<http://www.diva-portal.org>

Postprint

This is the accepted version of a paper published in *Journal of Education and Work*. This paper has been peer-reviewed but does not include the final publisher proof-corrections or journal pagination.

Citation for the original published paper (version of record):

Augustsson, G. [Year unknown!]

The client company marginally utilises the knowledge of highly skilled temporary staff.

Journal of Education and Work

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13639080.2014.997681>

Access to the published version may require subscription.

N.B. When citing this work, cite the original published paper.

Permanent link to this version:

<http://urn.kb.se/resolve?urn=urn:nbn:se:miun:diva-24138>

The client company marginally utilizes the knowledge of highly-skilled temporary staff

Gunnar Augustsson, Department of Education, Mid Sweden University, Härnösand, Sweden.

This study is based on the presumption that there is often an under-use of temporary staff in client companies (CC) with highly skilled professionals. The study combines theories of the flexible organization and a socio-cultural perspective on learning within the framework of an inter-organizational context. The data is based partly on seventeen transcribed, semi-structured interviews with individuals in various types of health care and social services. The data is also based on two semi-structured focus group interviews with managers responsible for hiring social workers, nurses, and doctors in two different temporary work agencies (TWA) as well as semi-structured focus group interviews with eight managers from a large health care organization. The results show that CCs only use a limited amount of the highly skilled personnel's capacity and exclude preconditions for taking over and absorbing knowledge from temporary workers. This contradicts the idea that staffing allows temps to increase their skills and enhance their employability. In addition, both TWA and the CC pronounce an interest in and readiness for deepening the business relationships between them, but they claim the other is responsible for initiation. The results reflect information not only about temporary workers with higher education but also the new business relationship between TWA and CC in the form of combined skills and workplace validation.

Keywords: Knowledge transfer; learning; socio-cultural perspective; temporary staff

Introduction

Some actors praise labor market flexibility, especially temporary work agencies (TWA), and others dismiss it. Regardless of the opinion on flexibility, in Sweden since 1993, it has been legal for both private and public employers (client companies) to use hired staff (SFS 1993:440). Independent of a client company's (CC) hired staff (short- and long-term) are both the temporary and the regular staff, including leaders affected by the temporary workers' learning as well as the knowledge transfer between new and existing employees (cf. Paré and Le Maistre, 2006). This transfer requires that both the temporary workers and the regular staff ensure temporary workers knowledge or awareness of a) what tasks are to be performed, b) how the tasks should be performed, c) in what places and situations different tasks should be performed, and (optionally) d) how their own task relates to other people's work.

The difference in learning in staffing compared to an employment in the CC is that the extent and/or turnover of temporary workers is usually (but not always) higher than the equivalent for regular staff (Augustsson, 2012). Therefore, staff hiring is often followed by a distinct yet similar complexity of learning for the CC. The propagation and the frequency of the knowledge that temporary workers initially bring with them into the CC are usually unknown to the CC's regular staff, may not initially match the skills and knowledge needed for the job, and must be supplemented with information on specific contextual conditions within the CC.

The industry organization for the Staffing Agencies in Sweden, Almega, give three ideological reasons for choose to work at an Agency: access to a lot of variation, networking opportunities, and a very competitive CV (Almega, 2014). Against this background, this paper studies how employers in health care use temporary staff. Such a study may shed light on the possibilities for effective learning and knowledge transfer between the CC's temporary workers and regular staff. Such knowledge transfer is 'the process through which organizational actors – teams, units, or organizations – exchange, receive and are influenced

by the experience and knowledge' (van Wijk, Jansen, and Lyles, 2008, 832). The authors show that labor organizations are dependent on new additions of knowledge, both for efficiency and business development (van Wijk et al., 2008). This kind of knowledge transfer is thus important in the cooperation between temporary workers and regular staff. The study's starting point is the presumption that in CCs with highly educated professionals, there are underutilized temporary workers, which can result in inefficient approaches to additions of new knowledge and high costs consistent with staff hiring. The study's level of analysis is the CC's handling of the temporary workers' skills and experience.

The flexible organization and learning

Since the 1990s, research on learning in organizations has increased (Jacobsen and Thorsvik, 2008; Stein, 1996). Such learning includes both individual and collective learning processes (Stein, 1996). Here, a special complexity will be added: Learning mainly includes persons rented by a company from another company. That is, there is an inter-organizational context (Augustsson, Olofsdotter & Wolvén, 2010).

The inter-organizational context can be described from Atkinson's (1984) idea of the flexible organization, which includes jobs that require both low and high education and short and long experience. These jobs include craftsmen, maintenance, finance, design, and sales. The ideas of functional, numerical, and financial flexibility could be applied to different types of occupations and tasks, and in a more or less planned manner (Stanworth and Druker, 2006).

The meaning of functional flexibility is 'that employees can be redeployed quickly and smoothly between activities and tasks', such as within an organization (Atkinson, 1984). The keywords are versatile skill and 'redployment'; Atkinson (1987, 90) addressed people with multiple areas of expertise as well as transfers between different types of work and professions.

The purpose of numerical flexibility is that the number of employees or hours worked within an organization 'can be quickly and easily increased or decreased in line with even short term changes in the level of demand for labour' (Atkinson, 1984, 1987). The keyword is 'unilateral skill'. This means that regardless of whether the person in question is more or less skilled, the CC is typically only interested in a certain aspect of the person's knowledge. Therefore, temporary doctors as well as industrial workers would receive similar treatment from organizations or organizational units applying numerical flexibility.

