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Mediating Role of Autonomy on FWA and WLB among Malaysian Academics

Lennora Putit ^{1*}, Geetha Subramaniam ², Siti Halijah Shariff ³, Jayalakshmy Ramachandran ⁴
Balasundram Maniam ⁵

* Corresponding Author

¹ Faculty of Business And Management, Universiti Teknologi Mara, Malaysia,

² Faculty of Education, Language, Psychology & Music, Segi University, Malaysia,

³ Arshad Ayub Graduate Business School, Universiti Teknologi Mara, Malaysia,

⁴ Nottingham University Business School, University of Nottingham, Malaysia

⁵ Finance Department, Sam Houston State University, Houston, USA

lennora633@uitm.edu.my, geethasubramaniam@segi.edu.my, sitihali@uitm.edu.my, Jayalakshmy.Rama@nottingham.edu.my,
GBA_BXM@shsu.edu
Tel: +6016 6682912

Abstract

Many organizations are increasingly providing flexible work arrangements (FWA) to fulfil employees' work-life balance (WLB), needs of happiness, well-being and productivity. This further affects WLB via a high sense of work autonomy observed. This study examines whether autonomy mediates the relationship between FWA and WLB. Using purposive sampling procedure, 302 usable online survey data were collected from university academics. Data analyses were carried out using SPSS and Smart PLS software. Results revealed a significant indirect influence of FWAs on WLB, integrating well-being, happiness, and productivity through autonomy. Implementing FWAs increases autonomy, which then increases the respective WLB. Discussions are elaborated.

Keywords: Autonomy; Flexible Working Arrangements (FWA); Work-life Balance (WLB); Academics

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1.0 Introduction

Over recent years, there has been an enormous surge amongst organizations towards offering flexible work arrangements (FWA) to the workforce. FWA describes varied possibilities relating to flexible time involving compressed work weeks or changes within the daily operational hours, as well as home office or teleworking (Peretz et al, 2018). In other words, it suggests the idea of employees conducting their tasks from the comfort of their homes, either partially or during the entire working week, by constantly staying connected to the workplace through technology. In addition, FWAs are also mutually advantageous contracts that provide employees and employers with various possibilities as to when, where, and how much one works (Allen et al, 2013). Furthermore, the recent global coronavirus (or Covid-19) pandemic crisis has hastened the long-term tendencies toward an increase in FWA. Recent studies found that the continuing COVID-19 outbreak has prompted companies to respond swiftly towards escalating matters pertaining to human resources (Sylvers & Foldy, 2020; Wei & Wong, 2020).

1.1 Problem of Study

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Whilst research has demonstrated many benefits of FWA, few studies have also been observed into the possibility that autonomy may mediate the impact of FWA on employees' WLB, which encompasses well-being, happiness, and productivity amid a global pandemic emergency (Azizan & Murad, 2020; Subramaniam et al, 2020; Razlan, 2021). It is suggested that academics working in higher educational institutions (or termed HEIs) experience fewer organizational barriers that generally prevent staff from utilizing FWA to the maximum (Dasan, 2019). This workforce may utilize FWA more frequently than others who are compelled to undertake conventional employment due to their academic nature of work.

1.2 Objective of Study

The main aim of this research is to examine whether autonomy mediates the relationship between flexible working arrangement (FWA) and work life balance (WLB) encompassing well-being, happiness, and productivity.

2.0 Literature Review

2.1 Flexible Working Arrangements (FWA)

Flexible Work Arrangements (FWA) are commonly believed to be able to satisfy many employees. Allen et al. (2013) and Palmeri (2013) have revealed a favourable relationship between FWA and happiness as well as well-being. Similarly, Shagvaliyeva and Yazdanifard (2014) mentioned that if employees can effectively fulfil their professional and personal responsibilities, the workforce themselves will be exceptionally contented. This, in turn, will then improve performance, increase commitment, reduce absenteeism, and decrease turnover. However, if trust between the employee and the employer is absent, these flexible working practices might generate further hardships.

