Flexible Job Structures: A Question of Equity

Work Equity Research Highlights 2022

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WORK EQUITY

United Way®

**United Way
of Massachusetts Bay
and Merrimack Valley**

Work Equity is an initiative sponsored by the Center of Social Innovation at Boston College. Work Equity aims to advance equity in the workplace by developing solutions to the root causes of racial, ethnic, and gender discrimination and biases built into the structure of jobs and employment systems.

With a focus on small and medium-sized organizations, we uphold the commitment of social work to "evidence-based practices by collecting national and regional data about the state of equity at work."

For more information, please visit our website: bc.edu/content/bc-web/schools/ssw/sites/center-for-social-innovation/work-equity.html

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Work Equity partnered with the **United Way of Massachusetts Bay and Merrimack Valley** to conduct the Boston Workplace Equity Study. The mission of the United Way of Massachusetts Bay and Merrimack Valley is "... to create positive, lasting change for people in need. We call it **harnessing the power of people working together**. And that means everyone – individuals, nonprofits, companies, and government agencies. We work everyday to achieve our vision and mission by focusing on two foundations of better lives: Financial Opportunity and Educational Success."

Please visit our website: unitedwaymassbay.org/covid-19/covid-19-family-fund/

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Section I: Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic and the economic volatility which followed disrupted business operations across America and around the world. Business leaders have had to make decisions about the unanticipated adoption of new business strategies and practices.

Throughout 2020-2021, there were remarkable accounts in the media about groups of workers and individual employees who continued to work in almost heroic ways. Employees of grocery stores showed up to stock the shelves; employees at medical facilities provided care knowing that they might face elevated risk of becoming infected; and employees in public transportation systems worked so that America could keep working.

The pandemic challenged many taken-for-granted ideas about "when," "where," and "how/how much" work gets done by employees. Almost overnight, there was a dramatic increase in the percentage of workers who were asked to or who requested to work remotely. Similarly, large numbers of people working in a number of different business sectors were either asked to make or requested changes in their work hours. These changes were not possible for everyone; in many cases, the type of work they did required an in-person presence during conventional business hours. However, changes in the where, when, and how of work caused employers and employees to step back and re-consider the ways that work has been structured for decades and the pandemic has el-evated the equity of job structures. A number of questions have been raised, such as:

- What are the options for job structures which might support different types of jobs? How can employers decide which groups of employees can/should have access to flexible job structures?

- How can supervisors take equity into account when they make decisions about which employees are al-lowed to use the flexible job structures that might be available to them?

- What are some of the positive outcomes – for the organization as well as for employees – associated with employee use of flexible job structures?

What are Flexible Job Structures?

The term job structure typically refers to the "scaffolding" of jobs in the context of work organizations. The structure of jobs includes the rules and resources (formal and informal) which affect how employees enact job tasks. For some time, experts who study the characteristics of job structure have focused on the extent to which an employee:

1. has discretion to decide what to do;
2. has some input about what happens on the job,
3. has some choice about the people with whom s/he works;
4. can determine the speed of work;
5. has some discretion about behavior at the workplace;
6. has some discretion about "how" to get work tasks completed;
7. can request change in at least some specific responsibilities, if desired;
8. can request a change in work days, if desired; and
9. can request a change in work hours, if desired.[1]

The pandemic has elevated the importance of a tenth job structure characteristic: "can request a change in the location where work is done."

Over the past several decades, many business leaders have referred to the extent of "choice and control" that employees might have with regard to the structure of their work as flexibility. Flexibility has been defined as:

"... the ability of workers to make choices influencing when, where, and for how long they engage in work-related tasks."[2]

Many experts emphasize that flexible job structures include choices with regard to both managing time (for example, the extent of control over work schedule and having a shift/schedule which is a good "fit", flextime, reduced time, and time off) as well as having options for the place of work.[3] Other thought leaders urge us to view the continuity of work (including leaves and breaks) as part of flexibility.[4]

[1]Idson, T.L. (1990). Establishment size, job satisfaction and the structure of work. *Applied Economics*, 22, 1007-1022. DOI: 10.1080/00036849000000130

[2]Hill, E.J., Grzywacz, J.G., Allen, S., Blanchard, V.L., Matz-Costa, C., Shulkin, S., & Pitt-Catsouphes, M. (2008). Defining and conceptualizing workplace flexibility. *Community, Work and Family*, 11(2), 149-163. DOI: 10.1080/13668800802024678

[3]Galinsky E, Sakai K, Wigton T. (2011). Workplace flexibility: from research to action. Future Child, 21(2), 141-61. DOI: 10.1353/foc.2011.0019.