The purpose of financial flexibility is twofold: a) '[P]ay and other employment costs reflect the state of supply and demand in the external labour market'; and b) 'pay flexibility means a shift to new pay and remuneration systems that facilitate either numerical or functional flexibility' (Atkinson, 1984). Sweden applies a range of financial flexibility that falls within the scope of both (a) and (b) above. In autumn 2012, the Swedish Trade Union Confederation signed a specific agreement with Swedish Staffing Agencies (TT, 2012). The financial flexibility for health care professionals appears to be greater than it is for various occupations within the Swedish Trade Union Confederation because they do not follow any agreement but instead are governed by supply and demand within the respective County Council (Thelin, 2013; Walter, 2012). Both these cases are examples of a specific system for salary and compensation and are a reflection of the conditions of supply and demand.

In this context, it is essential to extend Atkinson's (1984) meaning of numerical flexibility from mainly affecting low-skilled jobs to affecting all levels of skill, except for industrial work (Augustsson, 2012). This would include both health care and social work (Augustsson, 2014). Atkinson's (1984) idea of flexibility is based on a 'separation of jobs which are specific to a particular firm from those involving only general skills'. He seems to connect

numerical flexibility with different types of occupation rather than specific tasks; he notes that these kinds of jobs ‘tend to be less skilled, [requiring] little training or retraining’. This is not true in cases where the County Council rents doctors or nurses or when the municipalities rent social workers. In the latter cases, the person has an occupation that requires complex skills and retraining. Therefore, it is particularly valuable in Sweden (compared to the Netherlands and the United Kingdom) to study what happens in organizations where temporary workers are highly trained and performing their duties in line with their higher education (Walter, 2012).

A frequent criticism of staffing is that it is expensive in the short term (Olsson, 2012; Öster, 2012a), and temporary workers are a particularly vulnerable personnel group (Boyce et al., 2007; Håkansson and Isodorsson, 2012; Öster, 2012b). More recently, researchers have criticized increased costs, particularly for County Councils (Folcker Aschan, 2013). Previous research on numerical flexibility in health care emphasized the importance of nurses hired for highly strategic reasons. Such a practice, when successful, is associated with reduced costs (Jooste and Prinsloo, 2013). A strategic approach also reduces the risk of temporary workers associated with a lack of job skills. Other research in health care shows that implementation of functional flexibility could result in significant stress, intensification of work, and learning new skills (Desombre et al., 2006). Further research in health care shows that temporary staff physicians appreciate their work situation (Alonzo and Simon, 2008).

Against this background, it is useful to study the deepening of the matching of workers and jobs (Walter, 2012) by analyzing the combination of numerical and functional flexibility in health care. The analysis makes it possible to study the conditions for learning in the flexible organization; to recognize, assimilate, and apply new outside knowledge (Koskinen and Pihlanto, 2006; Lahti and Beyerlein, 2000; van Wijk et al., 2008; Watson and Hewett, 2006); and to study the conditions for spreading the knowledge in question within the CC (Easterby-Smith, Lyles, and Tsang, 2008; Mu, Tang, and MacLachlan, 2010). Such uptake and distribution capacity could increase the efficiency of CCs’ use of temporary workers and thus reduce costs.

Socio-cultural theory

A socio-cultural perspective on learning is useful to more accurately explain the flexibility of the consequences for an organization’s work tasks requiring both versatile and unilateral skills. Such a theoretical perspective is reminiscent of Giddens’s (1984) ambition to bridge the gap between structure and process (Billett, 2008) and makes it possible to consider the work organization as a community of practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998). Learning can be defined as follows:

to possess information, have the skills and understanding, but also to determine what information, what skills and understanding are relevant in a particular context and in the context of an activity system (Säljö, 2000, 141).

An important point is the pairing of the cognitive aspects of information and understanding of the contextual assessment of where, when, and how the information and understanding should be used (cf. Billett, 1998). This relates to context-bound action.

The application of a socio-cultural perspective to various CCs’ treatment of temporary workers makes it possible to better understand and explain CCs’ approaches to temporary workers. Perhaps the most important aspect of the socio-cultural perspective is that ‘people act within the framework of practical and cultural context and in direct or indirect interaction with others’ (Säljö, 2000, 104). This puts a strong emphasis on the ‘language’s communicative and functional role in the interaction between people’ (Säljö, 2000, 106). The

interaction is emphasized in the socio-cultural perspective's core 'to understand the connection between context and individual action' (Säljö, 2000, 130).

The consequence of this coupling is made clear in terms of socialization; the socio-cultural perspective is not about 'learning a series of explicit rules which you then follow to the letter'. Rather, it requires 'that the individual acquire a complex insight into where and when different rules are applicable' (Säljö, 2000, 130). Therefore, it is more appropriate to speak of a mode of thinking that is at the system level rather than the sensory level.

'[L]earning and knowledge reproduction are not simply a matter of mastering knowledge and skills in themselves as isolated units' but are also a question of 'determining when a particular set of knowledge is relevant and productive and how the knowledge work in different situations' (Säljö, 2000, 129). In work life, this is often referred to as 'competence', or an individual's ability to form information, communication, learning, and knowledge to successfully identify, interpret, evaluate, and perform a certain task within a specific situation or a specific context (Beckett and Hager, 2000; Ellström and Kock, 2009; Ellström, 1992, 1997; Sandberg, 2000; Wenger, 1998). Another important aspect of learning is the norms and values in the workplace that regulate the individual's ability to participate in various goal-oriented (Billett, 2004, 2008) and innovative (Brown and Duguid, 1991) activities.

This means that what is characteristic of the socio-cultural perspective is that the individual act on the basis of own knowledge's and experiences, and of what one consciously or unconsciously perceive[s] that the environment requires, permits, or makes possible in a given activity (Säljö, 2000, 128).

The quote suggests that there are three key aspects that could be linked to the socio-cultural perspective: mediation, context, and power.

Mediation

Mediation means that 'people are born into and developed through interaction with other people' (Säljö, 2000, 66). From a socio-cultural perspective, it means that 'the outside world is *pre-interpreted*' (Säljö, 2000, 66).

