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Flexibility for Whom? Pay Band, Career Stage and Organisational Support as Correlates of Perceived Workplace Flexibility among IT-Enabled Services Employees in Karnataka, India

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Abstract:

Purpose: This study examines whether the experience of workplace flexibility is evenly distributed among employees of India's IT-enabled services (ITES) sector, and whether organisational support is associated with perceived flexibility and self-rated performance.

Design/methodology/approach: Survey data from 104 ITES employees in Karnataka were analysed using descriptive statistics, t-tests, one-way ANOVA with post-hoc comparisons and hierarchical regression.

Findings: Hybrid work and work from home were the most widely available options, while time-based options were reported by only a quarter to a third of employees. Perceived flexibility differed significantly by pay band ($\eta^2 = 0.14$), with the Rs. 40,001–60,000 band reporting the least flexibility, and senior employees reported less hybrid and shift flexibility than early-career employees. Gender, dependant care, shift type and city made no significant difference. Organisational support was positively associated with perceived flexibility ($\beta = .188$) and with task performance ($\beta = .260$), whereas perceived flexibility was unrelated to performance.

Practical implications: ITES firms should monitor who actually benefits from flexible work, design arrangements for mid-level and senior staff who carry supervisory responsibilities, and invest in supportive supervision and clear policies.

Originality/value: The study shifts attention from whether flexible work is effective to who experiences it, and identifies a possible 'squeezed middle' and a seniority penalty in perceived flexibility in an Indian service context.

Keywords: Workplace flexibility; access to flexible work; organisational support; career stage; IT-enabled services; India

Paper type: Research paper

I. INTRODUCTION

Flexible work has moved from the margins of human resource policy to its centre. Employers in India's IT-enabled services (ITES) sector, which includes business process management, contact centres and knowledge process outsourcing, now routinely advertise hybrid work, work from home, flexi-time and shift choice as part of their employee value proposition. In Karnataka, which hosts the largest concentration of the industry in the country, hybrid work has become the normal way of working for a large share of employees since the pandemic.

A formal policy, however, does not guarantee that every employee experiences the same degree of flexibility. Research in western organisations has shown that access to flexibility is often uneven. Kelly and Kalev (2006) found that the final decision on flexible arrangements commonly rested with managers, who granted it as a favour to valued

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employees rather than as an entitlement. Swanberg et al. (2005) documented disparities in access to flexible schedules across occupational and pay levels, and Sweet et al. (2014) showed that most employers offer flexibility to some of their workers but few offer it to the majority. Individually negotiated arrangements, or 'i-deals', allow some employees to secure more flexibility than others in the same organisation (Hornung et al., 2008). Older workers in European firms have been found to doubt whether all employees have equal access to flexible solutions (Richert-Kaźmierska & Stankiewicz, 2016).

In India, most studies of flexible work have asked whether it improves outcomes such as engagement, balance or performance (e.g., Sekhar & Patwardhan, 2021; Ugargol & Patrick, 2018). Fewer have asked who actually experiences flexibility, and whether the experience differs by pay, career stage, gender, family responsibility or the shift an employee works. This question matters in the ITES sector, where the workforce spans fresh graduates in entry-level process roles, mid-level team leaders accountable for service-level targets, and senior specialists, and where a large share of employees work night or rotational shifts for overseas clients.

This study addresses that gap using survey data from 104 ITES employees in Karnataka. Its objectives are (a) to describe the flexible work options that employees report as available and their actual pattern of working from home; (b) to examine whether perceived flexibility differs across pay bands, career stages, gender, dependant care responsibility, shift type and city of work; (c) to examine whether perceived organisational support is associated with perceived flexibility over and above these characteristics; and (d) to examine whether perceived flexibility and organisational support are associated with self-rated performance. In addressing these objectives, the study moves the discussion from whether flexibility works to the question of for whom it is available.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW AND HYPOTHESES

