

Textual Analysis: Flex-Working Programs

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ABSTRACT

This study sought to explore how newspaper make sense of the flex-working programs in the Korean government, as well as what the focus of the newspaper articles about the flex-working programs are in terms of its content, terms frequently used, pictures, and headlines. To address, this research conducted a textual analysis based on newspaper articles which cover the flex-working programs derived from two English-language newspapers: The Korea Herald and The Korea Times. As a result, this research confirmed that these two newspapers similarly and mainly focus on problems regarding the current employment environment and work-family balance in Korea, as well as abstract necessities and expected positive outcomes of the flex-working programs. However, coverage in these newspapers did not focus strongly on the provision of detailed guidelines and significant information pertaining directly to use of the flex-working programs. Finally, this study confirmed that the implementation process for flex-working programs may well suffer from weak leadership and political support among public and private employers in the Korean workforce due to the absence of coverage of those critical issues. The other findings and limitations of this study were also specifically discussed.

Keywords: Textual Analysis, Flex-Working Program, Newspaper Coverage, Newspaper Content, Policy Implementation

INTRODUCTION

As a family-friendly workforce policy, two departments of the central government of Korea – the Ministry of Public Administration and Security (MOPAS) and the Ministry of Employment and Labor (MOEL) – have established and implemented in earnest three types of flex-working programs, flex-time work, part-time work and at-home work, since 2010. Initially, both the Korean government and its public officials expected positive outcomes (e.g., maintaining a balance between work and family, increasing opportunities for women’s careers, improving quality of life, increasing birth and employment rates, reducing time and costs for commuting, and so on) following implementation of the flex-working programs. However, only 2.28 percent of government employees at all levels of the Korean government (central, provincial and local government) applied for and used the flex-working programs in 2011 (MOPAS & MOEL, 2013), even though a number of government employees strongly believe in the necessity of the programs, as well as the beneficial effects of such a policy, which can resolve problems relevant to both the employment environment and work-home balance in Korea.

This research explores the relationship between newspaper coverage and implementation of the flex-working programs in the Korean government. Specifically, the following research questions are posed:

- 1) How do newspaper articles make sense of the flex-working programs? What is the focus of each of the newspaper articles about flex-working programs in terms of its content, terms frequently used, pictures, headlines, and so on?

- 2) How does newspaper coverage influence the low rate of usage of the flex-working programs in the Korean government?

To address these research questions, this study conducted a textual analysis based on newspaper articles which cover the flex-working programs derived from two English-language newspapers: The Korea Herald and The Korea Times. Finally, this study collected and analyzed 11 newspaper articles from The Korea Herald and 12 from The Korea Times that were published between 2004 and 2013. First, this study discusses context and background of the flex-working programs in the Korean government. Following this, the main findings of the textual analysis are specifically discussed. Finally, conclusions and limitations are stated at the end of the paper.

PROGRAM CONTEXT AND BACKGROUND

The Ministry of Public Administration and Security (MOPAS) and the Ministry of Employment and Labor (MOEL) established and implemented the flex-working programs in the Korean government. In theory, MOPAS and MOEL initially included nine kinds of flex-working programs (e.g., at-home work, telework, flex time, alternative work schedule, compressed work, discretionary work, core-time work, free-dress code, and part-time work), classified by workplace, time, method of work, dress, and type (MOPAS & MOEL, 2013). Among them, three programs – flex-time, part-time and at-home work – have been implemented and used with more positive results when compared with the other types of flex-working programs in the Korean government. Therefore, this study focuses primarily on these three flex-working programs.

The flex-time work program was first implemented as a pilot program at the Korean Intellectual Property Office in January 2001. Since August 2010, the program has been implemented and applied to the central, provincial and local governments in Korea (MOPAS & MOEL, 2013). A government employee is able to choose the time to start and end her/his work under the flex-time work program. However, an employee must work 8 hours per working day and 40 hours per week on a full-time work basis. Specifically, the program divides working hours into two time ranges, such as core time (10:00-16:00) and flexible time (07:00-10:00 & 16:00-19:00). Therefore, a government employee is able to flexibly select the time to start working, between 07:00 and 10:00, as well the time to finish her/his work, between 16:00 and 19:00. One important aspect of the flex-time work is that every government employee who uses the program must work during the core time (10:00-16:00) in order to improve cooperation and communication within an agency and with other governmental agencies (MOPAS & MOEL, 2013).