[4]Kossek, E.E., Thompson, R.J., & Lautsch, B.A. (2015). Balanced workplace flexibility. *California Management Review*, 57(4), 5-25. DOI: 10.1525/cmr.2015.57.4.5

For the purposes of this report, we consider flexible job structures to be the choices that employees and their supervisors can make about "when," "where," and "how/how much" employees work.[5]

This research highlight focuses on the respondents' perspectives about flexible job structures.

First, we present findings about the extent to which employees working for the respondent organizations have access to flexible job structures (Section II). We also explore the extent to which organizational characteristics and workforce characteristics are related to employee access to flexible job structures. In Section III, we consider whether pressures (pressures in the business environment and assessments of the pressures experienced by employees) are related to the employee access to flexible job structures. In Section IV we examine the relationship between employee access to flexible job structures and workplace equity. In the last section (Section V), we examine the relationship between employee access to flexible job structures and organizational resilience.

Definitions of Terms

Diversity-Equity-Inclusion: Diversity or representational diversity ... has been defined as "the representation ... of people with distinctly different group affiliations... Inclusion is "the degree to which individuals feel a part of critical organizational processes ..." Finally, equity refers to "the absence of systematic disparities. ... Equity calls for the righting of systemic and structural injustices. To achieve equity and other benefits of inclusion, it is important to discuss and elevate practices that can move us from diversity to equity."[6]

Organizational Systems: Organizational systems include policies, practices, programs, tacit understandings that define how an organization operates, and the assignment of roles and responsibilities.

Flexible Job Structures: The options regarding the time and place structures ("when," "where," and "how/how much") of employees' work, as well as the employment contract which specifies whether a worker is considered a full-time employee, a part-time employee, or a worker who is not an employee and is, for example, a self-employed independent contractor.

Organizational Resilience: Organizational resilience refers to the ability of an organization to withstand adversity and bounce back to perform effectively and sustainability.[6]

Workplace Equity Study 2021

Work Equity invited leaders from for-profit (n = 298) and non-profit (n = 733) organizations to respond to the Boston Workplace Equity Study survey in September and October of 2021. Key informants (one per organization) from 178 organizations completed the survey for a response rate of 17%. 87% of the organizations were nonprofit, 3% were government public agencies, 7% were for profit, and the remainder were categorized as other. (6) The Boston Workplace Equity survey in-cluded questions about a number of important issues, including the pressures on their organizations, the perceived equity of their organizational systems, the availability of flexible job structures which employees might be able to work as they adjust to the volatile business environment, and organizational resilience.[7]

[5]Hill, E.J., Grzywacz, J.G., Allen, S., Blanchard, V.L., Matz-Costa, C., Shulkin, S., & Pitt-Catsouphes, M. (2008). Defining and conceptualizing workplace flexibility. Community, Work and Family, 11(2), 149-163. DOI: 10.1080/13668800802020467

[6]Bernstein, R.S., Bulger, M., Salipante, P., & Weisinger, J.Y. (2020). From diversity to inclusion to equity: A theory of generative. interactions. Journal of Business Ethics, 167, 395–410. DOI: 10.1007/s10551-019-04180-1

[7]This convenience sample provides important insights about the experiences of organizations and their employees during 2020-2021. However, the respondent organizations do not constitute a representative sample of firms in the greater metropolitan area their employees during 2020-2021.

Section II: Employee Access to Flexible Job Structures

The 2021 Workplace Equity Survey asked the respondents about the extent of access that their employees have to twelve specific types of flexible job structures. We summarize their answers in Figure 1 below. *(See Figure 1).*

The top three flexible job structures reported to be available to 50% or more (most/all or almost all) of the workforces at the organizations participating in the study were:

1. To be able to periodically change starting and quitting times (66.4%)

2. To have choice about paid or unpaid overtime hours (that is, they can decline to work paid or unpaid overtime) (58.8%)

3. To occasionally or regularly work some or all of the work week remotely (e.g., from home) (57.4)%

We created a "Flexible Job Structure Index," which is the mean of the 10 types of flexible work options; the scores of the index ranged from 1-4. The average (mean) score was 2.32; higher scores indicated greater employee access to flexible job structures.

