

Personal flexibility as a key component of competence of employees in non-traditional forms of employment

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Abstract: This Many theoreticians and practitioners are inspired by the current situation on the labour market and, in particular, flexibility of employment as an a-typical form to analyse broadly understood theme of flexibility. Requirements of this non-traditional form of making a living make an employee acquire a permanent capacity to adjust to multifaceted changes of irregular frequency. This relatively permanent tendency may be the result of a longer exercise, be formed due to regularly repeating operations or be intrinsic capacity manifested in a meta-ability responsible for optimal for an individual use of psycho-social domains due to a situational context (which is a cognitive, emotional and behavioural potential).

In the first case, we are dealing with a cognitive habit performing an economic function, liberating the mind from controlling operations resulting from cognitive schemes that can be automated. However, excessive leaning toward habits leads to impoverishment of cognitive processes, automation of performed actions, mental laziness and emotional depletion. This effect is shown in a later section describing the area of flexibility qualified as pathological (cf. Dobrowolska, 2011, 2012, 2014).

The article presents the results of research on a sample of n=2118 flexible employees, using a tool devised by the author of the paper - Personal Flexibility Auto-perception Tool.

Keywords: flexibility, non-traditional forms of making a living

I. INTRODUCTION

The term flexibility, is almost automatically associated with adjustment describing a specific relation between an individual and the environment. Adjustment is the possibility of realising one's full potential with respect to the environment, which allows for effective operations within it, combined with satisfaction of all the needs of one's organism, accomplishment of a full balance in the interaction between an individual and the environment (Reber, 2000). Related terms are adjustment to the environment, accommodation to the environment. The first one is about adjusting to the surroundings, the environment, the state of balance. This second one, on the other hand, stresses the exchange between an individual and the environment, by adjusting the environment - assimilation, or oneself and one's structure to the environment - accommodation.

No matter how our view on human potential in relation to the environment is, it seems that the flexible ability to adjust to the surrounding reality for contemporary man is a key competence allowing for smooth functioning.

What follows is a presentation of selected problems with the terms and metaphors of flexibility and attempts to operationalise this variable.

II. PROBLEMS WITH THE TERMS AND METAPHORS OF FLEXIBILITY

Among the overlapping concepts that interact with one another within the broadly understood flexibility issue the most important are: vividness, tenderness, stiffness and metamorphosis.

Often the concepts of flexibility and vividness are applied interchangeably and treated as synonyms. When we try to define these two concepts, using scientific terms, we learn very quickly that this is not the case. Flexibility and vividness, although form a kind of continuum of the same dimension, describe two completely different phenomena. Physicists divided solid matters with respect to their properties into three groups: resilient matter, i.e. flexible one, vivid matter and fragile matter. Flexibility in the sense is understood as capacity to return to original shape and dimensions, after the cause of deformation is removed. The essence of vivid matter is a capacity to keep changes of the form after the cause of deformation is removed. While fragile matter get damaged and dissociated after some force is imposed on them. Rigidity of matter is about, in the nutshell, inability to change shape due to high endurance to the applied force or immediate destruction.

There is one more term that does not appear in the realm of technique but in natural sciences. The term refers to a saltatory and to a large extent "radical" transformation, i.e. metamorphosis.

The author chooses not to quote the basic dictionary definitions, although from the point of view of a full understanding of the said notions it is important to point at the fact that they "meet" in the form of many various similar and synonymous terms (e.g. variable, vivid, flexible, shrinking,

firm, springy, soft, spongy, shapeable, forgeable, etc.) and their application in many, often very different from each other, areas of life: For example, metal ductility and intellectual vividness, etc. This could be a proof of practical relevance of this family of concepts, but on the other hand, it complicates their use and defining in a given scientific discipline, in this case, the discipline of human actions and behaviours.

Flexibility as a complex and unclear psychological phenomenon provokes on the relatively high level of abstraction to attempt to use metaphors explaining this phenomenon.