A. Formal availability and perceived flexibility

A distinction is commonly drawn between the formal availability of flexible arrangements and the extent to which employees feel able to use them. Hayman (2009) showed that the perceived usability of flexible arrangements, rather than their mere existence, was what mattered for work-life outcomes. Kelly and Kalev (2006) described the 'formalised discretion' through which written policies are filtered by managerial judgement. Timms et al. (2014) found that the uptake of flexible arrangements depended heavily on workplace norms, and that using them could even be associated with lower engagement over time where the culture was not supportive. Perceived flexibility, as measured in this study, therefore reflects the employee's lived experience of being able to choose working hours, to work from home, to have a say in hybrid days and to compress or swap shifts.

Flexibility can take several forms. Thompson et al. (2014) found that prospective employees valued flexibility in time more than flexibility in place, and that the two had independent effects. Lauring and Jonasson (2024) argued that hybrid work involves switching across location, modality and timing, so that two employees with the same number of office days may experience very different degrees of control. The present study therefore examines four forms of perceived flexibility, namely flexi-time, remote work, hybrid work and compressed or shift flexibility, as well as their overall level.

B. Pay band and career stage

Several arguments suggest that flexibility will rise with pay and seniority. Employees in better-paid and more senior roles typically have more autonomy, their work is judged by outcomes rather than by time logged, and their bargaining power allows them to negotiate individual arrangements (Hornung et al., 2008). Swanberg et al. (2005) found that lower-wage employees had less access to flexible schedules than higher-wage employees. On the other hand, more senior roles in service delivery often carry responsibility for team targets and client escalations, which may tie them more closely to fixed hours and office presence. In ITES operations, team leaders and process managers are expected to be available to their teams and to clients across shifts. Entry-level employees, by contrast, increasingly join an industry in which hybrid work has been the norm from the start of their careers. Because these arguments point in different directions, we frame our expectations in non-directional terms.

H1: Perceived flexibility differs significantly across pay bands.

H2: Perceived flexibility differs significantly across career stages.

C. Gender, family responsibility, shift and location

Flexible work is often framed as a policy for employees with caring responsibilities, especially women. Research shows that women and parents are more likely to use flexibility for family reasons (Shockley & Allen, 2011), and that women in Indian IT firms who use flexible options are more likely to remain in their careers (Shanmugam & Agarwal,

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2019). Chung and van der Lippe (2018) caution, however, that flexibility can reinforce rather than reduce gender inequalities, depending on who uses it and how it is perceived. Shift workers may face more limited access, since night and rotational shifts in voice processes are tied to client time zones and real-time service. Finally, the growth of ITES centres in tier-2 cities of Karnataka raises the question of whether employees outside Bengaluru experience the same flexibility as those in the capital. As prior evidence on these characteristics is mixed and largely from other settings, we treat them as research questions.

RQ1: Does perceived flexibility differ by gender, dependant care responsibility, shift type and city of work?

D. Organisational support

Perceived organisational support refers to employees' general belief that their organisation values their contribution and cares about their well-being (Eisenberger et al., 1986). According to organisational support theory and social exchange theory, such beliefs are built from the treatment employees receive, including fair policies and the behaviour of supervisors (Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002; Blau, 1964). Flexibility granted through supportive supervisors and clear policies is likely to be felt more strongly than flexibility that exists only on paper. Kossek et al. (2022) emphasise the role of work-life supportive leadership in turning policies into lived experience, and Indian studies have found that supervisor support shapes how flexible arrangements affect outcomes (Sekhar & Patwardhan, 2021; Yadav & Bagri, 2026). We therefore expect support to be associated with higher perceived flexibility, beyond the effects of pay, career stage and other characteristics.

H3: Organisational support is positively associated with perceived flexibility, after controlling for pay band, career stage, gender, dependant care, shift type and city of work.