Are there relationships between characteristics of the organization/its workforce and employee access to flexible job structures?
We analyzed the data to explore possible relationships between employee access to flexible job structures and characteristics of the organizations as well as their workforces.

Figure 1: **Extent of Employee Access to Flexible Job Structures.**

% responding organizations by extent of access
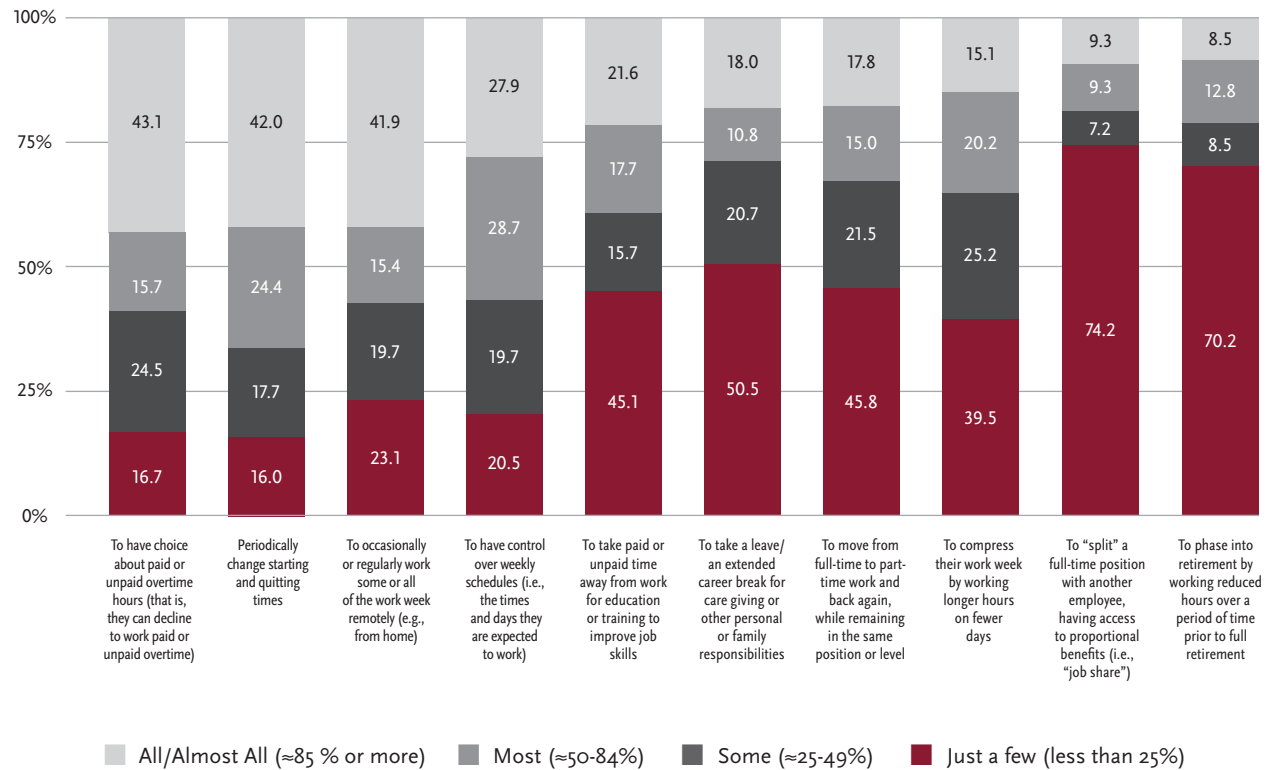
Our analysis of the data found relationships between scores on the Flexible Job Structure Index and:

- Size of the Workforce: We found that **small-sized organizations** (0-49 employees) were **more likely** than either medium (50-249 employees) or large (250+ employees) organizations to have **higher scores on the Flexible Job Structure Index.**

- Percent of Employees of Color: We did not find a relationship between the percent of the workforce identified as employees of color and scores on the Flexible Job Structure Index.

- Percent of Women in the Workforce: We did not find a relationship between the percent of the workforce identified as women and scores on the Flexible Job Structure Index.