The author (cf. 2011, 2012) presents her own concepts of flexibility understood as: (a) a cognitive habit, in psychology a typical phenomenon of acquisition of psychosocial competences; (b) psychosocial meta-capacity; she uses a metaphor of device for this purpose; (c) basic psychological dimension, using a metaphor of a layer flexibility map; (d) ability to revert to an original psychological state using a physical metaphor; (e) protection of the structure of "self" using a metaphor of a computer cleaning software.

When it comes to technical analogies and a physical metaphor, flexibility, in this respect, is about capacity to behave in way that is different from the previous or a typical one (in technology it is a capacity to take shape that is different from a typical one), and then returning to the original one (in technology we are talking about shape). In another words, it is an ability to act in a way that is different from a "typical" one. Such different behaviour is caused by "external forces", after the forces in question cease to act, the behaviour disappears, in accordance with the principles of physics. On the other hand, vividness is the ability of "distortion" or a permanent change of behaviour, which in technology is the permanent change of shape, without an option to return to the original state. Focus on these two terms is sufficient in the context of human behaviour and provides inspiration for clarification and their definition in the psychological context. Technical definitions shall be treated as material for comparison, however without far-fetching comparisons and analogies. It is assumed, therefore, that a technical distinction should be maintained: flexibility vs. vividness, and define these two concepts in terms of human behaviour, without insisting on looking for literate similarities between a man and a spring, in spite of the observed analogy between the two.

With respect to a psychological analysis of functioning of an individual, while keeping the analogy of flexible matter the author (2011, 2012) analyses flexibility, vividness and fragility taking into account three psychological dimensions: own or forced activity as a response of an individual to the emerging changes in one's external environment, subjectively perceived effort at the time of an activity of an individual and the effect of this activity.

Personnel flexibility is the ability to adapt to new conditions, easy adaptation to the changing environment. Following synthesis of *flexibility*, it can be understood in the following ways: (a) cognitive habit; (b) ability to revert to the original psychological state (physical metaphor) c) meta-ability (metaphor of a tool); (e) defensive mechanism

(metaphor of cleaning mechanisms). *Flexibility* could be defined as the ability to behave temporarily in a way that is different from the typical one. Such different behaviour is caused by "external forces", which stops after their termination. In the light of the above, *flexibility* can be understood as adaptation resulting from activities of an individual, carried out in way that is natural to him/her, without experiencing any effort at the time of the activity and in a subjective opinion of an individual not causing any adverse and lasting changes.

Personal vividness is a psychological sensitivity to changes, capacity to adapt to a new environment and constant changes in the environment. This relatively permanent tendency can be caused by a longer practice and be created by regularly repeated actions or activities. It may also be an inborn ability manifesting itself in a meta-ability responsible for optimal use of potential (cognitive, emotional and behavioural one) of human beings, taking into account a situational context. In the first case, we are dealing with a *cognitive habit*, which liberates the mind from controlling operations resulting from foreseeable and automatable cognitive schemes. *Vividness* is adaptation to changes resulting from one's own activity or forced by external circumstances, with a subjectively experienced effort at the time this activity, resulting in permanent changes, but not necessarily negative ones. *Vividness* results from speculations on *flexibility*, from the assumption, that no matter is utterly flexible. Limitation for flexibility is a regulatory role of memory, effects of changes in one's psyche resulting from experience of an individual.

Personal stiffness is a personal inability to adapt to changes of irregular frequency and multi-faceted nature; it is a forced activity of a subject as a response to changes; at the time of this activity effort is subjectively experienced (and the situation itself is perceived as difficult), subjectively causing permanent and mostly negative changes (adverse effects included in the destructive ones). The effect of positive changes which are an exception may be metamorphosis achievable thanks to saltatory transformation of mental structures and eventually their changes. Destruction, on the other hand, it is the result of a break-down of mental structures caused by outside pressures. *Stiffness* is the opposite of flexible and vivid behaviour.