The part-time work program was first implemented as a pilot program in 2002. Since August 2010, the program has been implemented and applied to the central, provincial and local governments in Korea (MOPAS & MOEL, 2013). As mentioned earlier, government employees are classified into two groups, full-time (40 hours of work per week) and part-time (less than 40 hours of work per week), which is dependent upon work type. Specifically, a government employee who applies for and uses the part-time work program usually works between 15 and 35 hours per week. However, the program requires a part-time employee to work at least 3 hours per working day (MOPAS & MOEL, 2013).

The at-home work program was first implemented as a pilot program at the Korean Intellectual Property Office in March 2005. Since August 2010, the program has been implemented and applied to the central, provincial and local governments in Korea (MOPAS & MOEL, 2013). A government employee who applies for and uses the at-home work program is

able to work from her/his home by using information and communication tools without commuting from home to the office every day. In order to use the program, employees first choose how many working days or hours they will work at home, as well as which portions of tasks will be completed at home. In general, either tasks which do not require face-to-face contact with the public or tasks which can be completed independently without having regular meetings or physical collaboration with other agencies or co-workers are appropriate for at-home work (MOPAS & MOEL, 2013).

The main purpose of establishing and implementing the flex-working programs is to maintain a balance between work and family, as well as improve the quality of an employee's life as a concrete example of a family-friendly workforce policy in the Korean government. Specifically, intended purposes and positive outcomes from the flex-working programs are as follows: 1) supporting job careers for married employees, especially for married female employees who need to spend more time caring for their children while continuing to develop their careers after giving birth; 2) improving equality between male and female employees in terms of balancing the number of male and female employees in higher positions in the workforce; 3) creating jobs for potential job seekers by implementing the part-time work program, 4) supporting employees' needs regarding self-development (e.g., language learning, education for advanced degrees, completion of certifications, and so on), as well as leisure activities in the early morning or late afternoon under the flex-time work program; 5) reducing time, costs, stress and fuel usage by allowing employees to work at home when feasible; 6) reducing organizational costs to maintain offices and other physical facilities; 7) enhancing job performance, job satisfaction and organizational commitment in public sectors; and 8) increasing birth rates as well as creating a more sustainable and employment-friendly labor environment (MOPAS & MOEL, 2013).

In this context, several intended users/ government employees of the flex-working programs are identified as follows: 1) government employees who need to spend time caring for their children while working simultaneously, as well as female employees who want to continue working after giving birth; 2) government employees who want to invest their time in self-development and leisure activities during the work day; 3) government employees who want to reduce the time, stress and costs which result from commuting every day; 4) government employees who want to have more time with their families; and 5) job seekers or potential government employees who have at least one of the needs identified above.

TEXTUAL ANALYSIS

Newspaper articles this study used include 11 newspaper articles from The Korea Herald and 12 from The Korea Times. The newspaper articles, which appeared between 2004 and 2013, are analyzed by content, terms, pictures and headlines contained in each of the articles, and which also serve as the article's primary focus. First of all, three subjects that these newspaper articles primarily focus on in their coverage of the flex-working programs are identified as follows: 1) problems and challenges regarding the current employment environment and work-home balance in Korea; 2) necessities and expected positive outcomes of the flex-working programs; and 3) information and structural details of the flex-working programs.

This research finds that in order to make sense of the justification for implementing flex-working programs, most of the newspaper articles give strong coverage to critical problems that exist in the Korean employment environment. The first point made in the newspaper articles pertains to the critical problems of long work hours and heavy workloads (e.g., Korea Times, 06/14/2010; Korea Times, 07/04/2012; Korea Herald, 08/14/2012; Korea Herald, 12/13/2007). For instance, "The average Korean employee worked 2,193 hours in 2010, which

translates to 43.2 hours per week. This comfortably represented the highest figure on the table as the OECD average came in at 1,749 hours for that year.” (Korea Times, 07/04/2012) Several newspaper articles point out that the long annual work hours of a Korean employee is one of the critical obstacles to maintaining a healthy balance between work and family (e.g., Korea Times, 10/04/2010; Korea Times, 07/04/2012).