Section III: Pressures on Organizations /Employees and Access to Flexible Job Structures

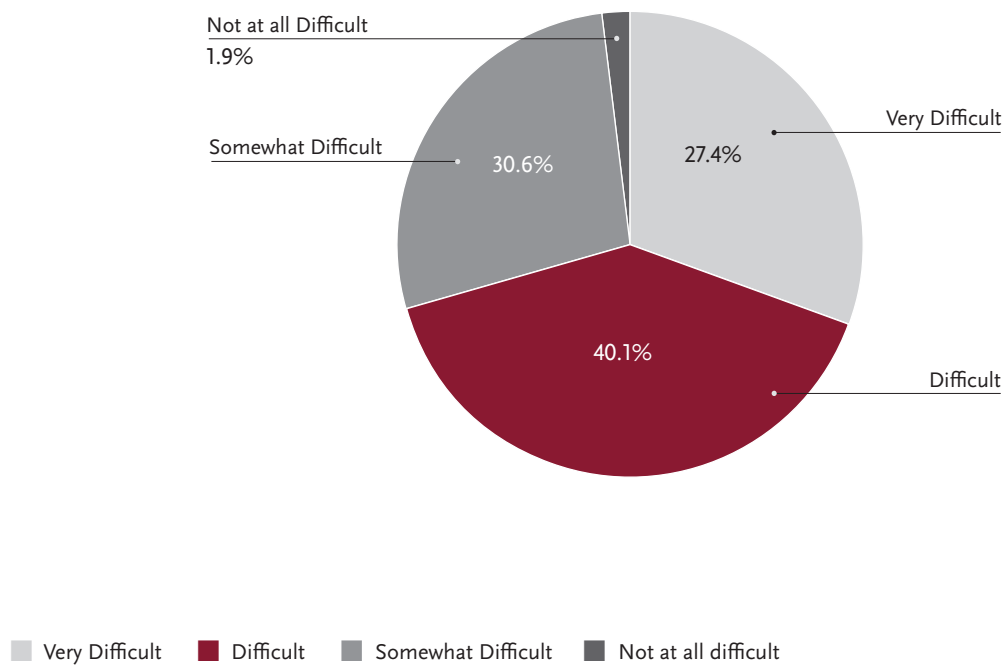## Pressures on Organizations

Many organizations struggled in 2020-2021. Some needed to change core business strategies for the delivery of services and goods to their customers. Others were forced to respond to changes in the preferences and needs of their clients and customers.

A majority (67.5%) of the respondents to the Workplace Equity Study reported that the past 18 months were "difficult/very difficult." *(See Figure 2).*

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Figure 2: **Overall Difficulty Experienced by Organizations**

% of responding organizations (n = 157)

Not at all Difficult 1.9%

Very Difficult 27.4%

Somewhat Difficult 30.6%

Difficult 40.1%

Legend: Very Difficult   Difficult   Somewhat Difficult   Not at all difficult

Is there a relationship between the pressures experienced by organizations and employee access to flexible work structures?

We found that organizations reporting that the past year had been "very difficult" were more likely to have higher scores on the Flexible Work Structure Index.