Metaphor is linked to the personal flexibility understood in layer terms. It is understood as continuum, in which flexibility is the ability of a subject, whereas vividness, metamorphosis and destruction are its characteristic features. Featured layers of theoretical, pathological and psychological flexibility provide new diagnostic and psychological capabilities of the analysed phenomena. A theoretical postulate for the theoretical flexibility is the fact that no matter is completely flexible. A limitation for a personal flexibility is a regulatory role of memory, which allows in this respect for creation of a model pattern of flexibility solely as a theoretical construct. The consequence of this is, that there are always some countable borders of both flexibility, vividness and fragility. Therefore one of the possible description of

flexibility would be a fraction of forces affecting an individual, with the highest intensity are understood as traumatic through the structure of "self" understood as durability of this structure.

Pathological flexibility describes a range within which external changes regardless of benefits for an individual, both positive and negative, appear periodically or chronically and do not cause changes in the structures of "self" and are not registered and approved for a cognitive analysis in any possible ways. For instance, in this way you can explain the phenomenon of inability to learn; automatism of behaviour deprived of emotions, resulting from over-practice; psychotic disorders.

The area of psychological flexibility is possible thanks to the role of defensive and cleaning programmes (see: Cleaning program metaphor). Vividness is the area where the task of flexibility as the meta-ability is management of the whole potential of an individual (see: tool metaphor). Metamorphosis is possible thanks to saltatory transformations of the content of the structure of "self", as the result of its changes. Destruction, on the other hand, is the result of a break-down of mental structures caused by outside pressures.

The third vision of flexibility is a metaphor of a tool, a capacity for self-programming understood as a meta-driver and is related to the idea of a "tool depot", meta-function of mind that thanks to the access to the whole cognitive, behavioural and emotional potential of a given individual is responsible for a choice of an adequate "tool" - ability to respond to a situation in which a subject finds itself. Flexibility being a meta-ability is responsible for a maximum capacity of a subject to interact with its surroundings.

With respect to the role of human memory that limits understanding of flexibility the author suggests one more metaphor of a cleaning software.

Flexibility understood in this way constitutes a set of processes affecting human actions that is not subordinate to human consciousness. It is a layer of a hidden part of psycho composed of dynamic psychological processes, which cannot be controlled, since they are not subject of cognition.

These processes are of a defensive character for "self". First of all they are to block emotional tension caused by external pressure, which might have a permanent impact on the structure of "self" and damage it. In behaviour of a subject it is manifested by lack of resistance against experienced reality and perceived sense of readiness to act regardless the requirements of a situation. Taken to extreme - in colloquial language it may be manifested in various utterances, such as: "I am not afraid of this", "who, if not me", "I can cope", "this problem is not a problem", regardless if the situation is perceived as new one (according to Tomaszewski's classification this is a difficult situation), or a known one - it is not perceived as difficult and/or impossible. To measure this aspect one can use the questionnaire method. The second task of the analysed processes is to reduce and sooth emotions (mostly fear and anger) generated by internal conflicts or changes in the environment, reduce emotional tension that might permanently deform the structure of "self" or expose it

to damage in the course of any activity. Another task of the said processes is responsible for elimination of all the experience of an individual that might have a negative impact on the structure of "self", that is to say cause any changes in its structure eliminating (deleting) at the same time emotional tension (analogically to deleting computer files).

III. ATTEMPTS TO OPERATIONALISE FLEXIBILITY

It seems that personal flexibility is biologically conditioned. Human beings have genetic abilities to adjust to many situations, tasks and environments, which most probably are absent among other species. Cognitive processes, intelligence, capability to learn and 'self-programming' are biological attributes located at the core of flexibility. We are dealing here with a biological paradox, which is expressed in the fact that "we are permanently programmed to be flexible". Flexibility is innate on the one hand, and on the other hand it is programmable, learnable. One of the important issues concerning flexibility is its relation to internal physical-and-psychological structures. It seems that when it comes to individuals, the less stable and permanent notions they have in their minds, the more flexible they are. These may be permanent and established values, assessments, attitudes, habits, etc.

According to the author the most important transmitters of flexibility are as follows: Creative thinking, rapid response to change, openness to change, adaptability, interdisciplinary - mental openness, moving in different directions, social competence, emotional control, smooth switching to different styles of behaviour, ability to operate in unclear and stressful situations (cf. Dobrowolska, 2011, 2012).

