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## SME employee perceptions about future work–life flexibility: findings from New Zealand

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### ABSTRACT

Employees of New Zealand small and medium enterprises (SMEs) desire more work–life flexibility and are seeking change in the workplace. Applying institutional theory and the related concept of institutional work as our theoretical frame, we explored employee perceptions about working arrangements and found a substantial desire for change. Specifically, 71% of 619 employees surveyed wanted more work–life flexibility, with the research highlighting three constructs that contribute to employee perceptions about their work and nonwork interface: working pattern control, job flexibility, and a sense of being respected. The findings are significant and novel as they illustrate a renewed desire on the part of employees to change work arrangement practices in response to recent lived experiences. Given these demands for flexibility are now being driven from an employee rather than employer perspective, this could lead to the development of new normative expectations that would place pressure on SMEs to change work arrangements in response to employees' active agency. In current high-employment environments, employee flexibility is likely to facilitate a recruitment and retention advantage, and each of the identified constructs will potentially play a fundamental major role in employee–employer relationships.

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### KEYWORDS

Job flexibility; sense of respect; SME; working pattern control; work–life flexibility; institutional theory; institutional work

## Introduction

Employees and employers responded to the disruption of established working arrangements caused by the COVID-19 pandemic by engaging in alternative working arrangements to ensure business continuity (e.g. Franken et al. 2021; Scott et al. 2023; Vyas 2022). While acknowledging that employees have sought flexibility to manage their work and nonwork demands for decades (e.g. Carlson et al. 2006; Chapman et al. 2014; Olson 1983; Pocock et al. 2008), recent research highlights how employees are now leveraging personal experiences of disruptions based on COVID-19 to define the future of their work, e.g. Adekoya et al. (2022), Chung et al. (2022), Macpherson et al. (2022).

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In this paper, we consider flexibility from the employee perspective which 'primarily emphasizes individual agency in the context of culture and structure' (Hill et al. 2008, 151). We also build from the premise that employees who have firsthand experience resulting from responses to COVID-19 are now aware of the impact these flexible arrangements can have on their ability to respond to, balance, and prioritise their work and nonwork demands. This has led to employees now negotiating their expectations and desires for when, where, and how they engage in work more assertively.

Institutional theory and the related concept of institutional work (Lawrence and Suddaby 2006; Lawrence et al. 2009) were used as our theoretical lens allowing this exploratory study to be contextualised within the framework of work–life flexibility. Our motivation was to explore whether a shift in employee desires for more flexibility in their work arrangements was occurring, and if so, what was contributing to employee desires for the future of their work and nonwork interface. We addressed this through our research question, which asks: How do employees perceive their work and nonwork interface, and given recent workplace experiences linked to COVID-19, do employees desire greater work–life flexibility, and if so, what are the primary drivers of this?

The research was undertaken in New Zealand (NZ) and involved small- and medium-sized firms, defined as those with fewer than 100 employees. NZ was an opportune environment in which to undertake this study for two primary reasons. First, 98% of all businesses in NZ with at least one employee are SMEs, employing approximately 43% of the total workforce, making this a significant social and economic group (Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment 2021)). Second, the length and stringency of lockdowns relating to COVID-19, and the period during which the border was effectively closed to travel, were significant when compared to other OECD countries (Wilson et al. 2021). These restrictions reflect the elimination strategy adopted by the NZ government, which resulted in NZ ultimately having the lowest cumulative COVID-19 death rate in the OECD and being the 6<sup>th</sup> best performing country in terms of GDP over the period quarter one 2020 to quarter one 2021 inclusive (Wilson et al. 2021). These COVID-19-related measures also impacted greatly on work practices, employee behaviours and experiences, and the social contract that existed in NZ between SME employers and employees prior to COVID-19. This impact is evident elsewhere, as it has been highlighted that 'in a post-pandemic world where there are more job openings than candidates, employees are holding the pen to write that new social contract' (Summer 2022, para. 6).

By examining the evolving perceptions and expectations of SME employees regarding the work–nonwork interface and work–life flexibility, this paper effectively addresses two gaps in extant literature. First, it identifies shifts in SME employee expectations across various demographics, a critical element for understanding the changing work–life dynamics. Second, it postulates as to how these shifting employee expectations are affecting or likely to affect future institutional norms and, in turn, organisational behaviour. Our study, therefore, contributes to the literature by revealing a more detailed picture of employee perceptions and expectations regarding work–life flexibility across demographics post COVID-19, than previously documented.

## Literature review

The literature review initially discusses institutional theory and the concept of institutional work, providing the rationale for their application as our theoretical lens. It then explores the work–life literature generally, and the concepts of workplace flexibility specifically, as components of that literature. The review subsequently contextualises the research within NZ, outlining the nation’s response to COVID-19 and how that response impacted on employers and employees and resulted in unprecedented flexible working arrangements. Finally, the review concludes by asserting that coercive pressure from government in response to COVID-19 was the primary initial catalyst for major changes to established work practices. However, in a post-COVID-19 environment, where there is emerging evidence that employees are continuing to demand greater flexibility than they did pre-COVID-19, it is unclear how the work and nonwork interface is perceived by employees, if there is an increase in desire for greater flexibility, and if so, what is contributing to these desires. We conclude this section by restating our research question and providing a conceptual model.