The implication is that we learn to 'pay attention, describe and act in real life in the way that the environment allows and encourages' (Säljö, 2000, 66). This permission and encouragement are both indirect and direct (Billett, 1998). With the help of others, social structures, groups, activities, spatial structures, and tools, we can reinforce our thinking and extend our actions. We need to 'understand how thinking is practiced by people who act in social practices through artifacts' (Säljö, 2000, 81). Mediation means that 'it metaphorically is a kind of sieves between us and the outside world: sieves that help us to constitute phenomena and perceive the world according to specific criteria' (Säljö, 2000, 100). This means that temporary workers at a CC will relate to the individual phenomena and events encountered there via the cognitive and physical breaks they are encouraged to use in those situations and in the wider setting where these phenomena and events are included (cf. Billett, 2004).

Context

It is the above situations and settings that create the context ('that which surrounds') (Säljö, 2000, 129). Säljö (2000, 135) notes that we are not 'affected by context, as all our actions and our understanding are part of contexts', but our actions are included in and 'create and recreate contexts'. Context can 'be seen as that which weaves together a social practice or activity and makes it . . . an identifiable whole' (Säljö, 2000, 135).

Säljö (2000) refers to the presence of different contexts: physical, cognitive, communicative, and historical. Physical context corresponds generally to the environment in which an action is performed and the rules for communication and behavior. In this case, it could refer to a CC's organization or parts of the organization that include temporary workers. The cognitive context implies a certain kind of logical thinking important to people's actions, such as the difference between having a regular position and being a temporary worker. The communicative context has specific rules and patterns for different types of verbal and nonverbal exchanges. For example, a person talks differently about the workplace and tasks during a coffee break than in a formal workplace meeting. Historic contexts are characterized by certain patterns that form social relationships that are maintained over time. This could include a formal conversation between employer and employee or conversations between doctor and patient.

Physical, cognitive, and communicative contexts are particularly relevant to analyzing the difference between functional and numerical flexibility. Functional flexibility requires spatial, organizational contexts in which employees can be redeployed while numerical flexibility only implies that people are substituted at a given time. Another way of putting it is that space and time are separated in Atkinson's (1984) model. This implies that temporary workers' identification with physical contexts (all or part of the organization) is likely hampered by numerical flexibility. The same applies to cognitive and communicative contexts.

Power

The implication of the power aspect is 'that it's some way of perceiving and understanding the world that becomes valid, and given a high status' (Säljö, 2000, 103). Bishop et al. (2009, 257) emphasize that attempts at cooperation 'are undermined by long-established habits, practices, cultures and incentives, all of which have a long history which promotes exploitation and conflict'. This power is exercised when individuals or groups are prevented from the possibility or the premise of acquiring an adequate perception and understanding of the world (cf. Billett, 2004). In this context arises the aspect of power; there is a division between different staff members. One group is largely covered by functional flexibility while the other is primarily concerned with numerical flexibility (Augustsson, 2012, 2014). A common division of labor is between regulars and temporary workers. Different types of legitimacy and rights, in relation to physical as well as cognitive and communicative contexts, usually follow such a division. The meaning of power therefore lies in the ability to segregate and integrate the individuals' mastery of knowledge and skills in relation to their ability to assess their relevance in different situations and contexts within the CC (cf. Wenger, 1998, 190).

The power aspect is particularly interesting in this context if it is understood in the light of recent research on the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL), which notes that 'knowledge and skills, often achieved and developed in the workplace, can be documented and evaluated through a more or less structured process' (Berglund and Andersson, 2012, 73). The authors distinguish between two types of RPL: traditional and workplace. The traditional RPL (T-RPL) 'produc[es] documentation of individuals' knowledge and skills' (p. 81). Its strength lies in 'contextual transferability via documents that communicate formalized knowledge/skills for all to see' (p. 81). Workplace RPL (W-RPL) represents a "'system" for assessing the knowledge and skills' (p. 81). Here lies the strength of the assessment system's usability.

The T-RPL associates knowledge and skills at the sensory level with the individual's merits while the W-RPL also includes the contexts for knowledge and the skills at a system level—i.e., 'more pragmatic and local motifs' (Berglund, 2010, 16). A strategic combination

of T-RPL and W-RPL at the CC would, over time, make it possible in a regular manner to deepen the matching of assessments of contracted individuals' knowledge and skills with the CC's own needs. Such a combination may be compared with Billett's (1998) goals for learning in the workplace, and contrasted with Walters's (2012) perception that matching supports universal and typified knowledge and skills rather than the unique and different.

Flexibility from a socio-cultural perspective

By combining two of Atkinson's (1984) flexibility types with Säljö's (2000) aspects of 'mediation', 'context', and 'power', it becomes possible to carry out an analysis of the working conditions that temporary workers often work under.

Matrix 1: Analysis model combining Atkinson's (1984) functional and numerical flexibility with Säljö's (2000) aspects of mediation, context, and power.

	Functional flexibility	Numerical flexibility
Physical context	Mediation and power: a) Providing intellectual and physical tools b) Opportunities/barriers to acquiring an adequate perception and understanding of the world	
Cognitive context		
Communicative context		

The combination of mediation, context, and power makes it possible to use Atkinson's (1984) definitions of functional and numerical flexibility to analyze 1) temporary workers access to organizationally identifiable entities, 2) the intellectual and physical tools that temporary workers are encouraged to use, and 3) whether temporary workers are prevented from acquiring and keeping up with an adequate perception and understanding of the world. In the theoretical sense, this means that the integration of Atkinson's (1984) ideas about the flexible organization and Säljö's (2000) socio-cultural perspective makes it possible to construct both a model for analysis and an explanation.

In the form of an analytical model, it is possible to sort empirical data within Matrix 1, above. It becomes possible first to construct statements about how mediation is expressed in various contexts and then to identify the status of the relational power between regular staff and temporary workers.

