organisations to reduce implicit work for part-time employees as it is often not measured and is done as unpaid overtime. Implicit work is work that is integral to a role, but not dealing directly with customers. It includes training, business development, travel, administration, staff management and team meetings.

While arguably an issue for all employees, implicit work becomes more problematic when working part-time. For example, an employee can't do a fraction of a training course or only go away for a few hours of an interstate trip. To make all roles more manageable, particularly those working part-time, organisations should monitor and reduce implicit workloads.

Some of the businesses I studied also relied on the employees to make their part-time roles work, which resulted in minimal redesign of the role. Whereas other organisations weighed up what the employee wanted with the minimum requirements of the role.

This approach, where the employee and manager negotiated, meant the part-time arrangement worked better for both. Being clear on the "job absolutes" gave the part-time worker autonomy to adapt their work around other commitments.

Understanding how to redesign full-time roles to part-time helps debunk some of the myths that existed in some organisations. These myths included that program director and partnership roles could not be done part-time. My study found that part-time can be easier at more senior levels, because of the higher autonomy and less urgent, unpredictable work.

Having part-time roles available means more people can participate in the workforce. Given the economic benefits of this, and [the increasing demand from](#) younger and older workers for these sorts of roles, organisations will be left behind if they don't accommodate well designed part-time arrangements.

I received a university scholarship to conduct this research.

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