Likewise, although FWA are generally accepted by organizational staff members due to their benefit of allowing the workforce to set priorities, some drawbacks may result in poor communication issues, reduced staffing levels, and exclusion of tasks and duties, amongst others (Maxwell et al, 2007). Nevertheless, since many FWA, particularly flexitime schedules, have been proven to improve work-life balance (Palmeri, 2013), the top management has been urged to carefully implement such practices within their businesses (Rawashdeh, Almasarweh and Jaber 2016).

2.2 Self-Determination Theory

Ryan (2009) stated that Self-Determination Theory (SDT) posits several fundamental and universal psychological needs, namely those for autonomy, competence, and relatedness, the satisfaction of which is thought to be indispensable to vital, healthy human functioning. Deci et al. (2017) further mentioned the implications of autonomy on workers' well-being and productivity whilst drawing from SDT. An autonomy-supportive work environment generally allows employees to be autonomously motivated, which then improves the qualities of work motivation since employees can relate to the meaning and significance of their job scope. According to Ryan (2009) and Ryan & Deci (2001), hedonic conceptions of 'happiness' are not the only sole aspects that accurately express well-being. SDT also makes use of the well-being perspective, which is characterized as an essential and fully functional complementary method. Ultimately, SDT emphasizes the importance of mindfulness in self-regulation and wellness since reflective awareness itself promotes autonomy.

2.3 Autonomy

Autonomy can be categorized as the degree to which employment offers invaluable liberty, independence, adaptability to changes, and preference in deciding how to perform duties effectively (Deci & Ryan, 2008). According to Lott (2015), working arrangements that allow for more freedom and flexibility in terms of when and how much time is spent at work may also have financial advantages. Job autonomy can foster a culture that values self-initiation, proactivity, and flexibility (Slemp, Kern, & Vella-Brodick, 2015). A member of the workforce who has adequate autonomy and flexibility to decide on their day-to-day tasks will use their expertise, preferences, and experiences to manage and carry out their duties, as well as resolve challenging conundrums that arise at work, which in turn raises an individual's feelings of accountability for their performance.

However, if given a choice to work elsewhere other than their workplaces of employment, employees may be drawn to the influence that FWA has on the degree of job autonomy. In other words, FWA can potentially influence employees' WLB via a high sense of work autonomy observed, to which an environment of self-initiation, proactivity, and flexibility can be created and advocated, respectively. Deci et al. (2017) further addressed the impact of autonomy on employees' wellness and performances. Employees would be more inclined to increase their happiness and well-being if given the right amount of autonomy in delivering their work. Members of the workforce can effectively carry out their responsibilities by putting their expertise, skills, and abilities to use when they are given a sufficient level of job autonomy. This would result in a favourable impact on the well-being of the workers (Park & Searcy, 2012; Kim et al., 2018).

2.4 Work-life Balance (WLB) - Happiness, Well-being & Productivity

As a result of changing family structures and the rise in dual-income earners, the vision of work-life balance (WLB) has been attracting interest amongst many organizations and workforce (Subramaniam et al, 2020). WLB is defined by Leon Medina-Garido et al. (2017) as striking a balance between an employee's personal and professional obligations. Employee well-being can be improved or harmed through the physical, mental, and emotional sense depending on the workplace observed. Hamar (2015) found that employees who are mentally well and content, in general have a higher quality of life, a reduced likelihood of injury and illness, and are more likely to give

back to their communities compared to less fortunate individuals. Miller (2016) further states that the happiness and well-being of employees are crucial elements for increased performance of employees, especially academics. In view of the above discussion, several hypotheses are developed as follows:

Hypothesis 1 – Autonomy mediates the relationship between FWAs and happiness.

Hypothesis 2 - Autonomy mediates the relationship between FWAs and well-being.

Hypothesis 3 - Autonomy mediates the relationship between FWAs and productivity.

3.0 Methodology

A quantitative research methodology was adopted in this study via purposive sampling technique. Using a 5-point Likert scale measurement, several item measurements from relevant prior established studies were adopted and adapted to operationalize constructs for the investigated model, as shown in Table 1.0. A total of 305 survey questionnaires were distributed online to targeted respondents comprising academics from both public and private universities in a progressively developing nation. Nevertheless, only 302 usable feedbacks were carried out for empirical data analyses. Both descriptive and inferential data analyses were carried out using Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) and Smart Partial Least Square (PLS) software respectively.