Method and data collection

This paper is based first on seventeen transcribed, personal, semi-structured interviews from December 2010 and February 2011 with people working in health care and social services. Secondly, it is based on two semi-structured focus group interviews from November 2012 with a total of four managers from two different TWAs responsible for renting social workers, nurses, and doctors. Thirdly, it is based on a semi-structured focus group interview in February 2013 with seven people and their manager, who is responsible for hiring personnel at a large CC.

The selection of interviewees has in most cases been carried out in a similar way. It started with contact with TWA, which in turn led to direct contact with a key person in the CC. This contact either performed the task or delegated the task of selecting interviewees. This has resulted in a list of interviewees either given to the interviewer via e-mail 1–3 days before the interview or when the interviewer arrived at the CC to carry out the interviews. The person typically conducted 1–3 interviews per day. In most cases, the interviews were carried out in a special room at the CC where the interviewer and interviewee could talk undisturbed. Someone other than the author of this paper conducted the interviews, in part. Transcriptions were performed by non-interviewers. However, the author analyzed the interviews.

The interview questions covered what Berg Sørensen (1988) calls complex phenomena and individual phenomena, objects, individual actions, and symbols. Examples of question areas are ‘cooperation between temporary workers and regulars’, ‘temporary workers and regulars work involvement’, ‘temporary workers and regulars motivation at work’, and ‘temporary workers and regulars specific tasks’. This means that the interview questions were related to the topics of conversation for both the organization as a whole and conversation topics associated with specific departments, locations, and events. The aim was to cover both structural and procedural phenomena—i.e., the rules and resources that are expressed during the execution of the tasks.

Because the results are about the interviewees’ thoughts on individual and compound circumstances in each organization, the conclusions can only be formulated in terms of interviewees’ thoughts and not facts about the organizations. This means that the results primarily highlight what the interviewees talked about and how they presented their ideas about different types of organizational phenomena.

The analysis of the transcribed personal interviews began with a rough categorization inspired by Illeris (2007), which studied whether the interview data on learning is related to the content of the work task, social relationships at work, and driving forces behind carrying out the work. The results of this categorization were analyzed in relation to four dimensions associated with the current work or work tasks: (A) work organization; (B) job complexity and decision making; (C) social networking/social involvement in the organization; and (D) training. The results of the analyses were examined in terms of a combination of Atkinson’s (1984, 1987) approach to the flexible organization and Säljö’s (2000) socio-cultural theory of learning.

In all cases, we followed up answers to interview questions with such questions as ‘Can you give an example?’ ‘What do you mean?’ and ‘Can you develop your answer?’ (see Sandberg, 2005). The questions varied depending on whether the interviewees were subordinates, middle managers, or senior managers, but their significance was the same. Interviewees’ answers were checked anonymously in a systematic manner with the responses of other interviewees, both within and between each staff group. Answers to questions from earlier interviewees were repeated for the next interviewee without revealing that it was a previously obtained answer. This approach made it possible to check the consistency of responses from different interviewees (see Sandberg, 2005).

The results from the analysis of the personal interviews were anonymous and summarized in a twenty-page PowerPoint document with images formatted into a PDF file that was sent to interested persons a week before each focus group interview. The images were used as input for the interview. The interviews were recorded electronically and have been transcribed selectively.

The analysis of the focus group interviews was conducted in different narratives and structured on the basis of orientation (time, place, situation, participants), complicating action, evaluative meanings, resolution, and coda (Johansson, 2005). These narratives were used as the source of the data that represented the CC’s and TWA’s perceptions.

The interviews were coded to make it possible to see the variations in the following categories: year of the interview (2010, 2011, 2012, or 2013); individual number; public (pub) or private (pri) organization; personnel in the client company (cc) or temporary work agency (twa); and status: employees (emp), leader (lead), or manager (man). The code ‘10/34, pub, cc, man’ means the interview was conducted in 2010 with individual No. 34, a public CC manager. The coding increased the credibility of the results by accurately showing who said what.

Result

This section presents selected quotes from both the personal interviews and focus group interviews. The quotes from the personal interviews have been organized based on the analytical model in the theory section above (Matrix 1), beginning with the quote that can positively or negatively relate to functional flexibility followed by the corresponding numerical flexibility. The quotes have also been organized according to the rows in Matrix 1 and encoded in relation to Mediation (Med) and Power (Pow). Thirdly, the citations were categorized into four empirical dimensions that are associated with the current work or tasks: (A) work organization; (B) job complexity and decision making; (C) social networking/social involvement in the organization; and (D) training. The procedure to link citations to flexibility, mediation, context, and power makes it possible to recognize the link between empirical data and the theory's central aspects.

The section concludes with a presentation of quotes in which the utterances of the focus group interviews with representatives of both CCs and TWAs are compared to the results of the personal interviews.

Functional flexibility

Functional flexibility includes personnel who are considered to be so versatile in their skills that they can be used for various activities and tasks of the organization. This kind of flexibility can be expressed in different contexts that are related to different issues. The contexts that are relevant to this study are the physical, cognitive, and communicative. The issues related to work organization (A), job complexity (B), social involvement (C), and training (D).

Physical context

The following quote shows that the CC's regular physicians participate in special planning meetings, but not even prolonged temporary physicians are involved in this kind of meeting.

We have physician meetings once a week, but it's just regular personnel that participate. Sometimes I think that even temporary doctors should be included in these meetings. We have a couple of temporary doctors who have been with us for years, but they never really participate in the weekly medical meetings (10/33, pub, cc, emp, A-Med).

At another work place, there are plans to transfer more complex organizational issues to a newly recruited regular physician; this is not included in the temporary physicians' duties.

We've hired a doctor fairly recently ... whom we have thought to be the one who is medically responsible and gathers the doctors. That person will of course eventually get different tasks compared to our temporary doctors (10/06, pri, cc, emp, B-Pow).

The same approach applies to training, which does not include temporary physicians in the same way as regular doctors.

It's the regular doctors who are sent on training, who have additional commitments to the health center. That is not the case with temporary doctors (10/34, pub, cc, man, D-Med).