E. Flexibility, support and performance

Evidence on the performance effects of flexible work is mixed. Meta-analytic and field evidence suggests modest or context-dependent benefits (Allen et al., 2015; Martin & MacDonnell, 2012), while some studies of Indian employees report gains and others report losses in productivity when employees work from home (Farooq & Sultana, 2021; Sekhar & Patwardhan, 2021). Organisational support, by contrast, has been more consistently linked to performance through the felt obligation to reciprocate (Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002). Talukder et al. (2018) found that supervisor support improved job performance in the Australian financial sector. We therefore expect support to be associated with performance, and examine whether perceived flexibility adds to this association.

H4: Organisational support is positively associated with self-rated performance.

H5: Perceived flexibility is positively associated with self-rated performance, after controlling for organisational support.

F. The Indian ITES context

Several features of the ITES sector in India make questions of access particularly relevant. The workforce is young and hierarchically layered, with large numbers of entry-level associates supervised by a much smaller group of team leaders and managers. Turnover has long been high, and demographic characteristics such as age, experience and income have been linked to employees' intention to leave Indian BPOs (Afroz & Haque, 2021). Night and rotational shifts are common, and research on women call centre agents has shown how midnight work interacts with family expectations and marriage prospects (Tara & Ilavarasan, 2011). After the pandemic, Indian organisations moved quickly to hybrid models. Verma et al. (2022) outlined the HR implications of hybrid workplaces in India, and Sampat et al. (2022) found that employees' preference for hybrid work was driven largely by the flexibility and balance it offered. Whether these new arrangements reach employees at all levels equally has not yet been examined in this sector.

III. METHOD

A. Participants and procedure

The data were collected through a structured online questionnaire distributed among employees of ITES firms in Karnataka. This paper uses the first 104 complete responses received in a larger survey of the sector. All scale items were mandatory, so the data contained no missing values. Participation was voluntary and anonymous. Of the respondents, 62 were men, 41 were women and 1 preferred not to state gender. 60.6 per cent were married and 53.8 per cent had care responsibility for children, elderly parents or both. 54.8 per cent worked in the day shift, 30.8 per cent in rotational shifts and 14.4 per cent in night shifts serving US or UK clients. 58.7 per cent worked in Bengaluru and the remainder in Mysuru, Mangaluru, Hubballi-Dharwad, Belagavi and other centres.

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For analysis, monthly pay was grouped into four bands: up to Rs. 25,000 (n = 16), Rs. 25,001–40,000 (n = 25), Rs. 40,001–60,000 (n = 26) and above Rs. 60,000 (n = 37); the small group earning above Rs. 1,00,000 was merged with the Rs. 60,001–1,00,000 group. Total work experience was grouped into three career stages: early, up to three years (n = 31); middle, three to ten years (n = 51); and senior, above ten years (n = 22).

B. Measures

Availability of flexible options was captured by asking respondents to tick all the flexible options offered by their organisation, from a list of six. The **number of days worked from home** in an average week was recorded on a scale of 0 to 5. **Perceived flexibility** was measured with twelve items covering four forms, each with three items: flexi-time (e.g., 'I can choose my starting and finishing time within the limits set by my organisation'; $\alpha = .60$), remote work ($\alpha = .52$), hybrid work (e.g., 'I have a say in deciding which days I work from the office'; $\alpha = .60$) and compressed work week or shift flexibility (e.g., 'I can swap or choose shifts when I need to'; $\alpha = .62$). The overall scale showed good reliability ($\alpha = .86$).

Organisational support was measured with five items adapted from the concept of perceived organisational support (Eisenberger et al., 1986), covering the supervisor's understanding of personal responsibilities, clear and fair flexible work policies, respect for the right to be offline, timely technical support and care for well-being ($\alpha = .75$). **Self-rated performance** was measured with nine items based on the Individual Work Performance Questionnaire (Koopmans et al., 2014), adapted to the ITES context, covering task performance (e.g., meeting productivity or SLA targets and quality scores), contextual performance and adaptive performance (overall $\alpha = .77$). All perceptual items used a five-point scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Some three-item sub-scales had alpha values between 0.47 and 0.62, which is common for short scales and acceptable for exploratory research (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994), but the composite scores were used for the main tests.