At this point it is worth returning to the issue of programming. Allport (after: Hall, Lindzey, 2001) recognized personality as a dynamic psychophysical system that determines the way of adjusting. Pulakos and others (2000) define eight dimensions of adaptation behaviour: coping with difficulties, threat, crisis; coping with stressful situations at work; creativity and creative problem solving; coping in new and insecure, difficult to predict situations; acquisition of competences, knowledge and awareness of organizational procedures; adaptive skills in interpersonal relationships; ability to adapt to organisational culture; adaptive skills to physical professional environment.

Adaptation to organizational culture consists of four phases: euphoria, cultural shock, adaptation to new conditions and new culture, state of equilibrium (Hofstede, 2000, p. 305).

Adaptation of a subject and the environment is compatibility, coherence between all of the components of the interaction (Caldwell and others, 2004). There are many dimensions of adaptation: requirements of an organization - capabilities of an object; needs of an employee - offer and resources of an organization; values and objectives of a subject - values and purposes of an organization (e.g. Cable, DeRue, 2002).

An interesting use of the phenomenon of personal flexibility seem to be its use in professional counselling, in

particular in analysing professional predispositions with respect to optimal forms of employment. Personal flexibility as a psychological dimension allows for adequate selection of employees for typical and atypical forms of employment. What is more, it may justify a high level of job satisfaction among employees employed under flexible forms by their own choice (not as a response to structural unemployment).

This is also of relevance for individual adaptive programs, the effectiveness of which is based on meeting the needs of an employee at all the subsequent stages of introducing him to an organization - both the physical conditions, such as security, health and safety at work, etc., and the socio-economic - team-work, and social-and-economic ones, such as recognition for work (Davis, 2003). Ashworth and others (1998) proved in their research that there is a positive relationship between an institutionalised socialisation and adaptation of an employee. This applies to adaptive and orientation programmes, impact of a supervisor, who is both a tutor and an instructor, socialisation of a group through acquisition of both formal and informal norms.

Consequences of adaptation are also involvement in professional work and organisational matters, satisfaction, intention to remain in an organization - these are key pros of well prepared impacts of introducing employees to work. Flexibility can also be treated as a part of a psychological immunity and in this sense its practising allows for a global improvement of psychosocial functioning of individuals. Piaget (1981) points out that adaptation takes place, when a subject adjusts to requirement of surroundings, an organism is transformed due to an impact of the environment, and a change in itself is positive for the both parties. This trend of adjusting is a natural and inborn for all living creatures.

The term adaptation, adaptation to work, or a professional adaptation is a natural process in each professional work (Reber, 2000). The first one is the process of achieving adequacy with one's professional environment (Dawis, 2000). Mutual requirements are correlated with mutual potentials, which allow for gaining and maintaining adequacy. Adaptation is accomplished by one of the four changes: needs of an individual, skills of a subject, organizational reinforcement and requirements of an organization. When an individual makes changes in the environment, this is an active adaptation, whereas adaptation within oneself is a reactive adaptation. Flexibility is an ability to cope in a situation of inadequacy (lack of adjustment) before adaptation activity, perseverance on the other hand is a state of remaining in the inadequacy and not giving up (Dawis, 2000).

The process of adapting to work is a professional socialisation, irrespective of forms of employment it applies to each professional experience (Hornowska, Paluchowski, 2001). Davis (2003) distinguishes between four phases of adaptation process: prior to employment, a trial period, a proper professional adaptation, evaluation. The proper adaptation involves adaptation in the environment, in a given organization and a specific job. The first one is fostered by actions that increase awareness of risks, information about

possible difficulties and delivery of knowledge on ways of coping with difficulties. The other one is fostered by understanding of mission, goals, objectives of an organization, getting acquainted with organizational culture. The third one is fostered by giving an employee adequate competences to experience work in a given environment, tools and other resources. Finally let us come back to proactiveness. Bateman and Crant (1993) defined persons with a tendency to activity and to affect the environment with a simultaneous resistance to environmental influences as proactive. They have a capacity to seize opportunities and possibilities and are characterised by an initiative, they do not give up while pursuing their aims, they have impact on the surrounding world, identify and remove difficulties, they support themselves by creation of conditions to effectively change their surrounding rather than adjusting to it (after: Bańka, 2005, p. 7).