The above quote shows evidence of a distinction; regular staffs with higher degrees are more subject to inclusive rules on communication and behavior in the organization than temporary workers.

Cognitive context

Existing differences between regular and temporary participation in different physical contexts are reflected in the thinking and the logic expressed about these personnel groups in different organizations.

The quote below reveals the notion that a regular's point of view is treated as more worthy than a temporary worker's.

It's [the] difference between being a regular and being a temporary worker. As a regular, I can make my voice heard a little bit more, so it is actually. As a temporary worker, do your job and do it well (10/30, pri, cc, emp, A-Med).

The equivalent goes for responsibility for complex tasks.

Patients have complained because the only regular physician has been highly loaded so she has had to take a lot out of the difficult so to say, which I do not feel that we have been able to use temporary doctors for (11/14, pub, cc, man, B-Pow).

The implication of the above quote is that CCs tend to consider regulars' cognitive involvement as more valuable than that of temporary workers.

Communication context

Regulars also usually have access to other contexts with specific rules and patterns of communicative exchanges than temporary workers.

In the interviews, it was one workplace that was an exception to that order. The following quote comes from this workplace where even temporary workers attended routine briefings.

All information is distributed to all employees in similar ways. There is no difference. ... Both by mail and in person mouth-to-mouth. Every week we have cross-functional meetings where all professions sit together ... so that the information is disseminated at this place no matter where it really comes from (10/29, pri, twa, emp, A-Med).

The limitation for this order at this workplace is that it is only for temporary workers who have been hired longer than a week.

The order at most workplaces included in this study was that engagement that you have with someone who chooses to work here as a regular, you don't have with a temporary doctor. Then . . . temporary workers do not get the feeling that they are one of the gang (11/14, pub, cc, man, C-Pow).

The quotes above about functional flexibility show that regulars have natural access to different contexts related to their daily work while temporary workers' access is either conditional or non-existent. This means that the conditions for and the possible existence of functional flexibility mainly include regular staff.

Numerical flexibility

Numerical flexibility was used among the CCs included in this study for both short- and long-term changes in labor demand. As with functional flexibility, numerical flexibility is expressed in physical, cognitive, and communicative contexts and in relation to different issues, such as work organization (A), job complexity (B), and social involvement (C).

Physical context

The following quotations show that the rules of communication and behavior differ significantly between regulars and temporary workers. Not least in organizational matters,

I never go to a temporary worker about organizational issues. ... They are a little off (10/34, pub, cc, man, C-Pow).

The above is confirmed by a former temporary worker:

When I started as a consultant I had the feeling that one went a little on the side, one . . . there to shovel [cleaning for others], and that one was an exception in the business (10/06, pri, cc, emp, A-Pow).

A regular (IP) answered the interviewer (I) this,

I (interviewer): So the temporary workers do not have as much overall understanding of what is happening in the workplace...

IP (interview person): Yes, they come here and shut the door, and they will go home. They do not have to think so much about what is around, because they're not on staff meetings or anything like that. They are a little on the side ... There are just regular doctors [at] medical meetings (10/33, pub, cc, emp, A-Pow).

A manager at a CC implicitly says that temporary workers do not have to deal with complicated thinking:

One can set different requirements depending on whether it is a temporary worker or a regular. Temporary worker, then it only to go on [working] (10/34, pub, cc, man, B-Pow).

The above quotes show a marked difference in expectations and treatment of regulars and temporary workers.

Cognitive context

Similar differences also exist in quotes on expectations about temporary worker's thinking and logic.

The expectations of temporary workers cognitive involvement in the organization are minimal, if not non-existent:

The introduction is extremely important for those we employ, though it will be very short for the temporary workers, because every second costs a lot of money for us. You have to give temporary workers exactly the information they need in order to work here and now. They're not engaged in business development, so what they do is to take care of patients, nothing else (10/08, pub, cc, man, A-Med).

This is also confirmed by temporary workers:

People say all the time ‘you do not need to be on this, you do not need to hear this’ and so on. You can feel very foreclosed in that way (11/37, pub, twa, emp, A-Med/Pow).

In the following quote, it is clear that managers in a CC do not expect anything other than that temporary workers focus their concrete work tasks:

As regards the introduction to the work itself, it is a fact that when you hire someone, it’s often a crisis and then you want to have someone who is experienced, so you can start working like this [snaps fingers] (11/36, pub, cc, man, B-Med).

This also applies to professionals with such complicated responsibilities as the exercise of public authority.

I: So what is it that you are missing right now?

IP: Right now I have to make decisions in a lot of cases, and there is no one who has shown me how to make a decision. I have to get someone to show me that. But it’s very much to chase up the right person and then just ask ‘who is it that can show me?’

I: You are like a blind [man] searching [for] your way.

IP: Yes, yes. Precisely Now we have a coordinator, but he does not know how to make decisions or know anything about law and stuff like that, so I cannot ask him. So I still have to ask someone else (11/37, pub, twa, emp, B-Med/Pow).

All quotes above show that temporary workers conditions and opportunities for cognitive involvement in the CC’s business is highly limited, even when such involvement can be seen as a part of the work task.

Communication context

In communicative contexts, there are rules and patterns for different types of verbal exchange. The following is a clear example of what applies to temporary workers as opposed to regular staff.

The nurse that I have, the first thing she did was to comment on how the job was handled here, and I could really just agree with her, but I did not . . . I could agree with her views, but stressed that she was hired here, and then you have to adapt to the rules and guidelines that apply here . . . (10/34, pub, cc, man, A-Pow).

The communicative distinction between regular and temporary workers legitimacy is clear.

All of the above quotes about numerical flexibility show that there are different rules for communication and behavior and different conditions for thinking for regulars and temporary workers so that they acquire an adequate perception and understanding of the organization at large.