In addition, some articles reveal that the imbalance between work and family has considerably detrimental effects on women’s continuous career development after giving birth, and the long work hours are more likely to discourage female employees over their male counterparts from entering into high-profile positions, such as executives and public managers (e.g., Korea Times, 07/31/2012; Korea Herald, 12/13/2007; Korea Herald, 05/19/2010). The final issue that the newspaper articles regard as a critical problem in the Korean employment environment as it pertains to work-family balance is Korea’s distinct and hierarchical work structure, which can be likened to a top-down system of management rather than a horizontal system or the bottom-up approach found in Korean governments and some private companies (Korea Times, 06/24/2010).

In this context, most of the newspaper articles frequently pointed out multiple intended purposes as well as expected positive outcomes following implementation of the flex-working programs (e.g., Korea Times, 06/14/2010; Korea Times, 10/26/2010; Korea Herald, 04/23/2010; Korea Times, 08/25/2004; Korea Herald, 04/03/2011; Korea Times, 01/09/2013; Korea Times, 06/20/2012; Korea Times, 10/31/2010; Korea Times, 07/31/2012; Korea Times, 03/07/2013; Korea Times, 07/04/2012; Korea Herald, 08/11/2010; Korea Herald, 01/07/2010). Those expected positive outcomes are identified as follows: 1) work-life balance; 2) an increase in birth rates to prepare for an aging society; 3) reductions in energy usage, expenditures of time, and traffic congestion during commuting time; 4) the creation of more efficient work environments; 5) support of child care and other family issues; 6) support and encouragement of self-development and leisure activities; 7) the creation of part-time jobs; 8) the realization of gender equality in the workplaces, including support for the economic activities of working mothers and their re-entry into the workplace after giving birth; and 9) creation of support for more family-friendly and sustainable employee engagement in the workforce.

The third area of interest the newspaper articles focused on pertained to information and structural details of the flex-working programs. Only three newspaper articles among the 23 focused on information and structural details pertaining to the flex-working programs: 1) an employee’s flexibility to choose a work schedule under the flex-time work program at public agencies (Korea Times, 08/25/2004); 2) telecommuters’ work schedules under the at-home work program (Korea Times, 01/09/2013); and 3) the Seoul City Council’s maternity program for pregnant employees (09/09/2011). However, newspaper coverage related to information and structural details pertaining to the flex-working programs, which government employees need to know in order to use the programs, was given very little coverage when compared with the other two areas of interest described earlier, namely: 1) problems and challenges regarding the current employment environment and work-home balance in Korea; and 2) necessities and expected positive outcomes of the flex-working programs. As a result, this study demonstrates that newspaper articles do not provide significant and positive content to inform the public about the flex-working programs in detail and to encourage government employees to apply for and use the programs in the Korean workforce.

This research analyzes the headlines of newspaper articles and divides them into two groups: 1) headlines representing expected positive outcomes and needs for implementing flex-

working programs (e.g., “Reward workers for work quality, not hours” (Korea Times, 06/14/2010), “W76 tril. Set aside for higher birthrate (Korea Times, 10/26/2010), “City employees to work at home” (Korea Times, 01/09/2013), “Minister calls for gender equality in workplaces” (Korea Times, 07/31/2012), “Right for family dinners” (Korea Times, 07/04/2012), “Flexible working to help women pursue careers” (Korea Times, 10/31/2010), “Don’t sweat, work smart” (Korea Herald, 08/11/2010), “Pregnant civil servants to get hour off” (Korea Herald, 09/09/2011), “KT expands smart working environment” (Korea Herald, 04/03/2011), and “Smart work system gains popularity in Korea” (Korea Herald, 03/14/2012)); and 2) headlines representing problems and challenges regarding the current employment environment and work-family balance in the Korean workplace (e.g., “Energy concerns lead to flexible working hours (Korea Times, 08/25/2004), “Lethargic society” (Korea Times, 06/20/2012), “Corporate culture stunts flextime” (Korea Times, 06/24/2010), “Only handful of firms tend to workers’ home needs” (Korea Times, 10/04/2010), “Korean women work longest hours in OECD” (Korea Herald, 12/13/2007), “Korea’s contribution to OECD and future challenges” (Korea Herald, 10/27/2009), “Underemployment” (Korea Herald, 01/07/2010), and “Are your employees ‘sustainably engaged?’ ” (Korea Herald, 08/14/2012)). According to the analysis of headlines, this research confirms that newspaper articles are more likely to focus on the positive effects of flex-working programs as well as current problems Korean employees face in the workplace rather than structural issues or policy procedures related to the flex-working programs.