### *Institutional theory and the concept of institutional work*

In seeking to understand the work–life domain, and more specifically flexibility in a post-COVID-19 environment where employees’ lived experiences mean they now have a practiced understanding of how flexible working practices can be operationalised, institutional theory and the related concept of institutional work were deemed to provide an appropriate theoretical lens. Institutional theory investigates how organisational changes are driven less by functional considerations and more by symbolic actions and external influences (Meyer and Rowan 1977). It not only explains why organisational structures and practices become entrenched, but also how and why change occurs. There are three types of institutional pressures instrumental in promoting organisational change. First, when new rules are introduced and backed by enforcement, coercive pressures can stimulate change either directly or indirectly via institutional dependencies. Second, mimetic pressures to copy successful forms during periods of transformation or high uncertainty can promote change. As new standards or practices become more widely accepted and adopted, they become gradually more legitimised in the environment. Third, normative pressures arise from individuals’ expectations, values, norms, and standards (Zhang et al. 2011).

When coercive, mimetic, and/or normative pressures exert sufficient force on organisations, resulting in changes to behaviour across a breadth of organisations within a sector, industry, or geographical location, the overarching patterns of practice are seen to change (Beckert 2010). These patterns of practice then continue to influence organisational behaviour, as the shift in practice at the institutional level feeds into organisational decision-making and practices (Hu et al. 2006).

Institutional work is a concept related to institutional theory which prioritises the agency of individuals in organisations and examines the ‘practices of individual and collective actors aimed at creating, maintaining, and disrupting institutions’ (Lawrence et al. 2011, 52). It recognises the challenges and complexities of eliciting change in organisations while also recognising the potential influence of actors.

In the context of our investigation into the work–life domain, and specifically work–life flexibility within NZ SMEs, institutional work was deemed to provide a framework for understanding how employees within SMEs, individually or collectively, can be a catalyst for change and the instigators of new normative frameworks. In addition, institutional work was deemed to overcome an inherent limitation evident in the application of institutional theory where actions are predominantly seen as institution-led rather than worker-led. That is, institutional work provides us with a framework to more fully consider how employee-led actions can be a catalyst for normative and organisational transitions.

### ***Work–life research***

Research in the domain of ‘work-life’ focuses on the intersection between tasks in employment (work) and activities and commitments outside of work (life), which can produce a sense of conflict and enrichment (Hagqvist et al. 2020). Historically, this research domain focused on how work and family interact (Greenhaus and Beutell 1985) and considered related predictors and consequences (Abendroth and den Dulk 2011). More recently, the focus has shifted to wider facets of ‘life’ or ‘nonwork’ domains beyond domestic and family care (Casper et al. 2018) and has considered organisational practices introduced to facilitate the integration of employees’ work and nonwork demands (Bardoel 2016; McCarthy et al. 2010).

Flexible working practices, which can include employee working pattern control and job design flexibility, have been a core research focus within the domain of work–life research and have been identified as having a positive impact on individuals and organisations (e.g. Kelliher and Anderson 2008; Weideman and Hofmeyr 2020; Wheatley 2017).

Researchers have identified the positive relationship between job satisfaction and flexible work arrangements, and the converse negative effects of working hours and work pressures on reported satisfaction (e.g. Abendroth and den Dulk 2011; Johnston et al. 2022; Yu 2014). Mokhtar (2020) specifically highlighted major benefits to employees working remotely, including financial and energy savings, increased family time, decreased stress, and increased productivity.

Employees often seek flexibility to better balance their work and personal lives, or their work and nonwork interface, and value having a degree of control over their work. The ability to control when and where they work has been shown to contribute to improved employee well-being and job satisfaction (Golden et al. 2014; Grund and Tilkes 2023). Work arrangements that provide employees with the ability to choose how they organise their tasks and manage their time have been shown to enhance job satisfaction (Drago et al. 2009), and the freedom to structure the workday according to personal preferences has been shown to lead to higher efficiency (Berkery et al. 2017). Literature also suggests that offering flexible work options can be a competitive advantage for employers in attracting and retaining top talent (Richman et al. 2008).

Overall, the extent to which individuals perceive autonomy provided by flexible working practices is a recognised well-being factor (Lases et al. 2018; Syrek et al. 2022; Zöllner and Sulíková 2021). In the workplace, perceived autonomy can be considered to be the level of control that employees perceive they have regarding the conduct of their tasks (Breugh 1985; Khoshnaw and Alavi 2020) and can have significant positive impacts on outcomes including commitment, satisfaction, work–life balance, stress, burnout,

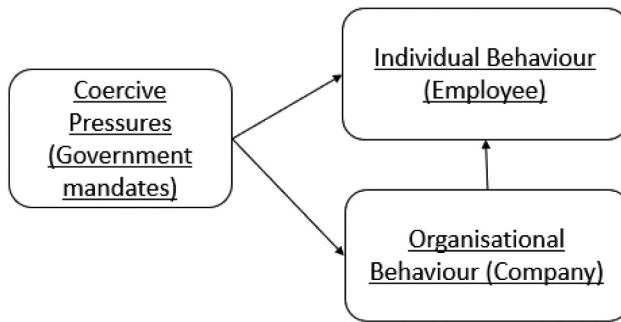
engagement, and performance (Khawand and Zargar 2022). It is also evident that while many millennials want to be able to work from home or have flexible hours (Deloitte 2018; Finn and Donovan 2013), recent studies also show shifts in working pattern practices post-COVID for other demographic groups (Moore et al. 2022; Pataki-Bittó and Kapusy 2021).