Perceptions from representatives of TWA and CC

Against this background, it is important to deepen the analysis by studying the reactions to the above findings of the representatives for TWAs and CCs. We relate their interview responses to T-RPL and W-RPL as they are understood by Berglund and Andersson (2012) and Berglund (2010). In connection to each quote below, there is a code for the person who spoke and the kind of RPL that is current.

The TWAs and their personnel are criticized by the CC because of their lack of knowledge and skill:

My experience is that temporary nurses [were] in the past much more involved and more proficient, selected with care (1/13, pub, cc, lead, T-RPL).

Another representative of the CC points out the internal centralized management of personnel hiring.

We're a little tail [heavy], in that it is a central agreement governing how, where and when. It demands [that we use] certain types of companies, and they may have a pool of staff that does not really suit us [If] you have a direct relationship with a company at the local level, it would be easier to reprocess routines to make demands (2/13, pub, cc, lead, T-RPL, W-RPL).

This person imagines that it would be easier with a direct contact with local existing TWAs. Flexibility cannot be taken for granted as some TWAs question the complexity of the CC's business.

I have faced questions from the companies: -Why do you have these requirements? Why must they come to introduction? Cannot we just send a nurse as we do to all others? (2/13, pub, cc, lead, W-RPL).

The quotation above shows the CC's hesitation in its own notion of temporary worker's expertise and TWA knowledge of the CC's need. This hesitation, with W-RPL as an undertone, can be perceived as an obstacle to the development of a combination of numerical and functional flexibility.

A manager at a TWA has noted similar constraints, but in terms of deepening the buy and sell relations between the parties:

I think that ... [leaders in CCs] only get an order form from above and [they] should fill it without having learned what it means to buy right. ... Then it will be again, what is there to buy, what is it you want...? Because I think that many CCs do not define [their demands]. For us it is important to have a job specification. We like to say that sometimes, especially in northern Sweden: What kind of doctor do you really want? (1/12, pri, twa, man, W-RPL).

The above quote is a concrete expression of the need for more detailed descriptions of the needs/requirements that CCs have (i.e., W-RPL).

A fundamental problem is that the CCs want the initiative to develop collaboration between parties to come from the TWAs.

I thought as a reflection on the question you asked that it is perhaps the TWAs that should be of service for that kind of contact ... I've missed this from the TWAs, a sell spirit. A good salesperson finds out what the customer wants, what kind of needs they have. These companies have not done this, when you look at this procurement as we did. It just flowed on and we had to adjust over time. No one has called and said: What do you want for the type of nurses? What kind of qualifications do you have? What kind of care are you pursuing? One should be better to match [temporary workers knowledge and skills with our needs] (2/13, pub, cc, lead).

This quote shows that this representative for a big CC places the responsibility on TWA.

The interesting result of this section is that there seems to be a readiness for advanced and deeper connections between TWA and CC, which could result in a combination of numerical and functional flexibility in an inter-organizational sense. A key problem is that both parties ascribe to 'the other' the responsibility for taking the first step in the development of cooperation and avoid expressing readiness in terms of the development of the organization's procedures.

Discussion and conclusions

This study is based on the presumption that there is often an under-use of temporary workers in CCs with highly skilled professionals. The study combined Atkinson's (1984) ideas about the flexible organization with Säljö's (2000) socio-cultural perspectives on learning. The combination makes it possible to view how mediation in inter-organizational environments is expressed in different contexts. It also makes it possible to identify the status of the relational power between regulars and temporary workers.

The results of the individual interviews show that a CC's regular staff has uncontested access to physical, cognitive, and communicative contexts related to their daily work while temporary workers access is conditional or non-existent. All regular staff embrace functional flexibility. There are different rules of communication and behavior—there are different conditions for thinking and opportunities for the CC's regular and temporary staff to gain an adequate perception and understanding of the organization as a whole.

The results of the individual interviews can be summarized as follows: 1) Temporary workers are kept away from various contexts in which there is talk about the overall organization. 2) Temporary workers are kept outside more intellectually complex and decision-making contexts. 3) Temporary workers are associated with social outsiders. 4) Temporary workers have fewer opportunities for in-house training than regulars. This means that CCs only use a limited aspect of the highly skilled capacity, not 'taking over and absorbing' knowledge from temporary workers (Säljö, 2000, 119).

The results are ominous because CCs that do not use temporary workers' full and functional capabilities risk losing the continuity of their business (Connelly, Gallagher, and Webster, 2011). This may in turn compromise the ideological basis in staffing. Temporary workers that are not offered opportunities to use their full capacity might not develop their skills and thus enhance their employability. This may in turn lead to that they lose interest and thus stop thinking independently and instead do as others say (Håkansson and Isidorsson, 2012). The consequence is that if no one asks them to do something, nothing will be done. This consequence jeopardizes the reasons given of the Staffing Agencies in Sweden, i.e. access to a lot of variety, networking opportunities, and a very competitive CV (Almega, 2014).

The results indicate the importance of deeper analysis by testing the results on representatives of both TWAs and CCs. The test shows that both TWAs and CCs have an interest in and readiness for advanced and in-depth business relationships. However, they ascribe to the other the responsibility for initiating this instead of taking their own or mutual initiative to perform this type of innovative, organizational, development work.

It is in this context that there are clearly both deficiencies and aversions to the integration of temporary workers in T-RPL and the CC's W-RPL. The implication of this is that TWA eventual validation of staff skills (assessment and evaluation of the individual's knowledge and ability) is not combined with the CC's workplace validation (visibility, assessment, evaluation, and documentation of specific knowledge and skills) (Lahti and Beyerlein, 2000).

This demonstrates CCs' limited use of highly skilled capacity. Yet some criticize that temping is consistent with high costs and special vulnerability.

A CC usually uses a strategic (minimal) organization of the relationship between the temporary workers cognitive involvement and the context that includes their tasks. Thereof, the results showed that there is a risk that this results in an inflexible use of temporary workers. Temporary workers' career prospects may thus be limited, given that they seem to be more or less systematically excluded from the activities and training required in order to be eligible for more permanent positions.