C. Analysis

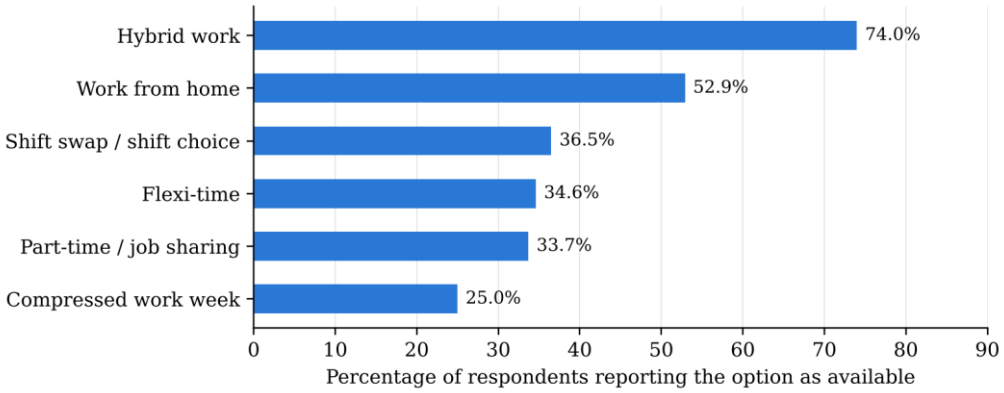
Descriptive statistics were used for the first objective. Differences in perceived flexibility across groups were tested with independent-samples t-tests and one-way analysis of variance, with Levene's test for equality of variances, the Welch test where variances were unequal, and Tukey's HSD for post-hoc comparisons. Effect sizes are reported as Cohen's d and eta squared (η^2). To test H3, perceived flexibility was regressed first on the personal and job characteristics and then on organisational support. H4 and H5 were tested by regressing self-rated performance and its three dimensions on organisational support and perceived flexibility, with gender and shift type as controls. Common method variance is a potential concern with single-source survey data (Podsakoff et al., 2003); procedural remedies included anonymity, separate questionnaire sections for different constructs and the use of factual items such as days worked from home.

IV. RESULTS

A. Availability of flexible options and patterns of home-based work

B. Figure 1

Flexible work options reported as available by respondents (multiple response)



Note. N = 104. Percentages exceed 100 because respondents could tick more than one option.

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Figure 1 shows that hybrid work was the most widely available option (74.0 per cent), followed by work from home (52.9 per cent). Time-based options such as shift choice (36.5 per cent), flexi-time (34.6 per cent), part-time work or job sharing (33.7 per cent) and the compressed work week (25.0 per cent) were each reported by only about a quarter to a third of the respondents. Every respondent reported at least one option, and the average was 2.57 options (SD = 1.13). Employees working in the hybrid mode spent 1.87 days a week at home on average, compared with 4.62 days for fully remote employees and 0.04 days for office-based employees. The number of available options tended to be lower for night-shift employees (mean 2.00) than for day-shift employees (mean 2.74), but the difference was not significant (Kruskal–Wallis H = 5.04, p = .081). The number of days worked from home did not differ significantly by pay band, career stage, gender, dependant care, shift type or city (all p > .25).