Conversely, research has also identified negative outcomes from flexible work practices (Putnam et al. 2014). Increased working from home may, for example, lead to blurred boundaries and make it harder to free oneself (Peters et al. 2009). For some employees, workplace flexibility can also impact their work-nonwork balance and create imbalances in a division of labour depending on gender and vocation (Chung 2018, 2022). Individual preferences about boundaries between work and nonwork might differ (T. Allen et al. 2014; Daniel and Sonnentag 2016), especially as individuals mature and their goals, preferences, and cognitive processes change. A young employee, for example, may prefer to balance work with travel, study, volunteering, leisure, and hobbies (Klimchak et al. 2019), while older employees may be concerned with balancing work and family (Haar 2013). Other recognised dark side effects of workplace flexibility include work intensification, where employees feel pressured to be constantly available and responsive (Wattree 2020). This can blur the boundaries between work and personal life, potentially leading to burnout (Buruck et al. 2020; Haley and Miller 2015). Another is the paradox between autonomy and flexibility, whereby employees feel overwhelmed by the responsibility of managing their own schedules and making decisions about when and where to work (Cañibano 2019). Further, Davis (2023) argued that flexible working practices can lead to a form of self-exploitation, where work becomes dominant in all spheres of an employee's life, with no 'balance' at all. Given that not all employees have equal access to flexible work arrangements, with certain roles requiring a physical presence and not all employees having the necessary technology or a suitable home environment for remote work (Araki 2023), flexibility for some can lead to perceived workplace inequity.

In the contemporary post-COVID-19 environment, virtual and hybrid work, otherwise recognised as enhancing flexibility, can also arguably lead to a lower sense of employee belonging and identification with their employers. In such situations, it has been suggested that organisations should consider remedial steps such as increasing team interdependence to enhance the employees feeling of belongingness and creating a sense of being respected in the workplace (Araki 2023; Grant 2008; Spitzmuller et al. 2023; Wheatley et al. 2023).

### ***COVID-19 and the New Zealand context***

Globally, organisational behaviour underwent widespread rapid change commencing in early 2020 as governments responded to COVID-19. These changes were a direct result of coercive pressures implemented in the form of frameworks, regulations, and mandates (Petherick et al. 2021). Because these were anticipated to be short-term measures in response to an external crisis, the coercive pressures might not necessarily have been anticipated to result in institutional shifts. However, these coercive pressures did result directly in changes to individual behaviour, as mandates required people to engage in physical distancing and avoid public spaces (World Health Organisation 2020).



**Figure 1.** Institutional pressures and institutionalisation of organisational behaviour (adapted from Hu et al. 2006).

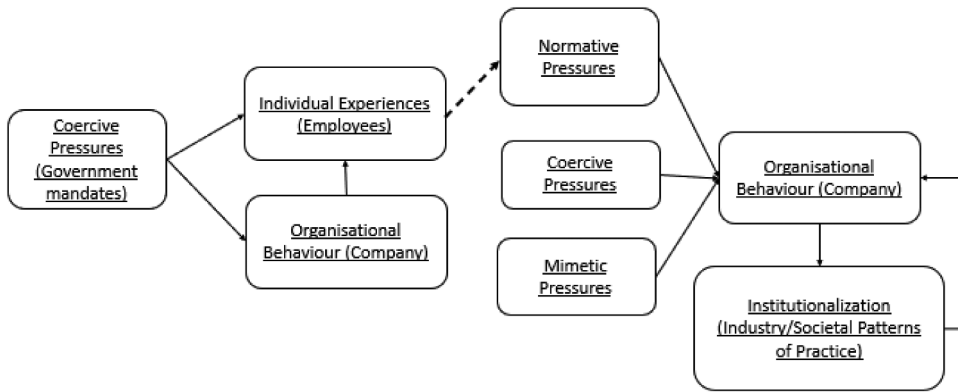
In NZ, specifically, the government's response to COVID-19 meant short notice advice to organisations requiring physical closure and employees navigating working from home (Cumming 2022; Hafner and Sun 2021). While individuals noticed a direct impact of mandates on their nonwork activities, they also experienced a direct impact on work activities because of the organisational responses to maintain business continuity. Individual behaviour was changing because of the coercive pressures of government mandates directly on individuals and the flow-on effect of organisational responses (refer Figure 1).

From March 2020, when the first complete lockdown in NZ happened (the physical closing of all non-essential businesses), through to October 2022, businesses and individuals in NZ remained uncertain as to when they would receive such mandates, their duration, and how frequently their working situations might change. While coercive pressures were not always at play in NZ (during times when lockdown rules were lifted), until the government repealed the laws that allowed them to implement regulations within 24-to-48-hour timeframes, employees and employers operated with a sense of anticipation of requirements that could be brought to bear.

### **Research context and question**

COVID-19-related flexible working practices arose in response to several drivers, and in NZ workplaces it is reasonable to assert that one of these drivers included the valid health and safety concerns of the employees, and employers. However, the most significant drivers were the coercive policies and laws implemented by government that required non-essential businesses to halt physical operations and that restricted the movement of people.

In post-COVID environments, it has been suggested that employees are continuing to demand greater flexibility than they did pre-COVID and that their experiences working under enforced flexible arrangements have helped them better understand how they might better manage their work and nonwork interface (Vyas 2022). However, it remains unclear how the work–nonwork interface generally, and workplace flexibility specifically, is characterised by employees, and if and how any demands for greater flexibility are impacting on organisational dynamics. Hence, our research question asks: How do



**Figure 2.** Conceptual depiction of COVID-19 government mandates as coercive pressures on individuals and organisations.

employees perceive their work and nonwork interface, and given recent workplace experiences linked to COVID-19, do employees desire greater work–life flexibility, and if so, what are the primary drivers of this?