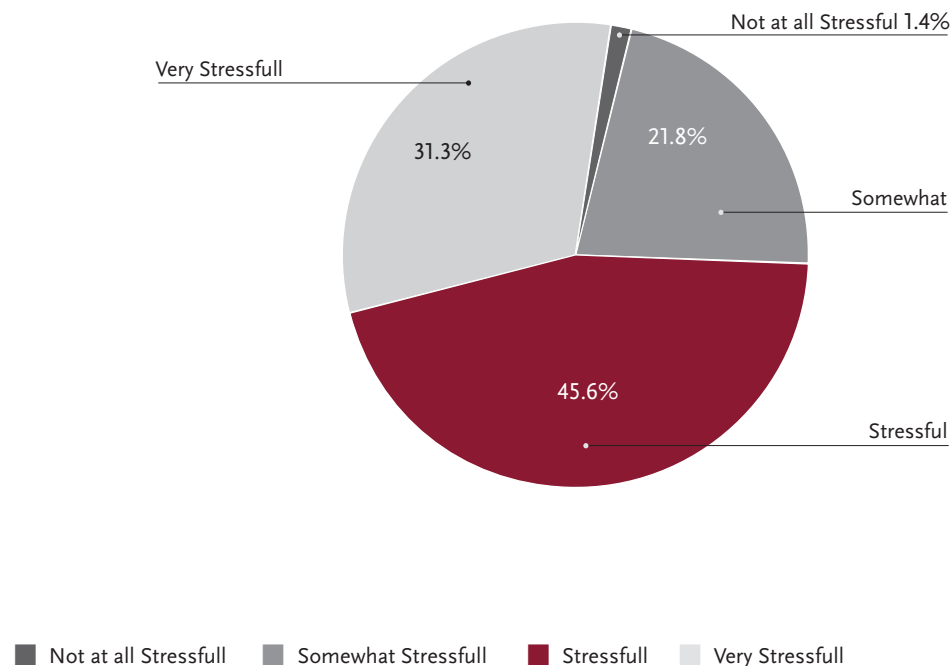## Employee Pressures and Stress

The respondents to the Workplace Equity Survey provided assessment of how stressful the past 18 months had been for their employees. One-third (31.3%) reported that the past year and a half had been "very stressful." *(See Figure 3)*.

Is there a relationship between employee access to flexible job structures and overall employee stress?

We compared scores on the Flexible Job Structure Index

Figure 3: **Organizational Leaders' Assessment of Overall Employee Stress**

% responding organizations (n = 147)

Not at all Stressful 1.4%

Very Stressfull — 31.3%

21.8%

Somewhat

45.6%

Stressful

◼ Not at all Stressfull   ◼ Somewhat Stressfull   ◼ Stressfull   ◻ Very Stressfull

and respondents' assessments of overall employee stress.

We found that the higher the scores on the Flexible Job Structure Index (meaning more flexible work options were available to large proportions of the organization's employees), the **less** likely the organizational respondent was to describe the stress experienced by employees over the past 1.5 years as "very stressful."

Pressures on Employees

We also asked the survey respondents to reflect on the specific pressures that may have been related to the stress experienced by employees *(See Figure 4)*. Worries about Covid-19 exposure in the workplace was the pressure that the highest number of respondents reported as having been a pressure "to a great extent".

We combined all of the questions related to assessments of the pressures related to this stress experienced by employees into an Employee Pressure Index. The scores could range from 1 to 4.
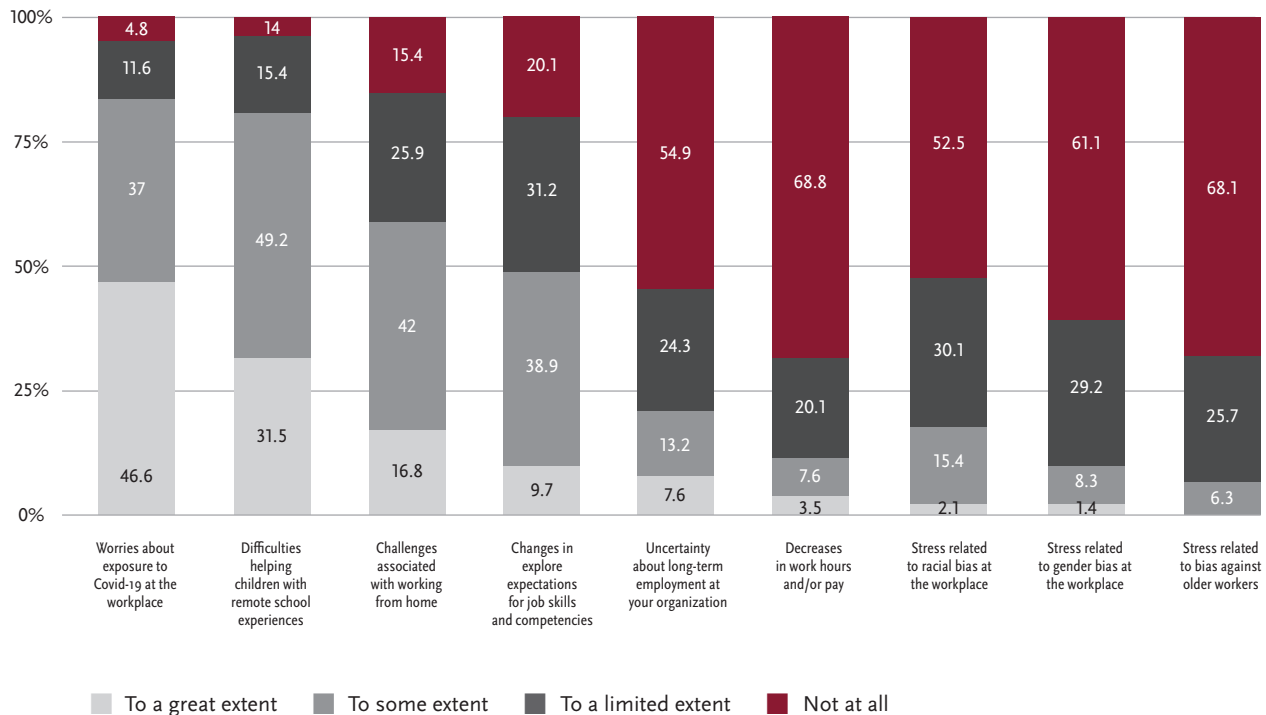
The average (mean) score for the Employee Pressure Index was 2.11.