Table 1 Research Instruments

Variable	Authors	Name	Source	Number or items	Cronbach-alpha (Past literature)
Demographic Factors	Developed by researcher	-	-	16 items	-
Working Arrangements	Ten Brummelhuis et al. (2012)	Flexibility at The Workplace	ter Hoeven & van Zoonen (2015)	3 items	0.7-0.93
Happiness	Hills & Hargle (1989)	Oxford Happiness Index	Hills & Argyle (2002)	25 items	0.92
Well-Being	Seligman (2011)	PERMA Model	Inigo & Raufaste (2019)	28 items (a)Positive Emotion (b) Engagement (c) Relationship (d) Meaning (e) Achievement	0.8-0.93
Productivity	Koopmans et al. (2013)	Task Performance.	Koopmans et al. (2013)	17 items (a)Task Performance (b)Subjective Productivity (c)Teaching & supervising (d)Publication & research (e)Collaborative & administrative	0.7-0.8
Need for Autonomy	Morgenson & Humphrey (2006)	Intrinsic Motivation Inventory	Kuvaas (2009)	8 items	0.87

4.0 Findings

Based on 302 usable data, a descriptive statistical analysis was performed using SPSS software, and the results are shown in Table 2.0. Further analytical procedures were carried out and tested in terms of both measurement and structural model via the Partial Least Squares - Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM) approach using SMART-PLS software. Structural Equation Modelling is also known as a second-generation technique that offers instantaneous modelling of relationships among multiple independent and dependent constructs (Gefen et al., 2011). PLS-SEM was selected as it is compatible with the study's predictive-oriented objective (Hair et al., 2017).

4.1 Demographic Profile of Respondents

Table 2 illustrates the targeted respondents' demographic profile. The findings shows that majority of the respondents are female (67%) with PhD degree qualifications at the highest educational level (50%). Many respondents are married (80%) while 68% of them have no young children below seven years old. The number of working years is almost equally distributed, with a slightly higher report (23%) for

those with 11 to 15 years of working experience. Following the same trend, a slightly higher monthly income report (31%) are in the category of RM 7001 to RM 9000 income bracket. Most of the respondents are not staying with their aged parents or parents-in-laws-in law (84%), and they do not have any domestic helper at home (92%). Most of them are staying in urban area (75%), and the most frequent amount of time spent on internet usage is six hours and above (85%).

Table 2 Demographic Profile of Respondents

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage
		(n)	(%)
Gender	Male	102	33
	Female	200	67
Ethnicity	Malay	208	69
	Chinese	24	8
	Indian	40	13
	Others	30	10
Highest Educational Level	Bachelor's degree	6	2
	Master's Degree	121	40
	Doctorate's Degree	151	50
	Post Doctorate	22	7
	Professional Qualification (ACCA, ICOSA, CPA etc)	2	1
Marital Status	Married	239	16
	Single	50	80
	Divorced	13	4
Years of Working	Less than 1 year	16	6
	1-5 years	48	16
	6-10 years	61	21
	11-15 years	70	23
	16-20 years	54	18
	21-25	30	11
	26-30	15	5
Monthly Income	RM 3000 and below	11	4
	RM 3001- RM 5000	25	8
	RM 5001- RM 7000	54	18
	RM 7001- RM 9000	93	31
	RM 9001- RM11000	67	22
	RM 11001 - RM 13000	25	8
	RM 13001 and above	27	9
Have young children below 7-year-old	Yes	96	32
	No	206	68
Stay with parents/ in-law	No	250	84
	Yes	52	16
Have caring duties	No Caring Duties	142	47
	Young Children	85	28
	Elderly/ Sick / Disabled/ Special Need	75	25
Have a domestic helper (maid)	No	275	92
	Yes	57	8
Internet use	1-2 hours	1	1
	3-5 hours	13	4
	6-12 hours	122	40
	More than 12 hours	166	55
Rural or urban	Rural	74	25
	Urban	228	75

4.2 Measurement Model

4.2.1 Convergent Validity

In measuring convergent validity (CV), there are three values to be assessed, which include the indicator loadings, average variance extracted (AVE), and composite reliability (CR). The CV assesses whether the items represent a single, unifying conceptual idea. According to the literature, the loadings of the indicators should be above the threshold of 0.6, the AVE should be above 0.5, and the

CR value should be above 0.708 (Gholami et al., 2013). As shown in Table 3, all the values are above the recommended value points, thus guaranteeing the accomplishment of the CV.