Figure 2 illustrates the broader conceptual model being considered by the research. It indicates that coercive pressure from government mandates related to COVID-19 directly impacted on organisational and individual (employee) experiences through the enforced adoption of a range of flexible working practices. The dashed arrow then suggests that employee experiences may now in turn be creating new normative pressures as employees enact greater agency post-COVID to maintain or enhance their work–nonwork interface. The conceptual model draws heavily on institutional theory and the concept of institutional work.

## Research method

To address the research question, an online survey was undertaken using panel data (Walter et al. 2018). Six hundred and nineteen valid responses were obtained with screening questions used to ensure respondents were currently working a minimum of 20 hours per week at the time of the survey, worked prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, and worked for an SME in NZ.

The means of data collection used in this exploratory study was an approach being used more frequently in employee research (Ng et al. 2019), with a recent meta-analysis showing that there are no significant differences between panel data such as that used in this study, and conventional data (i.e. derived from mail surveys) (Walter et al. 2019). Software and screening questions were used to safeguard against multiple responses and remove respondents who answered the survey too quickly or too slowly to ensure the survey is being filled out as designed. Ethics approval was granted through the Massey University Human Ethics Research Committee, approval number 4,000,026,131.

The survey tool comprised four filtering questions, 27 enquiring questions and 16 demographic and employment-related questions. Questions 1–4 sought respondent permission to undertake the survey and filtered out ineligible respondents as defined

above. Questions 5–20 enquired of respondents' current work practices measured on 5-point Likert scales from strongly agree to strongly disagree. A sample item is 'I have enough work-life flexibility to manage my work and life demands.' Questions 21–23 had yes, no, unsure, and prefer not to answer as response options, with questions 21 and 22 asking respondents about organisational practices and subsequent impacts on other employees regarding work–life flexibility policies and question 23 asking about future desires of work practices relating to work–life flexibility. Question 24 asked what was driving the desire for more flexibility, allowing respondents to choose as many options as they desired, among choices such as 'personal well-being' or 'increased productivity.' Questions 25–30, measured on 5-point Likert scales from strongly agree to strongly disagree, asked about future work practices. A sample item is 'I want to determine how many hours I spend working each day.' Question 31 asked respondents why more work–life flexibility would not work for them. Respondents could choose as many options as they desired, among choices such as 'I need separation between work and home' and 'there is no support from my company.' The full survey is available in the [Appendix](#).

Data were analysed in two ways: through exploratory factor analysis and descriptive statistics. Exploratory factor analysis, using principal component analysis and oblimin rotation method, provided a means to validate the measures used and provided an explanation of variance (Abdi and Williams 2010; Fabrigar and Wegener 2011) and reliability statistics were used to check the internal consistency of constructs (Tavakol and Dennick 2011). Bivariate descriptive statistics were also run to study the frequency distribution for various populations (Warner 2012) and to explore the findings and consider patterns that arose within the theoretical frame.

## Results

The sample of 619 valid responses largely mirrored the employed NZ population (refer [Table 1](#)). There was no statistically significant difference between or among demographic groups or groups defined by employment-related factors or nonwork responsibilities,

**Table 1.** Participant gender, ethnicity, and industry of employment compared to NZ population.

		Survey Population	Employed NZ Population (StatsNZ 2022)
Gender	Female	54%	50%
	Male	45%	50%
	Diverse	0.6%	NA
Age	Under 30 years	32%	9%
	30 to 39 years	27%	23%
	40 to 49 years	18%	19%
	50 to 59 years	13%	18%
	60 to 69 years	8%	12% (60 years and over)
	70 years and over	2%	
Ethnicity	Asian	14%	16%
	European	61%	75%
	Māori	16%	17%
	Pacific Peoples	4%	8%
	Other	5%	2%
Employment industry	Primary	5%	5%
	Goods-producing	24%	20%
	Services	71%	75%

with the exception being a higher percentage of respondents under 30 years of age compared to the NZ population.

Exploratory factor analysis was initially used to analyse the data and identify latent constructs using principal component analysis. Three components were identified and subsequently confirmed as valid constructs following analysis for internal consistency through reliability tests using Cronbach's alpha.

The first component was comprised of five items reported on a 5-point Likert scale coded 1 = strongly agree to 5 = strongly disagree. This scale was adapted from Morgeson and Humphrey's (2006) Work Design Questionnaire (WDQ), specifically the work scheduling autonomy scale, and was deemed to effectively measure the construct of 'working pattern control.' The items are listed in Table 2. Overall, 28.8% of the variance was explained, with factor loadings from 0.65 to 0.88. This component provided an alpha of 0.85, demonstrating internal consistency, and therefore was considered to be valid and reliable.

The next component was comprised of five items reported on a 5-point Likert scale coded 1 = strongly agree to 5 = strongly disagree. Acknowledging the potential dark sides of flexible work-life practices, and drawing on research that suggests alternate interventions for enhancing an employee's work-nonwork interface (e.g. N. J. Allen and Meyer 1990; Grant 2008; Hagqvist et al. 2020; McKie et al. 2009; Nicks et al. 2020), these items measured the construct of 'sense of being respected in the workplace.' The items are listed in Table 3. Overall, 17.8% of the variance was explained, with factor loadings from 0.70 to 0.83. This component had an alpha of 0.84, demonstrating internal consistency, and therefore was considered to be valid and reliable.