Is there a relationship between the assessments of pressures experienced by employees during 2020-2021 and employee access to flexible job structures?

We found no relationship between the Employee Pressure Index and the Flexible Job Structure Index.

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Figure 4: **Organizational Leaders' Assessent of Specific Pressures on Employees**

	To a great extent	To some extent	To a limited extent	Not at all
Worries about exposure to Covid-19 at the workplace	46.6	37	11.6	4.8
Difficulties helping children with remote school experiences	31.5	49.2	15.4	14
Challenges associated with working from home	16.8	42	25.9	15.4
Changes in explore expectations for job skills and competencies	9.7	38.9	31.2	20.1
Uncertainty about long-term employment at your organization	7.6	13.2	24.3	54.9
Decreases in work hours and/or pay	3.5	7.6	20.1	68.8
Stress related to racial bias at the workplace	2.1	15.4	30.1	52.5
Stress related to gender bias at the workplace	1.4	8.3	29.2	61.1
Stress related to bias against older workers	6.3	25.7	68.1	

Section IV: Workplace Equity and Employee Access to Flexible Job Structures

Organizational equity is considered to be the fairness of access that employees have to formal and informal resources at the workplace in the context of their priorities and needs.[8]

Among the organizational leaders who responded to the Workplace Equity Survey, 46.1% said that (overall) their workplace policies were "very fair." *(See Figure 5).*

The Workplace Equity survey also included 27 questions related to specific aspects of the equity of organizational systems *(See Appendix A.)* We combined the responses to the 27 items to create an Organizational Systems Equity Index, with scores that could range from 1 to 4. The average (mean) score was 3.18.

Is there a relationship between employee access to flexible job structures and organizational equity?
We explored the relationships between the respondents' assessment of the equity of organizational systems and employee access to flexible work structure, comparing the scores on the Organizational Equity Index with the Flexible Job Structure Index. We found that, controlling for factors such as the percentage of employees who were people of color, organizational size, nonprofit status, the percentage of employees who were full-time, and the percentage of employees who were women, organizations with higher scores on the **Flexible Job Structure Index** reported stronger **organizational equity.**

Figure 5: **Overall Equity of Organizational Systems**

How would you rate the fairness of the policies and practices at your workplace, overall?

Not at all Fair 0.7%

Somewhat Fair 5.0%

Very Fair 46.1%

Fair 49.2%
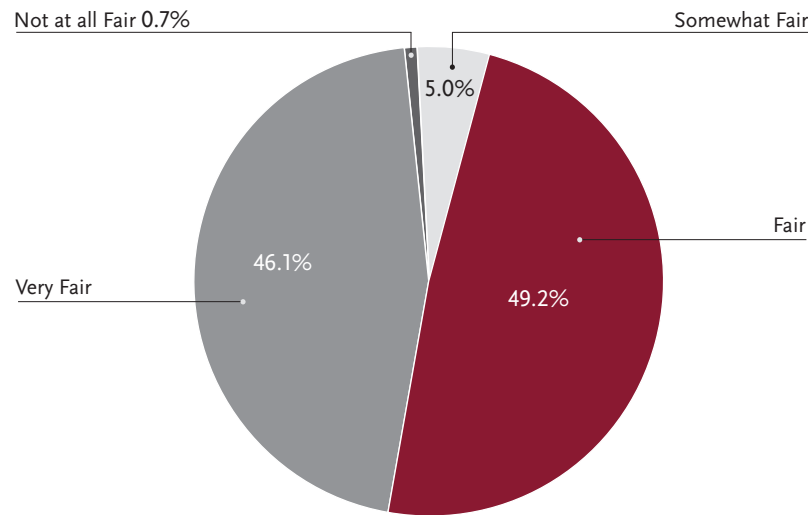
% of respondents (n-141)