C. Differences in perceived flexibility (H1, H2 and RQ1)

TABLE I PERCEIVED FLEXIBILITY (OVERALL) BY PERSONAL AND JOB CHARACTERISTICS

Characteristic	Group	n	M	SD	Test
Pay band	Up to Rs. 25,000	16	2.88	0.42	$F(3, 100) = 5.46$, $p = .002$, $\eta^2 = 0.141$
	Rs. 25,001–40,000	25	3.28	0.79	
	Rs. 40,001–60,000	26	2.60	0.56	
	Above Rs. 60,000	37	3.05	0.61	
Career stage	Early (up to 3 years)	31	3.18	0.66	$F(2, 101) = 2.73$, $p = .070$, $\eta^2 = 0.051$
	Middle (3–10 years)	51	2.92	0.60	
	Senior (above 10 years)	22	2.77	0.74	
Gender	Male	62	2.91	0.67	$t(101) = -1.03$, $p = .305$, $d = -0.21$
	Female	41	3.04	0.64	
Dependant care	No dependants	48	2.99	0.64	$t(102) = 0.36$, $p = .723$, $d = 0.07$
	Has dependants	56	2.94	0.68	
Shift type	Day shift	57	2.97	0.71	$F(2, 101) = 0.09$, $p = .917$, $\eta^2 = 0.002$
	Rotational shift	32	2.99	0.63	
	Night shift	15	2.91	0.57	
City of work	Bengaluru	61	3.00	0.67	$t(102) = 0.57$, $p = .572$, $d = 0.11$
	Other cities	43	2.92	0.65	

Note. Gender excludes one respondent who preferred not to state gender. Levene's test was significant for pay band; the Welch test confirmed the difference ($F(3, 49.9) = 5.11$, $p = .004$).

Table 1 compares overall perceived flexibility across groups. Perceived flexibility differed significantly across pay bands ($F(3, 100) = 5.46$, $p = .002$, $\eta^2 = 0.141$), and the Welch test confirmed this result ($p = .004$). The pattern was not a simple rise with pay. Employees earning Rs. 25,001–40,000 reported the highest flexibility (M = 3.28), followed by those earning above Rs. 60,000 (M = 3.05) and those earning up to Rs. 25,000 (M = 2.88), while those earning Rs. 40,001–60,000 reported the lowest (M = 2.60). Tukey's test showed that the Rs. 40,001–60,000 band differed significantly from the Rs. 25,001–40,000 band (mean difference = 0.68, p = .001) and from the band above Rs. 60,000 (mean difference = 0.45, p = .026). H1 was supported.

Overall perceived flexibility declined from early-career (M = 3.18) to middle (M = 2.92) and senior employees (M = 2.77), but the overall difference fell just short of significance ($F(2, 101) = 2.73$, $p = .070$, $\eta^2 = 0.051$). No significant differences were found by gender, dependant care, shift type or city of work. In answer to RQ1, therefore, perceived flexibility did not depend on gender, family responsibility, shift or location in this sample.

TABLE II FORMS OF PERCEIVED FLEXIBILITY BY PAY BAND AND CAREER STAGE

Form	Factor	Group 1	Group 2	Group 3	Group 4	F	p	η^2	Significant Tukey pairs
Flexi-time	Pay band	2.77	3.31	2.55	3.01	5.01	.003	0.131	₹25,001–40,000 vs ₹40,001–60,000
	Career stage	2.92	3.00	2.77		0.67	.513	0.013	–