The final component was comprised five items reported on a 5-point Likert scale coded from 1 = strongly agree to 5 = strongly disagree. The items for this scale were adapted from the WDQ and other research on flexible working (Wheatley 2017) and measured the construct of 'job flexibility.' The items are listed in Table 4. Overall, 13.4% of the variance

**Table 2.** Employees' perceptions of working pattern control ( $n = 619$ ).

	Have enough flexibility ( $n = 386$ )	Do not have enough flexibility ( $n = 233$ )	Difference
I can decide how to carry out my work	64%	34%	30%
I can determine at what time I work each day, including when I start and finish	51%	21%	30%
I can change the number of hours I was contracted for	53%	28%	29%
I can determine how many hours I spend working each day	49%	21%	28%
I can decide where I work (e.g. at home, the office, or other places)	51%	24%	27%

**Table 3.** Employees' perceptions on a sense of being respected in the workplace ( $n = 619$ ).

	Have enough flexibility ( $n = 386$ )	Do not have enough flexibility ( $n = 233$ )	Difference
I feel a strong sense of belonging to my organisation	80%	46%	34%
My manager values my contributions at work	87%	58%	29%
My manager trusts me to work independently	86%	59%	27%
My team values my contributions at work	85%	61%	24%
I have the opportunity to interact with and get to know other people at work	80%	61%	19%

**Table 4.** Employees' perceptions of desired job flexibility ( $n = 441$ ).

	Agree	Neither	Disagree
I want to determine at what time I work each day, including when I start and finish	75%	18%	7%
I want to determine how many hours I spend working each day	74%	20%	6%
I want to decide how to carry out my work	71%	24%	5%
I want to choose the location I work to suit my work–life needs	67%	20%	13%
I want to change the number of hours I am contracted for	45%	24%	31%

was explained, with factor loadings from 0.64 to 0.84. This component had an alpha of 0.81, demonstrating internal consistency, and therefore was considered to be valid and reliable.

To help with clarity of the tabled data and identification of patterns or trends, the 5-point Likert scales were collapsed to three categories. This is included in the presentation of results in Tables 4, 5, and 6, where responses to 'strongly agree' and 'agree' were combined and shown as 'agree' and responses to 'strongly disagree' and 'disagree' were combined and shown as 'disagree.' For Tables 2 and 3, the agreement reported is also for the combined responses of 'strongly agree' and 'agree.' Where no percent is shown for 'neither,' participants were not presented this option in the question.

Table 5 provides descriptive statistics that enabled exploration of the possible shift in employee demands in SMEs in NZ and consideration of the frequency distribution of responses to the items that comprised the validated constructs. All respondents are included in Table 5 figures to provide an overview of employee perceptions about their personal work–life flexibility and work–nonwork interface as well as organisational responses for the companies within which they worked.

Employees' perceived levels of working pattern control were considered for all participants. These findings are reported in Table 2, grouping respondents who indicated they had enough work–life flexibility to manage their work and nonwork demands ( $n = 386$ ) and those who did not indicate they had this flexibility ( $n = 233$ ). The percent figures shown in each row represent the percent agreement for each group as well as the percent difference between the two groups. The items are listed in order of greatest to least difference between the groups of respondents.

Like working pattern control, employees' sense of being respected in the workplace was explored by considering the same two groups of respondents: those who indicated they currently have enough flexibility to manage their work and nonwork demands ( $n = 386$ ) and those who did not agree to having that flexibility ( $n = 233$ ). The differences, in employee perceptions of trust, value, productivity, and sense of belonging to an

**Table 5.** Employees' perceptions about work–life flexibility and the impact of organisational decisions ( $n = 619$ ).

	Agree	Neither	Disagree
Compared to pre-COVID, I now have more work–life flexibility	52%	31%	17%
Compared to pre-COVID, I now want more work–life flexibility	67%	23%	10%
I have enough work–life flexibility to meet my work and nonwork demands	62%	25%	13%
I want more work–life flexibility in my job	71%	12%	17%
My company has made formal policy changes to enable more work–life flexibility since 2020, not including temporary changes during the pandemic	48%	-	52%
I know of employees who have left my organisation because the organisation did not provide enough work–life flexibility to match their needs	41%	-	59%

**Table 6.** Employees' perceptions of desired job flexibility, despite already having enough flexibility ( $n = 266$ ).

	Agree	Neither	Disagree
I want to determine at what time I work each day, including when I start and finish	81%	13%	6%
I want to determine how many hours I spend working each day	79%	16%	5%
I want to decide how to carry out my work	74%	22%	4%
I want to choose the location I work to suit my work–life needs	72%	17%	11%
I want to change the number of hours I am contracted for	66%	19%	15%

**Table 7.** Employees' perceptions of why they want more work–life flexibility ( $n = 441$  and  $n = 266$ ).

	All employees wanting more work–life flexibility ( $n = 441$ )	Employees who already have enough but want more work–life flexibility ( $n = 266$ )
Personal well-being	71%	71%
Family care	56%	58%
Lifestyle	48%	50%
Increased productivity	22%	23%
Less interruptions	14%	15%
Community involvement	11%	10%
Other	1%	0%

organisation, listed in order of greatest to least difference between the two groups, are reported in [Table 3](#).

To understand the trends about desired job flexibility, we considered the responses from the 441 employees who indicated they want more work–life flexibility in their job. [Table 4](#) reports what these respondents wanted in terms of flexibility, listed in order of most to least percent agreement.

A subset of this group was also considered – those employees who, although they indicated they already have enough work–life flexibility to manage their work and non-work demands, still wanted more work–life flexibility in their job ( $n = 266$ ). The reasons for this subset group wanting more work–life flexibility in their job are shown in [Table 6](#).