A limitation of this study is that the sample of respondents is relatively small, although the focus group interviews to some extent compensated for this deficiency. The strength of the study is that it includes interviews with highly skilled temporary workers within the relatively unexplored area of health care.

This study is important for future development and deeper research on the collaboration between TWAs and CCs in terms of skills and workplace matching of health care professionals.

Acknowledgments

This work was supported by The Swedish Governmental Agency for Innovation Systems (VINNOVA) under Grant 2009-03060. The funder did not have any influence on the research after approved funding. A special thank to Associate Professor Lena Boström and Associate Professor Jimmy Jaldemark both in Education at Mid Sweden University, and to Elin Stark Ph.D. student in Political Science at Umeå University, for their support during the writing process. I am also grateful to reviewers connected to the Journal of Education and Work.

References

- Almega (2014) "Varför bemanningsbranschen? [Why the Staffing Industry?]", September 2. <http://www.bemanningsforetagen.se/branschfragor/jobba-i-branschen/bemanningsbranschen>.
- Alonzo, A. A., and Simon, A. B. 2008. "Have stethoscope, will travel: contingent employment among physician health care providers in the United States." *Work, Employment and Society*, 22 (4): 635–654.
- Atkinson, J. 1984. "Manpower strategies for flexible organisations." *Personnel Management*, August, 28–31.
- Atkinson, J. 1987. "Flexibility or fragmentation? The United Kingdom labour market in the eighties." *Labour and society*, 12 (1): 87–105.
- Augustsson, G. (2014) "Temporary and Regular Workers Fulfill Their Tasks Side-by-Side, But in Different Learning Conditions." *Journal of Workplace Learning*, 26 (2): 79-90.
- Augustsson, G. (2012) "The organizational control of temporary workers: An interview study in Sweden." *International Journal of Management*, 29 (3): 48-63.
- Augustsson, G., Olofsdotter, G. och Wolvén, L-E. (2010) "Swedish Managers in TWA Act as Boundary Spanners." *Leadership & Organization Development Journal*, 31 (1): 4-17.
- Beckett, D., and Hager, P. 2000. "Making judgments as the basis for workplace learning: towards an epistemology of practice." *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, 19 (4): 300–311.
- Berg Sørensen, T. 1988. *Fænomenologisk mikrosociologi: interview- og samtaleanalyse 1* [Phenomenological micro-sociology: interview and conversation analysis 1]. 1 ed. Århus: Forl. Gestus.
- Berglund, L. 2010. *På spaning efter arbetsplatsvalidering: en studie av fyra organisationers synliggörande av kompetens* [In Search of workplace validation: a study of four organizations visibility of skills]. PhD diss., Avdelningen för industriell produktionsmiljö, Luleå tekniska universitet. Luleå: Institutionen för arbetsvetenskap.

- Berglund, L., and Andersson, P. 2012. "Recognition of knowledge and skills at work: in whose interests?" *Journal of Workplace Learning*, 24 (2): 73–84.
doi:10.1108/13665621211201670.
- Billett, S. 1998. Understanding workplace learning: Cognitive and sociocultural perspectives. In D. Boud, ed. *Current issues and new agendas in workplace learning*, 43–59. Leabrook, SA: NCVER Ltd.
- Billett, S. 2004. "Co-participation at work: Learning through work and throughout working lives." *Studies in the Education of Adults*, 36 (2): 190–205. Retrieved from <http://www98.griffith.edu.au/dspace/bitstream/handle/10072/5131/Coparticipation.pdf?sequence=1>.
- Billett, S. 2008. "Learning through work: Exploring instances of relational interdependencies." *International Journal of Educational Research*, 47 (4): 232–240.
doi:http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.ijer.2008.07.006.
- Bishop, D., Felstead, A., Fuller, A., Jewson, N., Unwin, L., and Kakavelakis, K. 2009. "Constructing learning: adversarial and collaborative working in the British construction industry." *Journal of Education and Work*, 22 (4): 243–260.
doi:10.1080/13639080903290355.
- Boyce, A. S., Ryan, A. M., Imus, A. L., and Morgeson, F. P. 2007. "Temporary Worker, Permanent Loser? A Model of the Stigmatization of Temporary Workers." *Journal of Management*, 33 (1): 5–29. doi:10.1177/0149206306296575.
- Brown, J. S., and Duguid, P. 1991. "Organizational learning and communities-of-practice: Toward a unified view of working, learning, and innovation." *Organization Science*, 2 (1): 40–57.
<http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=buh&AN=4433760&site=ehost-live>.
- Connelly, C. E., Gallagher, D. G., and Webster, J. 2011. "Predicting temporary agency workers' behaviors: Justice, volition, and spillover." *Career Development International*, 16 (2): 178–194. doi:10.1108/13620431111115622.
- Desombre, T., Kelliher, C., Macfarlane, F., and Ozbilgin, M. 2006. "Re-Organizing Work Roles in Health Care: Evidence from the Implementation of Functional Flexibility." *British Journal of Management*, 17 (2): 139–151. 10.1111/j.1467-8551.2005.00473.x.
- Easterby-Smith, M., Lyles, M. A., and Tsang, E. W. K. 2008. "Inter-Organizational Knowledge Transfer: Current Themes and Future Prospects." *Journal of Management Studies*, 45 (4): 677–690. doi:10.1111/j.1467-6486.2008.00773.x.
- Ellström, P.-E. 1992. *Kompetens, utbildning och lärande i arbetslivet: problem, begrepp och teoretiska perspektiv* [Competence, training and learning at work: problems, concepts, and theoretical perspectives]. 1 ed. Stockholm: Publica.
- Ellström, P.-E. 1997. "The many meanings of occupational competence and qualification." *Journal of European Industrial Training*, 21 (6/7): 266–273.
- Ellström, P.-E., and Kock, H. 2009. "Competence development in the workplace. Concepts, strategies and effects." In K. Illeris, ed. *International perspectives on competence development: developing skills and capabilities*, 34–54. London: Routledge.
- Folcker Aschan, A. 2013. "Skenande kostnader för inhyrd personal [Skyrocketing costs for agency staff]." *Dagens Nyheter*, April 13. <http://www.dn.se/sthlm/skenande-kostnader-for-inhyrd-personal/>.
- Giddens, A. 1984. *The constitution of society: outline of the theory of structuration*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Håkansson, K., and Isidorsson, T. 2012. "Work Organizational Outcomes of the Use of Temporary Agency Workers." *Organization Studies*, 33 (4): 487–505.
doi:10.1177/0170840612443456.
- Illeris, K. 2007. *Lärande* [Learning]. 2nd ed. Lund: Studentlitteratur.