This is an interactive assumption, people's behaviour that has an impact on the environment, a mutual interaction. Proactiveness means a capacity to have an impact on the environment and shaping it to the extent that transgresses a capacity to shape the environment. Proactiveness is something more than simply adaptation, because at the end of the day this is a proactive behaviour that reshapes the environment (Maddi, 1989). This is an intentional, independent, active and causative action (Bateman, Crant, 1993). The distinctive feature of the proactive is an initiative that generates changes, without being dependent on others. This is an approach that creates a change rather than anticipates it. It is more about creation of future, than about predicting it. According to Bateman and Crant (1993) such individuals can be characterised by seven points: Proactive persons seek opportunities to change through their own activities and actions. They go beyond standard limitations of the environment and derive benefits of its reshaping. Proactive persons set effective and change-oriented objectives, they are focused on maximizing objectives performance, their achievements open new action paths and new dependencies, qualitative effort is undertaken that is related to crossing borders; proactive people anticipate problems and take corrective measures, they use information feedback. Proactive people have tendency to do various things, different from actions taken by other people, they are constantly focused on solving problems and reaching set goals, they do not bound by limitations. Proactive people are people of action, willing to take care of their own life being aware of risks and responsibility; proactive people are stubborn and are prone to stick to their own plans. They are persevering; they change their tactics when surrounding conditions call for it; proactive people reach goals, they have real achievements and make a lot changes. They are more adaptable and flexible. There are four approaches to personal aspects of protectiveness: as a personality, as a personal initiative, as self-efficiency and as a responsible involvement (Crant, 1995, 1996, 2000) (all after: Bańka, 2005, pp. 8-12). Proactive personality that is the tendency to intentional and causative changes in the environment. There are individual differences in the proactive personal disposition, measures focused on a change in the

environment, relatively independent of environmental conditions and forces (Bateman, Crant, 1993). Personal initiative is a model of behaviour with self-initiative approach to work that exceeds formal requirements, assigned tasks and obligations (Frese and others, 1996). It contains five components of proactive behaviour: personal initiative is consistent with the mission of an organisation, it is focused on long-term objectives, it is an activity oriented on activity and objective, it is continued regardless of adverse circumstances, it is an activity that is spontaneous and proactive. Self-efficiency is a construct formulated on the basis of the research of Parker (1998). It defines a perceived ability to deal with proactive set of tasks that exceed assigned requirements of a role; it is about coping with dynamics of the environment. Responsible commitment is a concept of proactiveness formulated by Morrison, Phelps (1999). It is an idea that organizations need people who are willing to take up challenges, consisting of introduction of constructive changes accompanied by effort of actions focused on functional changes (after: Bańka, 2005, pp. 12-14). Acknowledgment (Heading 5)

The preferred spelling of the word “acknowledgment” in America is without an “e” after the “g”. Avoid the stilted expression, “One of us (R. B. G.) thanks . . .” Instead, try “R. B. G. thanks”. Put sponsor acknowledgments in the unnumbered footnote on the first page.

IV. PRESENTATION OF THE AUTHOR’S RESEARCH

Flexible employees have been divided into 9 professional groups, each of them with more than 200 people. The featured groups were as follows: 12.1 % working for a specified period of time; 13.2% working part-time; 10.7% working on contract; 10.3% of the self-employed; 10.4% of teleworkers; 10.4% working under a substitute work contract; 12.4% of temporary workers; 10.0% of seasonal workers; 10.5% of the employed in the social economy.

The respondents were adults of different ages, although all the respondents were in the so-called age a professional activeness, working age from 18 to 60 years for women and up to 65 years for men. 7% of the respondents were 18- 24 years old. The largest group - 42% are persons aged 25-34. 34% of the respondents are 35 to 44 years old. Another 12% of the respondents are between 35 -44 years, while 5% of the respondents were 55-65 years.