Table 3 Reflective Measurement Model

First-Order Construct	Items	Loading	CR	AVE
Flexible Working Arrangements	F1_Time	0.822	0.892	0.734
	F2_Location	0.872		
	F3_Method	0.874		
Autonomy	Au1_Decide	0.835	0.953	0.694
	Au2_Plan	0.805		
	Au3_Decision	0.839		
	Au4_Autonomy	0.829		
	Au5_Judge	0.840		
	Au6_Order	0.840		
	Au7_Method	0.822		
	Au8_Independence	0.853		
	Au9_Schedule	0.834		
Positive Emotion	PE1_Positive	0.889	0.951	0.764
	PE2_Good	0.912		
	PE3_Pleasant	0.902		
	PE4_Happy	0.895		
	PE6_Joyful	0.884		
	PE8_Contentedsatisfied	0.752		
Engagement	E1_MeetDemand	0.741	0.882	0.518
	E2_UnderControl	0.704		
	E3_MomentExcitement	0.718		
	E4_StrongEmotion	0.737		
	E5_PutHeart	0.807		
	E6_LotofEnergy	0.658		
	E7_StayUntilDone	0.665		
Relationship	R1_GoodRelationship	0.838	0.914	0.682
	R2_StandByMe	0.865		
	R3_Appreciated	0.868		
	R4_MutualRespect	0.833		
Meaning	R7_ConfidentRelationshi P	0.717	0.960	0.856
	M1_Important	0.900		
	M2_Worthwhile	0.921		
	M3_Meaningful	0.944		
Achievement	M4_Valuable	0.934	0.929	0.767
	A1_Progress	0.881		
	A2_Goal	0.896		
	A3_Accomplishm	0.917		
Happiness	A4_Completing	0.807	0.967	0.538
	H1	0.687		
	H3	0.710		

	H4	0.681		
	H5	0.640		
	H6	0.749		
	H7	0.692		
	H8	0.680		
	H9	0.788		
	H10	0.744		
	H11	0.711		
	H12	0.791		
	H13	0.710		
	H14	0.625		
	H15	0.723		
	H16	0.769		
	H17	0.742		
	H18	0.796		
	H19	0.772		
	H20	0.708		
	H21	0.836		
	H22	0.749		
	H23	0.701		
	H24	0.785		
	H25	0.737		
	H26	0.744		
Subjective Productivity	SP1_Managetime	0.798	0.901	0.695
	SP2_ImproveProductivity	0.819		
	SP3_HighQuality	0.865		
	SP4_WorkEfficiently	0.850		
Task Performance	TP1_PlanWork	0.885	0.926	0.758
	TP2_Keepinmind	0.886		
	TP3_SetPriorities	0.886		
	TP4_Managetime	0.823		
Collaborative and Administrative	CA1_Examiner	0.791	0.921	0.661
	CA2_Consultation	0.842		
	CA3_Innovation	0.794		
	CA4_Community	0.832		
	CA5_Collaboration	0.847		
	CA6_Engagement	0.772		
Teaching and Supervising	TS1_ConsultationHour	0.755		
	TS2_GOT	0.672	0.876	0.641
	TS3_Journal	0.866		
	TS4_BookChapter	0.889		
Publication and Research	PR1_Publish	0.890	0.897	0.743
	PR2_Grants	0.862		
	PR3_Conference	0.833		

Note: Items PE5, PE7, R5, R6, H2 and H27 are deleted due to low loading (add it back)

Table 4 Formative Measurement Model

Second Order Construct	First Order Construct	Weight	VIF	t-value (weight)	t-value (loading)
Well-Being	Positive Emotion	0.299	1.969	14.216	
	Engagement	0.293	2.665	17.446	
	Relationship	0.218	1.679	11.109	
	Meaning	0.225	1.949	11.911	
	Achievement	0.205	1.591	10.269	
Productivity	Subjective Productivity	0.512	1.589	3.704	
	Task Performance	0.517	1.578	4.503	
	Teaching & Supervising	0.141	1.490	1.025	4.183
	Collaborative & Administrative	0.158	1.683	1.282	3.535
	Publication & Research	-0.123	1.730	0.882	2.019

Note: VIF is below 3.3. T- value (weight) more than 1.96 is supported by t-value (loading) more than 1.96. Hence, there is no indication of a multicollinearity problem among first-order constructs from the results.