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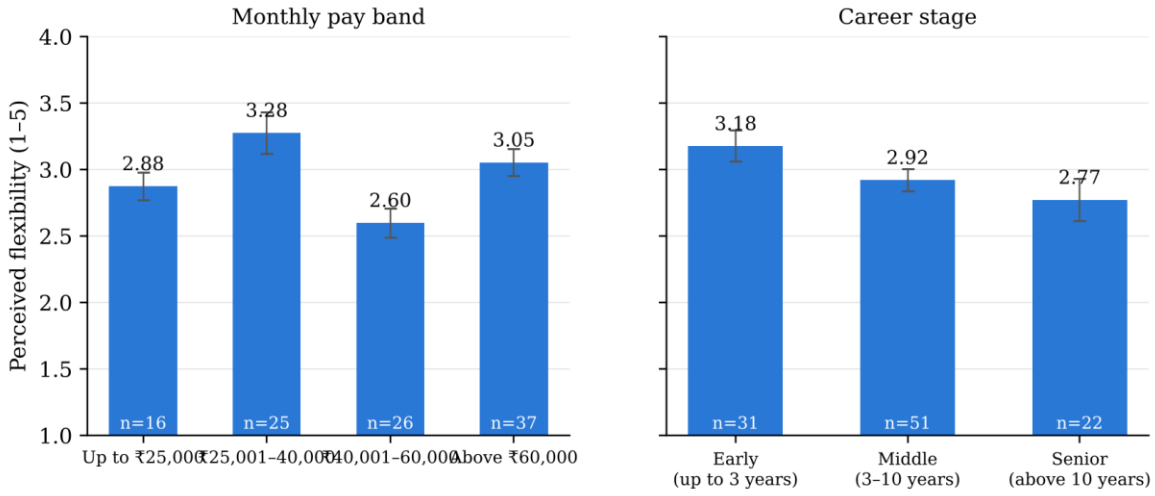
Form	Factor	Group 1	Group 2	Group 3	Group 4	F	p	η^2	Significant Tukey pairs
Remote work	Pay band	2.81	3.11	2.67	3.04	2.16	.097	0.061	–
	Career stage	3.12	2.83	2.88		1.64	.199	0.031	–
Hybrid work	Pay band	2.88	3.36	2.68	3.13	3.64	.015	0.098	₹25,001–40,000 vs ₹40,001–60,000
	Career stage	3.33	2.96	2.77		3.66	.029	0.067	Early vs Senior
Compressed / shift flexibility	Pay band	3.04	3.33	2.50	3.05	5.06	.003	0.132	Above ₹60,000 vs ₹40,001–60,000; ₹25,001–40,000 vs ₹40,001–60,000
	Career stage	3.33	2.90	2.67		5.02	.008	0.090	Early vs Middle; Early vs Senior

Note. Pay band groups 1–4: up to ₹25,000; ₹25,001–40,000; ₹40,001–60,000; above ₹60,000. Career stage groups 1–3: early (up to 3 years); middle (3–10 years); senior (above 10 years). Tukey HSD at $p < .05$.

D. Figure 2

E. Mean perceived flexibility by pay band and career stage



Note. Error bars show ±1 standard error of the mean.

Table 2 and Figure 2 break these results down by form of flexibility. The pay-band differences appeared in flexi-time, hybrid work and compressed or shift flexibility, with the Rs. 40,001–60,000 band scoring lowest on each, while differences in remote work were not significant. Career-stage differences were significant for hybrid work ($F = 3.66$, $p = .029$) and for compressed or shift flexibility ($F = 5.02$, $p = .008$), but not for flexi-time or remote work. In both cases, early-career employees reported more flexibility than senior employees, contrary to the view that flexibility increases with seniority. H2 was partly supported: career stage was associated with two of the four forms of flexibility.

F. Organisational support and perceived flexibility (H3)

TABLE III REGRESSION OF PERCEIVED FLEXIBILITY ON PERSONAL AND JOB CHARACTERISTICS AND ORGANISATIONAL SUPPORT

Predictor	Step 1 β	p	Step 2 β	p
Female	.119	.212	.115	.220
Has dependants	.053	.577	.050	.595
Rotational/night shift	-.029	.757	-.021	.824
Works in Bengaluru	.025	.798	.017	.857

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Predictor	Step 1 β	p	Step 2 β	p
Pay ₹25,001–40,000	.309*	.021	.348**	.009
Pay ₹40,001–60,000	-.144	.288	-.071	.607
Pay above ₹60,000	.193	.168	.251	.076
Middle career (3–10 years)	-.199	.077	-.212	.056
Senior career (>10 years)	-.255*	.022	-.277*	.012
Organisational support			.188*	.049
R^2	.21		.24	
Adjusted R^2	.14		.16	
F	2.79**		2.98**	
ΔR^2 (Step 2)			.03*	.049

Note. Standardised coefficients. Reference categories: male; no dependants; day shift; outside Bengaluru; pay up to ₹25,000; early career (up to 3 years). * p < .05; ** p < .01.