To more fully understand the respondents who wanted more work–life flexibility in their jobs, data were collected to gather insight into potential drivers, or reasons, for wanting this flexibility. The results are reported in [Table 7](#), listed from most to least selected. For this question, respondents could select as many options as they wished.

## Discussion

This research sought to answer the question: How do employees perceive their work and nonwork interface, and given recent workplace experiences linked to COVID-19, do employees desire greater work–life flexibility, and if so, what are the primary drivers of this? To address this question, we examined how employees characterise their work–nonwork interface, their current levels of perceived workplace flexibility relative to pre-2020, their satisfaction with current levels of workplace flexibility, and their current and future desired levels of workplace flexibility.

The period of work pre-2020 was used to compare to the current workplace as this encompassed work prior to the disruptive impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, with the

intervening period being one in which unprecedented shifts in organisational practices were caused by coercive pressures in the form of government regulations. A novel aspect of this study was that while past studies have largely focused on how companies respond to external pressures and seek to change work–life policies through coercive pressures in pursuit of efficiency goals (Pasamar and Alegre 2015; Pasamar and Valle 2015), this study focused on employees, their characterisation of the work and nonwork interface, their perceptions regarding past, present, and future workplace flexibility and considered how employee active agency could lead to normative pressures that ultimately change organisational behaviour.

Our findings indicated that employees have a desire for future work that improves the work–nonwork interface. This shift appears widespread across NZ SMEs and is similar across all demographic groups, and it is likely, given the strength of responses in our survey, that new normative pressures are developing, which are being forcefully promulgated by employees. Importantly for organisations, if these emergent normative pressures are strong enough across industries, communities, or parts of society, they will drive new patterns of practice or new ways of working (Pasamar and Alegre 2015).

Before delving into the constructs and employees' desires for future work practices, it is useful to note the overarching patterns observed through the data. More than half of the respondents indicated that, compared to pre-2020, they now have more work–life flexibility, while two-thirds of respondents agreed that they now, compared to pre-2020, want more work–life flexibility. Employee perspectives were not limited to their personal experiences and desires, but to organisational actions and what they have observed regarding other employees. Nearly half of the respondents acknowledged their organisation had made formal policy changes to enable more work–life flexibility and 41% indicated they knew of someone who had left their organisation because of a lack of work–life flexibility to meet their needs. Without comparing to pre-2020, 71% of respondents agreed they want more work–life flexibility in their job. We also found that 43% of respondents agreed to both having enough workplace flexibility and wanting more. The findings demonstrate the apparent shift from pre-2020 work practices to now, and the findings indicated that where organisations have not responded suitably for some employees, they have chosen to leave the organisation.

Returning to our motivation to understand both whether a shift in employee desires for more flexibility in their work arrangements was occurring, and if so, what was contributing to their desires the future of their work–nonwork interface, we initially used principal component analysis and reliability tests to identify key constructs that contribute to the work–nonwork interface. We found three valid and reliable constructs that contribute to employee perceptions regarding work–life interface that were labelled job flexibility, sense of respect in the workplace, and working pattern control.

Job flexibility consisted of five items that are evident in Table 4, which indicates that employees who wanted more work–life flexibility mostly wanted to be able to choose how their work demands fit within their day. The items that involved being able to decide the specific hours each day that they work were the top two indicators, with the choice of location ranking fourth. Comparatively, employees were less likely to want to change the number of hours they were contracted for.

The construct representing job flexibility was further explored by considering the subset group of employees who already had enough work–life flexibility but still

wanted more. It was notable that the percent agreeing with each statement was higher than those who were simply seeking more flexibility (but might not yet have it). For example, for the group  $n = 441$  (refer [Table 4](#)), the top two indicators had agreement at 75% and 74%, while this subset group involving those who stated that they already have enough flexibility of  $n = 266$  (refer [Table 6](#)) had the same top two indicators with agreement at 81% and 79%. That is, this subset group acknowledged they already had enough flexibility to meet their work and nonwork demands, while they clearly indicated what they still desire more flexibility. Again, the top four items that loaded to this construct for the subset group were about flexibility in carrying out daily work demands, while the lowest percent agreement was about changing the number of contracted hours.

Although we expected that working from home would be a strong indicator of desired flexibility (Blok et al. 2012), this was not the top priority for respondents. Flexibility of location ranked fourth for desired flexibility within a job. The findings therefore suggest that instead of organisations focusing on getting employees to return to the physical workplace (Kaufman et al. 2020), they could, instead, turn their attention to offering employees flexibility regarding when to work each day rather than where they work. The data suggests that desired flexibility is not simply a choice of working from home or the office, but flexibility in daily tasks, activities, and demands – both work and nonwork. Of course, it is also possible that the sample included a large number of employees for whom working from home was not practical due to the nature of their work and/or included a large number of employees who did not have a home working environment that was work conducive, as suggested by Araki (2023).

A sense of being respected in the workplace consisted of five items as shown in [Table 3](#). Responses of all 619 respondents were considered under two distinct groups – those who agreed to having enough work–life flexibility to manage their work and nonwork demands ( $n = 386$ ), and those who indicated they do not have this flexibility ( $n = 233$ ). The differences between the groups ranged from 19% to 34% and overall were viewed as considerable. Notably, the group that agreed to already having enough work–life flexibility had agreement levels of 80% or above for all items loading to this construct.