4.2.2 Discriminant Validity

At the next level, discriminant validity (DV) is tested, as illustrated in Table 5. DV generally indicates the degree to which a construct varies from other items within the model (Hair et al, 2017). The hetrotrait—monotrait ratio of correlations (HTMT) is used to test for discriminant validity, to which all the HTMT values fall between 0.80 and 0.87 (Franke & Sarstedt, 2019), hence demonstrating discriminant validity of the said measures.

Table 5 Discriminant Validity Using HTMT

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
(1) Achievement	0.87 6												
(2) Autonomy	0.35 7	0.8 33											
(3) Collaborative & Admin	0.10 9	0.2 02	0.81 3										
(4) Engagement	0.57 5	0.5 45	0.11 8	0.72									
(5) FWAs	0.26 4	0.4 12	0.13 5	0.35 5	0.85 6								
(6) Happiness	0.52 2	0.5 03	0.17 2	0.60 8	0.30 7	0.734							
(7) Meaning	0.51 99	0.3 99	0.09 1	0.66 3	0.28 8	0.433	0.92 5						
(8) Positive Emotion	0.47 24	0.5 24	0.11 7	0.66 2	0.40 1	0.573	0.54 5	0.874					
(9) Publication & Research	0.02 8	0.1 39	0.60 1	0.09 2	0.09 9	0.026	0.06	0.097	0.86 2				

(10) Relationship	0.42 5	0.3 61	0.10 3	0.58 7	0.30 3	0.446	0.49 9	0.547	0.07 1	0.8 26			
(11) Subjective Productivity	0.48 6	0.4 58	0.25 6	0.54 6	0.23 7	0.517	0.46 3	0.436	0.18 9	0.2 92	0.8 34		
(12) Task Performance	0.38 6	0.4 64	0.22 6	0.59 7	0.28 4	0.515	0.45 8	0.411	0.20 3	0.3 4	0.5 88	0.87 1	
(13) Teaching Supervising	0.23 2	0.2 24	0.45 7	0.27 1	0.20 5	0.203	0.20 1	0.232	0.49 2	0.2 12	0.3 1	0.31 3	0.8 01

The main objective of this study is to determine the mediating role of autonomy in the relationship between FWA and WLB, consisting of the well-being, happiness, and productivity of academics in Malaysia. Through the bootstrap re-sampling technique (5000 re-samples), the path coefficient is then assessed to ascertain the significance of these hypotheses. Table 6 displays the result of the hypotheses identified in this study.

Table 6 Hypothesis Testing

Hypotheses		Beta	SE	t-value	p-value	LL	UL	Result
Flexibilities Autonomy Happiness	-> ->	0.233	0.004	5.766	≤0.001	0.127	0.283	Supported
Flexibilities Autonomy Productivity	-> ->	0.205	0.035	5.912	≤0.001	0.130	0.260	Supported
Flexibilities Autonomy Well-Being	-> ->	0.205	0.035	5.822	≤0.001	0.132	0.260	Supported

5.0 Discussion

From Table 6, it can be established that autonomy has a significant mediating effect concerning the impact of FWA on well-being, happiness, and productivity. H1 was supported, to which autonomy positively mediates the relationship between FWA and Happiness ($\beta=0.233, t=5.76, p\leq 0.001$). This finding supports previous research by Thompson & Prottas (2006). Happiness is heavily influenced by the opportunities to which an individual must have some power over activities and events in an environment. These incentives allow for personal influence over one's own decisions as well as those of family or friends, and sometimes expand the lives of other people through significant discretion. A lack of this opportunity may cause unhappiness in jobs, unemployment, retirement, and outside the labour market. From this finding, it can thus be revealed that when employees are given a higher level of autonomy, it would result in their ability to embrace happiness when undertaking work at their level best without any stress. The recent global COVID-19 pandemic can be taken into consideration when construing the resulting data. The decision to enforce FWA, particularly home-based work, teleworking, or flexitime, can be highly simulative for staff in terms of their gratification regarding safeguarding their safety and well-being; this is because their main concern regarding said pandemic is the fear of contracting COVID-19 virus.