An average age in the analysed group was 36, and the median was 35 years. The youngest respondent was 18 years old, and the oldest 65 years old. The distribution of results in the Polish sample of the tested fits fully into the *European characteristics of flexible employees*, which describes them as rather young, with an average period of employment in an organization - less than five years (Nollen, 1996).

A variable *personal flexibility* is dependent on education and occupation. The higher education, the higher level of flexibility. The same applies to a post - the higher in the organizational structure, the more flexibility is exhibited. Other social-and-demographic variables do not reveal any connection.

A statistically significant relation between education and a personal flexibility has been demonstrated: the relation confirmed by Kruskal -Wallis test: Chi-square (df 2) = 37.307; $p < 0.001$). The higher education, the higher results on the scale of a personal flexibility: in the group of the analysed with education below secondary schools: the median = 161; among people with secondary education: the median = 162; among people with a university degree: the median = 168. There is also a statistically significant relation between profession and the results on the scale of a personal flexibility, the results of the Kruskal- Wallis test: Chi-square (df 4) = 34.243; $p < 0.001$. People who work at higher and more prestigious positions score higher results than those further down the hierarchy. In the group of executive directors, CEOs and business owners: the median = 168. In the group of specialists and freelancers as well as technicians and civil service officials: the median = 167. In the group of trade and services workers: the median = 162. The group workers: the median = 161.

The average score on the scale of a personal flexibility in the analysed group of flexible employees was 165.21 with the variable scope ranging from 63 to 230. The median was 166, which means that half of the analysed scores below 166 points. Skewness becomes negative, but much less than zero, which indicates that there is no asymmetry of distribution. Kurtosis is positive, which points at the fact, that the distribution is slender – there is too much values centred around the average.

The results obtained on the flexibility scale with respect to forms of employment have been analysed. Variance analysis was possible since its assumptions had been met (after rejection of the outliers). The variance analysis has shown that a form of employment significantly differentiates the test results on the scale of a personal flexibility: $F(8,2105) = 3.937$; $p < 0.001$. The results of the survey show that the highest results on the scale of a personal flexibility are achieved by the self-employed (an average 171.79), while the lowest results are achieved by seasonal workers (on average 160.40).

Average values in all the subgroups are in accord with sten norms and fall within average values, which proves only vividness of behaviour, not its flexibility. *Personal vividness* is described in the theoretical part is a psychological sensitivity to changes, capacity to adapt to a new environment and constant changes in the environment. *Vividness is* adaptation to changes resulting from one's own activity or forced by external circumstances, with a subjectively experienced effort at the time this activity, resulting in permanent changes, but not necessarily negative ones (compare: Dobrowolska, 2011, 2012).

The relatively highest scores on the scale of a personal flexibility in comparison with other groups are obtained by the self-employed and the employed in the social economy. Whereas the highest score is found in the group of seasonal workers, which may constitute a proof of a tendency to a personal stiffness understood as an inability to adapt to changes of irregular frequency and multi-faceted nature; it is a

forced activity of a subject as a response to changes; at the time of this activity effort is subjectively experienced (and the situation itself is perceived as difficult), subjectively causing permanent and mostly negative changes (adverse effects included in the destructive ones). Stiffness is the opposite of flexible and vivid behaviour (see: Dobrowolska, ibid).

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Malgorzata Dobrowolska – Associate Professor PhD, working in Silesian University Poland, Institute of Psychology, Faculty of work and organizational psychology, her research interests are centered around the issues of flexible employment forms, with a particular focus on general psychological aspects of employees' functioning under such employment conditions. She work on the application of the results of my studies to the practice of human resources management, and developing my own perspective on personal flexibility. Moreover, her interests encompass some aspects of social work, in particular those connected with solving professional and social problems of the people who are in danger of social exclusion at regional, national and transnational level. She also teach occupational and general psychology specialization classes at university. Furthermore, she conduct original coaching seminars, as well as MA and PhD seminars.