Further analysis of the results pertaining to respect in the workplace showed the item having the largest difference in terms of agreement between the groups was the feeling of a strong sense of belonging to an organisation, at 34% difference. While not specifically articulating trust, value, or respect when considered in combination with the desire for the feeling, this suggests that employees did not simply want separation from their organisation, for example, by being isolated physically when working from home. This suggests employees want to maintain a strong connection with their organisation but seek flexibility in structuring their days.

Working pattern control consisted of seven items (refer [Table 2](#)). For this construct, which embodies elements of autonomy and trust, the same two groups were used as for the sense of being respected workplace construct ( $n = 386$  and  $n = 233$ ). Again, both the level of agreement for each group and the differences between the groups were reported. Across all items for this construct, these differences ranged from 27% to 30%. For example, for the group who had enough flexibility, 64% agreed they could decide how to carry out their work, while only 34% of the group who did not have enough flexibility agreed to this. While 51% of those who already have enough flexibility could determine

when they start and finish their work each day, only 21% of the group who did not have the required flexibility agreed to this item.

We anticipated that respondents reporting on autonomy would include the 'where' of work or working from home as an item impacting autonomy (Putnam et al. 2014). However, we did not hold a similar expectation regarding the 'when' for completing work tasks. As shown in Table 2, the differences between those respondents who had enough flexibility and those who did not were highest for the items relating to how and when work was undertaken rather than where employees worked. Like the job flexibility construct, the data suggests that employees agree they have enough flexibility when they also have control over how they schedule their day's work and nonwork demands.

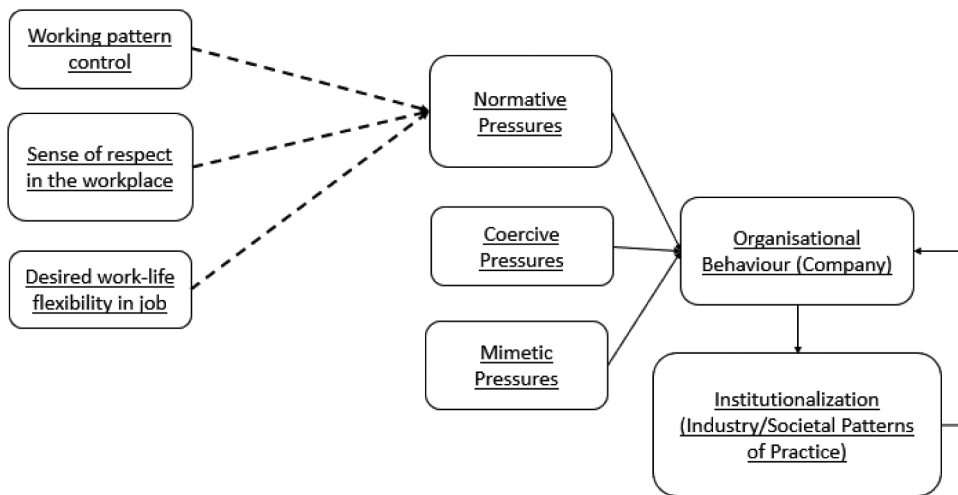
Using additional exploratory questions, we also note potential drivers of nonwork demands that contributed to employees seeking more flexibility. Table 7 shows the top three reasons respondents wanted more work-life flexibility: personal well-being, family care, and lifestyle. This was the case for the group that included all employees wanting more flexibility, and for the sub-group that only included employees who already perceived that they had enough flexibility, but still want more. The options of increased productivity, less interruptions, and community involvement were less notable.

Acknowledging the top three drivers could encompass a variety of sub-drivers, they provide an initial picture of influential reasons underpinning employee expectations pertaining to work-life flexibility that might drive new workplace norms. We note the large percent of respondents having selected personal well-being as an item compared to the other reasons and acknowledge this apparent importance may have resulted from concerns about health and well-being being top of mind for many individuals following the pandemic.

When considered together, the three identified constructs that contribute to work-life interface (job flexibility, sense of being respected, and working pattern control), evident trends regarding expectations of enhanced workplace flexibility post-COVID-19 (refer Table 5), and drivers for wanting more flexibility (refer Table 7) suggests that there are emergent normative pressures, driven by the active agency of employees through their behaviour, and that these pressures are currently impacting on, and will continue to impact upon, organisational behaviour. As suggested in Figure 2, when new norms of employee behaviour develop, they contribute to new normative pressures (den Dulk et al. 2013).

In addition, following data analysis and discussion, this consideration is refined further to suggest that these normative pressures include demands for greater flexibility, respect in the workplace, and work pattern control. Conceptually, this is shown in Figure 3. Further, while there may be other emergent normative pressures, from this research involving employees of NZ SMEs, it is suggested that demands for greater job flexibility, respect in the workplace and working pattern control, are underpinned by employees wanting to focus on personal well-being, lifestyle, and family care.

These findings are important for organisations, as emergent normative pressures will be placed on companies and potentially result in, or require, changes to organisational behaviour. This research suggests that a shift is apparent in terms of an increased desire for work-life flexibility within a job to meet work and nonwork demands. The employee perspectives contributing to the new normative pressures include flexibility of time and location of work tasks, having control over those



**Figure 3.** Conceptual depiction of new individual behaviours driving the development of new normative pressures.

decisions about working patterns, and feeling respected in the workplace. If organisations can understand these drivers, and how they impact employees and their specific workplace, they can work with employees as the new norms set in, for effective responses to organisational behaviour (Goodstein 1994). Returning to NZ specifically, where unemployment is low (StatsNZ 2022), if enough organisations respond to the new employee expectations and normative pressures, the need to follow similar practices might also end up driving businesses to change their policies to attract and retain sufficient and skilled labour.