Furthermore, employees' intent to leave the firm may be lessened if they recognize and acknowledge that their supervisors and the organization are working hard to support their efforts to maintain good health. Conversely, decreased turnover rates may also stem from employees' fears of losing their jobs due to the pandemic's detrimental impacts on affected industries. Autonomy is negatively associated with turnover intention and interacts with role stress to predict burnout among employees (Kim & Stoner, 2008). Employees who perceived a high level of control at work experienced less emotional and physical symptoms, showed better commitment, involvement, satisfaction, and motivation, and had a lower turnover intention.

H2 was further supported, to which autonomy significantly mediates the relationship between FWA and Productivity ($\beta=.205; t=0.205; p\leq 0.001$). This finding is supported by Gajendran et al (2015), who revealed that autonomy plays a highly mediating role in the positive relationship between telecommuting (a category of FWA) and productivity. Berkery et al. (2017) found that employees' motivation and job satisfaction has increased when their desire for autonomy is met. Consequently, stress levels decrease, and work-life conflicts disappear, hence increasing overall productivity (Berkery et al., 2017). Furthermore, Berber et al (2022) found that FWA indirectly influence turnover intentions by increasing job satisfaction. FWA may increase job satisfaction, and job satisfaction, in turn, may reduce intentions to leave the organization. Job satisfaction mediates this relationship, and when staff members who receive FWA are satisfied at work, there may be a decrease in their intentions to leave. Hence, as far as H2 is concerned, it is concluded that autonomy plays a role in mediating the effect between FWAs and productivity.

H3 was also supported ($\beta=0.205$; $t=5.822$; $p\leq 0.001$), to which autonomy positively mediated the relationship between FWA and Well-Being. It supports Ter Hoeven & Van Zoonen (2015) who argued that few resources and demands were observed that could impact the relationship between FWA and Well-Being, which included enhanced work-life balance, autonomy, and effective communication (resources) as well as increased interruption (demand). Individuals' psychological well-being would significantly improve when they started to feel independent and autonomous at work (Yang & Zhao, 2018). Such transformation is justified because employees would be able to use their creativity, authority, and power in managing their work tasks when they possess more opportunities to deal with the challenging work environment. Additionally, it reduces stress while fostering job happiness, organizational involvement, and workers' mental wellness.

6.0 Conclusion & Recommendations

In essence, the results revealed an indirect significant influence of FWA on well-being, happiness and productivity through autonomy. FWA may contribute towards the intensification of autonomy; in turn, intensified autonomy results in increasing WLB consisting of happiness, productivity and well-being. Autonomy thus mediates this relationship, to which workforce members that are offered FWA may experience a higher degree of happiness, well-being, and productivity when they have higher autonomy. The implementation of FWA increases autonomy and subsequently increases the respective work-life balance in terms of happiness, well-being, and productivity. Considering the COVID-19 epidemic, this presents opportunities for businesses to keep their finest workers while also creating a contemporary workplace that will give employees greater opportunities and safety in the modern business climate.

7.0 Limitations and Future Research

Several limitations were, however observed. Firstly, this study only involved academics in higher education institutions (HEIs). As such, the results should be generalized with great caution and could not be generalizable to workforce in other non-academic organizations. FWA's nationwide implementation perspective should not also be ignored since it is gradually gaining further attention among employers in many developing countries, including Malaysia. Future research should thus consider looking at other organizational sectors and comparing the effectiveness of FWAs between these sectors. Ultimately, a comparative study between nations could further result in the potentially significant effects of FWA on happiness, well-being, and productivity via autonomy.

Paper Contribution to Related Field of Study

This paper contributes towards understanding the importance of WLB for academics in Malaysia. As academia play an integral role in the development of human capital, this study's results can guide the adoption of FWAs to increase national productivity, which aligns with SDG 3- Good Health and Wellbeing as well as SDG 16 Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions.

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