- Jacobsen, D. I., and Thorsvik, J. 2008. *Hur moderna organisationer fungerar* [How modern organizations operate]. Lund: Studentlitteratur.
<http://www.studentlitteratur.se/omslagsbild/artnr/6593-03/height/320/width/320/bild.jpg>
- Johansson, A. 2005. *Narrativ teori och metod: med livsberättelsen i fokus* [Narrative Theory and Method: the life story in focus]. Lund: Studentlitteratur.
- Jooste, K., and Prinsloo, C. 2013. "Factors that guide nurse managers regarding the staffing of agency nurses in intensive care units at private hospitals in Pretoria." *Curationis*, 36 (1): 1–10. doi:10.4102/curationis.v36i1.115.
- Koskinen, K. U., and Pihlanto, P. 2006. "Competence transfer from old timers to newcomers analysed with the help of the holistic concept of man." *Knowledge and Process Management*, 13 (1): 3–12.
- Lahti, R. K., and Beyerlein, M. M. 2000. "Knowledge Transfer and Management Consulting: A Look at 'The Firm'." *Business Horizons*, 43 (1): 65.
<http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=buh&AN=2797315&site=ehost-live>.
- Lave, J., and Wenger, E. 1991. *Situated learning: legitimate peripheral participation* (2009th ed.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
<http://www.cambridge.org/9780521423748>.
- Mu, J., Tang, F., and MacLachlan, D. L. 2010. "Absorptive and disseminative capacity: Knowledge transfer in intra-organization networks." *Expert Systems with Applications*, 37 (1): 31–38. doi:http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.eswa.2009.05.019.
- Olsson, E. 2012. "Inhyrd personal för miljardbelopp [Agency staff for billions]." *SvD Nyheter*, May 26. http://www.svd.se/nyheter/inrikes/inhyrd-personal-for-miljardbelopp_7230723.svd.
- Paré, A., and Le Maistre, C. 2006. "Active learning in the workplace: transforming individuals and institutions." *Journal of Education and Work*, 19 (4): 363–381. doi:10.1080/13639080600867141.
- Sandberg, J. 2000. "Understanding Human Competence: An interpretative Approach." *Academy of Management Journal*, 43 (1): 9–25.
- Sandberg, J. 2005. "How Do We Justify Knowledge Produced Within Interpretive Approaches?" *Organizational Research Methods*, 8 (1): 41–68.
- SFS 1993:440. Lag om privat arbetsförmedling och uthyrning av arbetskraft [Law on private employment agencies and temporary employment].
<http://www.riksdagen.se/webbnav/index.aspx?nid=3911&bet=1993:440>.
- Stanworth, C., and Druker, J. 2006. "Human resource solutions?: Dimensions of employers' use of temporary agency labour in the UK." *Personnel Review*, 35 (2): 175–190. doi:10.1108/00483480610645812
- Stein, J. 1996. *Lärande inom och mellan organisationer* [Learning within and between organizations]. Lund: Studentlitteratur.
- Säljö, R. 2000. *Lärande i praktiken: ett sociokulturellt perspektiv* [Learning in practice: a socio-cultural perspective]. Stockholm: Norstedts.
- Thelin, A. 2013. "Skenande kostnader för stafettläkarna [Skyrocketing costs for doctors]." *Piteå-Tidningen*, April 12. http://www.pitea-tidningen.se/nyheter/senaste_nytt/skenande-kostnader-for-stafettlakarna-6495059-default.aspx.
- TT. 2012. "Lönegaranti i nytt bemanningsavtal [Pay security in new staffing agreement]." *Dagens Nyheter*, October 17. <http://www.dn.se/ekonomi/lonengaranti-i-nytt-bemanningsavtal>.
- Van Wijk, R., Jansen, J. J. P., and Lyles, M. A. 2008. "Inter- and Intra-Organizational Knowledge Transfer: A Meta-Analytic Review and Assessment of its Antecedents and Consequences." *Journal of Management Studies*, 45 (4): 830–853. Retrieved from 10.1111/j.1467-6486.2008.00771.x.

- Walter, L. 2012. "Matchningsfabriken [Matching factory]." *Arbetsmarknad & Arbetsliv*, 18 (3): 35–49.
- Watson, S., and Hewett, K. 2006. "A Multi-Theoretical Model of Knowledge Transfer in Organizations: Determinants of Knowledge Contribution and Knowledge Reuse." *Journal of Management Studies*, 43 (2): 141–173.
- Wenger, E. 1998. *Communities of practice: learning, meaning, and identity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Öster, J. 2012a. "Därför hyr företagen in personal [Therefore companies hire personnel]." *Transportarbetaren*, March 1. <http://www.transport.se/Transportarbetaren/Start/Nyheter1/Darfor-hyr-foretagen-in-personal/>.
- Öster, J. 2012b. "Gör jag fel är jag körd [If I make wrong, I am out]." *Transportarbetaren*, March 1. <http://www.transport.se/Transportarbetaren/Start/Nyheter1/Gor-jag-fel-ar-jag-kord/>.