### Conclusions, future research, and limitations

This article has focused on responding to the question: How do employees perceive their work and nonwork interface, and given recent workplace experiences linked to COVID-19, do employees desire greater work–life flexibility, and if so, what are the primary drivers of this? Using exploratory factor analysis and descriptive statistics, three valid and reliable constructs were identified as contributing to employee perceptions of their work–life interface. The findings highlight that SME employee perceptions have shifted since pre-2020, informed by desires for increased job flexibility, being respected in the workplace, and having more control over working patterns. The data showed that these employee expectations are not limited to a specific demographic group or group of individuals organised by employment-related characteristics, nor are there statistically significant differences across industries – they are widespread across NZ SMEs.

The article contributes theoretically to the literature on institutional theory and the concept of institutional work and to our understanding of how new normative pressures can emerge in the workplace through the active agency of employees. It is also reasonable to suggest that the results indicate that the lived experience of COVID-19 and the associated significant changes in work practices, underpin a new awareness and

confidence on the part of employees as they press for workplace change in the full knowledge of how workplace flexibility can further improve their work–nonwork interface.

The research also validated three constructs: working pattern control, sense of respect in the workplace, and desired job flexibility, using scales adapted from existing literature. These three constructs, when combined, contribute to our understanding of the work–nonwork interface.

The findings are also important for organisations. When employers recognise employee demands and what underpins them, they can understand how these demands and their drivers inform the development of emergent normative pressures. These pressures, which may be brought to bear on companies, will require a change in organisational behaviour. The knowledge and anticipation of employee perceptions will help employers make sense of employee behaviours, desires, and expectations and respond effectively and prepare for the future workforce.

Our future research aims to investigate the concepts of job control and autonomy on employee well-being, mediated by work-, family-, and leisure orientations, job control, and relationships to employees' perceptions of their work–nonwork interface. Other future research might explore management responses and organisational change, where employers and employees can work together to create new norms that benefit all parties, rather than conflict arising from new expectations that cannot be met. Acknowledging there is yet to be consensus on whether emergent normative pressures are permanent, others might wish to add to that conversation.

The research presented in this paper has some noted limitations. The first of these is that the survey captured cross-sectional data. This is often an issue for the efficacy of research and therefore it is recommended that future research is undertaken examining different time frames. That said, the research was positioned purposively in a moment in time and sought to have respondents reflect on the pre-2020 (pre-COVID-19), while it was still relatively fresh in their mind and compare that to current perceptions regarding their work–nonwork interface.

It should also be recognised that the research was conducted in one constituency that being NZ. While the specific context allowed the researchers to establish a baseline environment for respondents, the NZ focus may restrict generalisation to other contexts.

It is also recognised that the research focus on employees means that we have not examined employer perceptions regarding the work–nonwork interface, how that may have changed in response to COVID-19, and what recognition if any may exist regarding normative pressures emanating from employees regarding work pattern control, sense of respect, and flexibility in job. That said, the research purposively focused on employees as the sample population, and from a theoretical perspective we were interested in the potential for employee agency to be a catalyst for normative pressures to emerge, reflecting employee-led rather than employer-led changes in the work–nonwork interface.

## **Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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## Appendix

### Survey questionnaire

Questions 1–3 are screening questions

- (1) Do you currently work 20 or more hours each week?
- (2) Were you working prior to the COVID-19 pandemic?
- (3) Do you work for a small-medium enterprise (SME comprising between 5 and 100 employees)?  
The following questions ask about how much work–life flexibility you currently have (1–5 Likert scale of strongly agree to strongly disagree):
- (4) Please indicate your agreement with the following statements regarding your current work practices.
  - (a) Compared to pre-COVID-19, I now have more work–life flexibility.
  - (b) Compared to pre-COVID-19, I now want more work–life flexibility.
  - (c) I have enough work-life flexibility to manage my work and life demands.
  - (d) I can change the number of hours I was contracted for.
  - (e) I can decide where I work (e.g. at home, at the office, other places).
  - (f) I can determine how many hours I spend working each day.
  - (g) I can determine at what time I work each day, including when I start and finish.
  - (h) I can decide how to carry out my work.
  - (i) My manager trusts me to work independently.
  - (j) My manager values my contributions at work.
  - (k) My team values my contributions at work.
  - (l) I have the opportunity to interact with and get to know other people at work.
  - (m) I feel a strong sense of belonging to my organisation.
  - (n) I feel I am more productive when I have work-life flexibility.
  - (o) I feel I was more productive when I worked in my traditional working pattern (pre-COVID-19).
  - (p) My productivity is not influenced by the level of work-life flexibility.
- (5) Has your company made formal policy change to enable more work-life flexibility since 2020, not including temporary policy change during the COVID-19 pandemic? (yes/no/in process/I don't)
- (6) Do you know of any employees who have left your organisation because the organisation did not provide enough work-life flexibility to match their needs? (yes/no)  
The following questions ask about how much work–life flexibility you want to have
- (7) Do you want more work–life flexibility in your job? (yes/no)
- (8) Why do you want more work–life flexibility? (multiple selection of options + other)
- (9) Please indicate your agreement with the following statements regarding your future work practices.
  - (a) I want to change the number of hours I am contracted for
  - (b) I want to choose the location I work to suit my work–life needs
  - (c) I want to determine how many hours I spend working each day
  - (d) I want to determine at what time I work each day, including when I start and finish
  - (e) I want to decide how to carry out my work
  - (f) I want to feel a strong sense of belonging to my organisation
- (10) Why would more work–life flexibility not work for you?