■ Not at all Fair   ■ Somewhat Fair   ■ Fair   ■ Very Fair

[8]French (2005) explains: "Equal access, opportunity and treatment encourage equal outcomes for all individuals regardless of their differences, whereas equitable access, opportunity and treatment encourage different outcomes for different individuals." (p. 52) French, E. (2005). The importance of strategic change in achieving equity in diversity. *Strategic Change*, 14. 35–44. DOI: 10.1002/jsc.708

Section V: Organizational Resilience and Employee Access to Flexible Job Structures

The disruptions experienced by workplaces across the country in 2020-2021 augmented the importance of resilience for many organizational leaders. We used data from the Boston Workplace Equity Study to examine the relationship between employee access to flexible job structures and organizational resilience.

At Work Equity, we use the following definition of organizational resilience:

"Organisational resilience ... involves the ability of the organisation to withstand significant adversity and yet bounce back from the disturbance to perform effectively and sustainably for the future and remain on track with its desired future in accordance with its articulated mission and strategic goals ...."[9]

In the context of the turbulence of 2020-2021, we asked the respondents to summarize the resilience of their organization over the past 18 months. Their responses provided an indication about whether their organizations were either: on the verge of collapse, struggling, resilient, or thriving.[10]

None of the respondents reported that their organizations were "on the verge of collapse", 40.4% of the organizations reported that, "...we basically feel we are resilient" and 42.2% expected that their organizations would thrive in the future. *(See Figure 6).*

Is there a relationship between organizational resilience and employee access to flexible job structures?

Using information gathered from the respondents to the Boston Workplace Equity Study, we did not find a relationship between flexible job structures and organizational resilience.

Figure 6: **Assessment of Overall Oragnizational Resilience during the Past 1.5 Years**
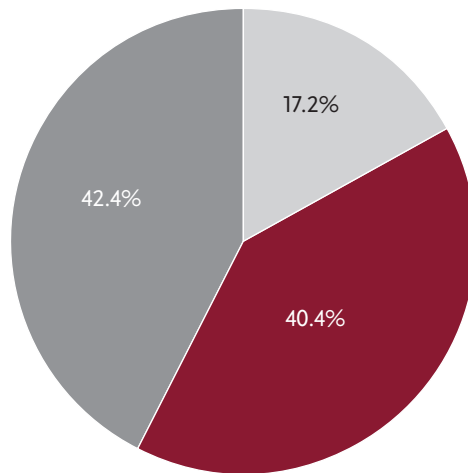
% of respondents (n=151)

- We have been able to respond to some of the smaller and more predictable changes in our business environment.
- We have been able to adjust and adapt to changes in our business environment.
- We have been able to make changes and even innovate in response to changes in our business environment.

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[9]Bui, H., Chau, V.S., Degl'Innocenti, M., Leone, L., & Vicentini, F. (2019). The resilient organisation: A meta-analysis of the effect of communication on team diversity and team performance. *Applied Psychology*: An International Review, 68(4). 621-657. DOI: 10.1111/apps.12203

[10]See Ruiz-Martin, C., López-Paredes, A., Wainer, G. (2018). What we know and do not know about organizational resilience. *International Journal of Production Management and Engineering*, 6(1), 11-28. DOI.org/10.4995/ijpme.2018.7898

Conclusion

The Covid-19 pandemic has brought renewed attention to the benefits that flexible job structures can offer to both employees and employers. The ability to redesign jobs in terms of time, space, and job responsibilities/demands has become a highly valued resource.

Among the respondent organizations, approximately 2 of every 5 allow "most/all or almost all" (e.g., at least 85%) of their employees to have some choice with regard to: working overtime hours, periodically changing starting and quitting times, and working remotely.