Table 3 presents the regression results. In Step 1, the personal and job characteristics explained 21.1 per cent of the variance in perceived flexibility ($F(9, 94) = 2.79$, $p = .006$). Adding organisational support in Step 2 raised the explained variance by 3.2 percentage points ($\Delta F(1, 93) = 3.96$, $p = .049$). Organisational support was positively associated with perceived flexibility ($\beta = .188$, $p = .049$), supporting H3. In the full model, employees in the Rs. 25,001–40,000 band reported significantly more flexibility than the lowest band ($\beta = .348$, $p = .009$), and senior employees reported significantly less flexibility than early-career employees ($\beta = -.277$, $p = .012$), with middle-career employees in between ($\beta = -.212$, $p = .056$). Once pay band and the other variables were controlled, the career-stage gradient that was only marginal in the bivariate analysis became significant for senior employees. Gender, dependant care, shift type and city were not significant.

G. Organisational support, perceived flexibility and performance (H4 and H5)

TABLE IV REGRESSION OF SELF-RATED PERFORMANCE ON ORGANISATIONAL SUPPORT AND PERCEIVED FLEXIBILITY

Outcome	Support β	p	Flexibility β	p	R^2	F	p (model)
Overall performance	.199	.050	-.027	.791	.05	1.17	.330
Task performance	.260*	.010	-.030	.766	.07	1.78	.139
Contextual performance	.123	.229	-.071	.486	.02	0.51	.727
Adaptive performance	.109	.279	.042	.678	.04	1.05	.386

Note. Standardised coefficients; gender and shift type included as controls (not shown). * p < .05.

As shown in Table 4, organisational support was positively associated with task performance ($\beta = .260$, $p = .010$). Its association with overall performance was of similar size but fell exactly at the conventional threshold ($\beta = .199$, $p = .050$), and its associations with contextual and adaptive performance were not significant. H4 was therefore supported for task performance only. Perceived flexibility was not associated with overall performance ($\beta = -.027$, $p = .791$) or with any of its dimensions, so H5 was not supported. The bivariate correlation between perceived flexibility and overall performance was also close to zero ($r = .01$, $p = .956$).

V. DISCUSSION

This study asked who experiences flexibility in India's ITES sector. The results suggest that flexibility is widely available in formal terms, since every respondent reported at least one option and hybrid work was reported by three-quarters of the sample. Yet the experience of flexibility was unevenly spread, and the unevenness followed lines of pay and career stage rather than gender, family responsibility, shift or location.

The most striking pattern concerned the Rs. 40,001–60,000 pay band, which reported the least flexibility in time, hybrid arrangements and shifts. In ITES operations, this band commonly includes team leaders, senior process associates, quality analysts and subject-matter experts, people who are accountable for the targets of others and who serve as the first point of escalation for clients and team members. Such roles may leave little room to choose hours or swap shifts, even when the organisation formally offers these options. We describe this as a possible 'squeezed middle' in ITES flexibility. The interpretation is tentative, since the survey did not record job titles, but it is consistent with

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arguments that responsibility for real-time service ties employees more closely to fixed schedules (Kelly & Kalev, 2006).

The finding that senior employees reported less hybrid and shift flexibility than early-career employees runs against the common expectation that flexibility increases with status and bargaining power (Hornung et al., 2008; Swanberg et al., 2005). One explanation is generational: employees who joined the industry after 2020 entered workplaces in which hybrid work was already normal, whereas senior employees built their careers in office-based operations and may continue to be expected, or to expect themselves, to be present. Another is that senior employees carry managerial responsibilities that limit their own flexibility while they administer flexibility for others. This mirrors the concern raised by Richert-Kaźmierska and Stankiewicz (2016), whose older respondents doubted that access to flexible solutions was equal.