In order to support the results, this research also analyzed terms which appeared frequently in the newspaper articles on flex-working programs. As a result, the following terms were identified: “work-life balance,” “glass ceiling,” “heavy workload,” “birth rate,” “aging population or society,” “flexible working hours,” “teleworking,” “smart work,” “women’s employment rate,” “family-friendly policy,” “unemployment,” “stress from the workplace,” “low efficiency at work,” and “quality of life.” Through frequent use of these terms, these newspaper articles emphasized justifications and policy needs regarding the Korean government’s implementation of the flex-working programs, as well as what Korean employees need in order to maintain a balance between work and family.

Three pictures are identified from these newspaper articles. The first picture is a woman’s lethargic facial expression due to a heavy workload and a great deal of stress at work (Korea Times, 06/20/2012). The second picture represents a group of workers who are moving to musical activities after work (Korea Times, 06/24/2010), and the third depicts a father and his daughter preparing for a family dinner (Korea Times, 07/04/2012). These three pictures similarly represent policy needs for flex-working programs in order to realize work-family or work-life balance and to achieve the goal of sustainable engagement in the Korean workplace. One newspaper article pointed out that implementation of flex-working programs is highly important because several issues that are specific to the Korean workplace (e.g., a hierarchical structure and an inflexible culture, especially in public sectors) need to be changed (Korea Times, 06/14/2010). In addition, the article raised questions about male employees’ need for flex-working programs as follows: “Based on some male workers’ experience, even if they leave work early to go home, there is no role he can play at home because children are studying all the time. When I talk to the 40s and late 30s generation, their key concern during the weekends is they’re having a hard time trying to organize something with the family.” (Korea Times, 06/14/2010)

CONCLUSION

This study sought to explore how newspapers make sense of the flex-working programs in the Korean government, as well as which issues pertaining to the programs such newspaper

articles have chosen to primarily cover. Based on 23 newspaper articles published in two English-language newspapers, The Korea Times and The Korea Herald, from 2004 to 2013, this study does not confirm any significant difference in usage of terms, tone or structure between The Korea Times and The Korea Herald in their coverage of the flex-working programs. In other words, these two newspapers similarly and mainly focus on problems regarding the current employment environment and work-family balance in Korea, as well as necessities and expected positive outcomes of the flex-working programs. In this context, primary content, terms used, and headlines featured in the 23 newspaper articles on flex-working programs reviewed are similar to one another.

However, as discussed earlier, coverage in these newspapers did not focus strongly on the provision of detailed guidelines and other information pertaining to use of the flex-working programs. Only 3 newspaper articles among the 23 very briefly describe contents of the programs. Specifically, newspaper coverage does not include the following: 1) how employees can apply for and use the flex-working programs; 2) the beneficial effects to both employees and employers upon implementing the programs; 3) how the government implements the programs to accomplish its intended policy goals more efficiently and effectively; and 4) how public managers or employers in the private sector manage and monitor employees who use the programs.

In the absence of coverage of these critical issues, newspapers to date have focused primarily on potential abstract and positive outcomes derived from the flex-working programs (e.g., family-friendly policy benefits, balance between work and home, employee career development, support for women's continuous career development and increased job opportunities, increased birth rates, and so on). In addition, these potential benefits and positive outcomes are primarily and directly relevant to employees rather than employers. Therefore, employers in private companies or public managers in the public sector are not necessarily likely to have clear and positive intentions to implement flex-working programs successfully in their organizations, and they may still have concerns regarding expected managerial challenges and negative outcomes resulting from implementation and usage of the programs.

As a result, the implementation process for flex-working programs may well suffer from weak leadership and political support among public and private employers in the Korean workforce. Consequently, only 2.28 percent of government employees in Korean governments applied to and used the flex-working programs in 2011, in part because coverage in newspaper articles did not provide necessary and critical details to both employees and employers, including specific information about how such programs work.

One of the limitations of this study is its range of data. The Korea Times and The Korea Herald are national newspapers in Korea. Namely, this research does not include newspaper articles on the flex-working programs published in provincial or local newspapers, since such newspapers are not published in English. Another issue to be addressed in future studies is the inclusion and analysis of newspaper readers' comments or responses about newspaper articles on the flex-working programs. If such information were included in future studies, it would be possible to analyze different perspectives regarding the nature of the flex-working programs and their implementation in the Korean workforce.

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