Our analyses of the Boston Workplace Equity Study have revealed a number of factors related to the extent of employee access to flexible work structures:

- Size of the Workforce
- Pressures Experienced by the Organization
- Employee Stress
- Organizational Equity

We did not find a relationship between the extent of pressures on employees and their access to flexible job structures. There are two possible reasons for this finding:

(1) The data were gathered from organizational leaders rather than from employees. It is possible that employees would have different assessments of the pressures they experienced during 2020-2021.

(2) It is common for time to elapse between employers' awareness of changes in employees' priorities and pressures and organizational responses, such as expanding employee access to flexible job structures. Many employers are in the midst of grappling with the action steps they might want to take as our country transitions out of the pandemic.

As they move into 2022, employers across the United States have entered into a new "talent war" era. Many organizations may find that offering flexible job structures helps prospective applicants to see the organizations' policies and practices as being both relevant and supportive. The findings of the Boston Workplace Equity Study suggest that employers might want to explore the extent to which increases in organizational pressures and employee stress might prompt workplaces to expand the flexible work structures at the workplace. Furthermore, our findings suggest an underlying connection between organizational equity and employee access to flexible job structures. ∎

Appendix A:

Survey Items Included in the Organizational Systems Equity Index

% : "to a great extent"

Core Values: Affirm the critical connection between the organization's diversity initiatives and its strategic/operational plans = 38.1%

Planning and Assessment: Set expectations that the organization will routinely collect and analyze data which could provide insight into possible inequities at the workplace = 20.1%

Recruiting + Hiring: Specify the steps the organization will take to ensure that recruitment and hiring for open positions is fair and unbiased, without regard to demographic or social identities = 44.3%

Recruiting + Hiring: Specify that the compensation system of this organization is fair, without regard to employees' demographic or social identities) = 51.4%

Job Structure: Set expectations that supervisors will use an equitable process when considering employee requests for flexible work arrangements and other alternative work options = 39.9%

Job Structure: Set expectations that employees who work remotely or who work non-traditional hours will have access to technical assistance and advice = 35.0%

Employee Benefits: Ensure that employees have equitable access to health insurance for themselves = 61.3%

Employee Benefits: Ensure that employees have equitable access to health insurance for family members = 56.5%

Employee Benefits; Ensure that employees have equitable access to paid family and medical leave with job guarantees when returning to work = 62.3%

Employee Benefits: Ensure that employees have equitable access to disability insurance coverage (also called temporary disability insurance or sickness and accident insurance) = 50.7%

Employee Benefits: Ensure that employees have equitable access to a plan for long-term care = 29.2%
Employee Benefits: Ensure that employees have equitable access to dental insurance = 58.7%

Manager Training: Set expectations that managers will participate in training relevant to equity and inclusion at the workplace = 36.3%

Employee Training: Specify that formal and informal training opportunities will be available to all employees without bias so that they can advance their careers = 48.5%

Separation: Ensure that decisions about furloughs and lay-offs are made in a fair and unbiased manner, without regard to employees' demographic or social identities = 62.4%

Performance, Promotion, Rewards, Recognition: Set expectations that supervisors will give feedback to employees and evaluate them fairly, regardless of such factors as race, age, sex, or social background = 64.4%

Performance, Promotion, Rewards, Recognition: Set expectations that supervisors will make promotion decisions based on employees' experience and competencies, regardless of such factors as race, age, sex, or social background = 65.4%

Accountability: Hold leaders at the organization accountable for diversity, equity, and inclusion at the workplace = 49.6%

Grievance: Clarify how the organization will handle grievances and disputes related to employees' work experience = 47.4%

Relationships: Set expectations that managers and team leaders should treat employees with respect, without regard to race/ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation or age = 80.5%

Relationships: Set expectations that co-workers treat one another with respect, without regard to race/ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, or age = 76.1%

Communication: Inform employees of resources available to them for managing work and family responsibilities = 32.8%

Communication: Inform employees about resources available to them that address inequities at the workplace = 27.3%

Participation: Support employee participation in networks/affinity groups/employee resource groups = 34.6%

Structural Responsibility: Explicitly assign responsibilities for equity and inclusion to at least one person = 34.3%

Well-Being: Affirm that employee well-being is a core priority 53.3%

Well-Being: Affirm that different types of opportunities and supports may be sought/needed by different groups of employees = 31.5%

Reputation: Establish the organization's positive reputation as a leader for equity and justice = 49.2%