It is notable that perceived flexibility did not differ by gender or dependant care. This may indicate that ITES firms in Karnataka apply flexible policies without regard to family status, which is consistent with a move away from treating flexibility as a concession for working mothers. It may also mean that employees with caring responsibilities do not receive the additional flexibility that their circumstances require. The absence of differences by city suggests that firms apply similar policies across Bengaluru and tier-2 centres. Night-shift employees tended to report fewer available options, which deserves attention in larger samples, given that their working hours are already constrained by client time zones and that night work carries particular personal and family costs, especially for women (Tara & Ilavarasan, 2011).

Organisational support was associated with higher perceived flexibility even after pay, career stage and other characteristics were taken into account. This supports the view that supportive supervisors and clear, fair policies help turn formal flexibility into lived flexibility (Hayman, 2009; Kossek et al., 2022). Support was also associated with better task performance, whereas perceived flexibility was not associated with any dimension of performance. Taken together, these results suggest that the performance benefits often attributed to flexibility may depend more on the supportive relationship within which flexibility is offered than on flexibility itself (Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002). This is consistent with the mixed findings on flexibility and performance in earlier studies (Allen et al., 2015; Farooq & Sultana, 2021).

A. Theoretical implications

The study contributes to the literature in three ways. First, it extends research on unequal access to flexibility, which has been conducted mostly in the United States and Europe (Kelly & Kalev, 2006; Swanberg et al., 2005; Sweet et al., 2014), to an Indian service setting, and shows that inequality may follow organisational position as much as pay. Second, it challenges the assumption, drawn from research on idiosyncratic deals, that flexibility rises with seniority and bargaining power (Hornung et al., 2008); in operational settings, responsibility for others may reduce rather than increase one's own flexibility. Third, it adds to organisational support theory by showing that support is associated with the perception of flexibility itself, which suggests that the lived experience of flexible work is partly a product of the exchange relationship between the employee and the organisation (Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002).

B. Implications for practice

Several practical implications follow. First, ITES firms should audit not only which flexible options exist but who is able to use them, broken down by pay band, role and career stage. Second, mid-level and senior employees who supervise others may need specific arrangements, such as rotating escalation duties, protected flexible days or deputies who can cover client calls, so that they too can benefit from flexibility. Third, because time-based options were reported far less often than place-based ones, firms could extend flexi-time and shift choice where processes allow, for instance in non-voice and knowledge work. Fourth, investment in supervisor behaviour and in clear, fair policy communication is likely to raise perceived flexibility and performance together. Finally, managers should not expect flexibility alone to raise performance; it is the supportive context that appears to matter.

C. Limitations and future research

The findings should be read in the light of several limitations. The sample of 104 employees was drawn by convenience from the first responses to a larger survey and may not represent the ITES workforce of Karnataka. Some groups, such as the highest pay band and night-shift workers, were small, and they were merged or analysed with caution. The design was cross-sectional and all measures were self-reported, so causal conclusions cannot be drawn and common method variance cannot be ruled out. The survey did not record job titles or process types, which would have allowed a direct test of the 'squeezed middle' interpretation. Future research should use larger samples, collect role and process information, combine self-reports with HR records of flexibility use and objective performance data, and follow employees over time as they move from entry-level to supervisory positions.

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VI. CONCLUSION

Flexible work is now almost universally available in some form in Karnataka's ITES sector, but it is not experienced equally. In this study, employees in the middle pay band and those in senior career stages reported the least flexibility, while gender, family responsibility, shift and city made little difference. Organisational support was associated with both greater perceived flexibility and better task performance, while flexibility itself was unrelated to performance. For employers, the message is that the fairness and support with which flexibility is delivered may matter more than the number of options on offer.

DECLARATIONS

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