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Influence of Flexible Working Hours on Employees: A Qualitative Study Across Bangladeshi Organisations

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Abstract

This proposal examines how flexible working hours are experienced by employees in Bangladeshi organisations, focusing on HR and management professionals. Adopting an interpretivist, phenomenological approach, the study explores how employees interpret flexible schedules, the meanings they attach to flexibility in relation to motivation and wellbeing, and its perceived impact on work–life balance. Drawing on Self-Determination Theory, Work–Life Balance Theory, and the Job Demands–Resources Model, flexible working hours are positioned not merely as policies but as practices embedded in organisational culture, managerial trust, and socio-cultural norms. Through in-depth, semi-structured interviews, the research aims to generate rich insights into autonomy, boundary management, and psychological safety among employees aged 25–40. The study seeks to extend predominantly Western theoretical frameworks to a non-Western context, fill a qualitative research gap on workplace flexibility in Bangladesh, and provide evidence-based guidance for developing employee-centred flexible work policies for organisational leaders, HR practitioners, and policymakers.

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1.1 Background & context

Bangladesh's corporate environment has been gradually reshaped by industrial expansion, technological advancement, and changing expectations among today's workforce. As organisations strive to remain competitive and responsive to global standards, interest in modern work practices-particularly flexible working hours-has grown noticeably. These shifts are especially relevant for employees in human resources and management roles, who carry the responsibility of maintaining organisational performance while also managing their own wellbeing in increasingly fast-paced work settings.

A clear distinction remains between public and private sector organisational cultures. Public institutions typically operate within hierarchical systems characterised by fixed schedules and procedural compliance, whereas private organisations emphasise innovation, efficiency, and adaptability, making them more receptive to flexible working arrangements. Such institutional differences significantly influence employees' perceptions of autonomy, job satisfaction and work-life balance.

Within private organisations, employee satisfaction has become a key determinant of productivity and organisational stability. Psychological safety, career development opportunities, mental wellbeing and supportive management practices all contribute to employee motivation and retention. Flexible working hours play an important role in this context by enabling greater control over time and reducing burnout, particularly for employees aged 25-40 who often balance professional and personal responsibilities.

Although the adoption of flexible working practices in Bangladesh's private sector has increased, implementation remains uneven across industries. Multinational and technology-driven firms have led the shift toward hybrid and results-oriented models, while many local organisations continue to face challenges related to trust, communication and cultural preferences for on-site work. Despite these barriers, flexibility is frequently associated with improved job satisfaction, time management, and mental wellbeing among HR and management professionals.

This study adopts an interpretive qualitative approach to explore how HR and management professionals in Bangladeshi organisations experience and make sense of flexible working hours in their everyday work lives. By examining both public and private sector contexts, the research aims to understand how flexible arrangements, organisational culture and wellbeing interact to shape perceptions of satisfaction and psychological safety within Bangladesh's evolving corporate landscape.

1.2 Research Problem

Problem Statement

Although flexible working hours are increasingly adopted in Bangladeshi organisations, little is known about how employees experience and interpret these arrangements in their daily working lives. Existing research largely emphasises performance outcomes, offering limited insight into employees' subjective meanings, motivations, and wellbeing. Consequently, organisations lack context-specific understanding of how flexible working hours function from an employee perspective

Consequences

This lack of understanding limits organisations' ability to design effective and humane flexible work policies, potentially undermining employee wellbeing, motivation, retention, and long-term performance. Employees-particularly those balancing professional and family responsibilities-may experience flexibility in ways that differ from managerial assumptions, while HR professionals and leaders remain constrained by evidence drawn largely from Western contexts that do not fully reflect Bangladeshi cultural and organisational realities. Academically, the dominance of Western, quantitative studies restricts theoretical development regarding flexible work in emerging economies.

Response

To address this gap, the study adopts a qualitative phenomenological approach to explore how Bangladeshi employees perceive, interpret, and make meaning of flexible working hours. By foregrounding employees' lived experiences, the research aims to generate contextually grounded insights that can inform more effective management practices and contribute to the broader literature on workplace flexibility in non-Western settings.

1.2.1 Research Gap

While flexible working hours have become a growing feature of contemporary organisational practices, their experiential and psychological impact remains underexplored within the Bangladeshi corporate context. Existing research on flexible working hours primarily focuses on quantitative outcomes, such as productivity and performance indicators, with limited attention to employees' subjective interpretations and lived experiences. Consequently, the ways in which flexibility influences motivation, wellbeing and work-life balance among Bangladeshi employees are not yet fully understood. Given that organisational culture, leadership styles and socio-cultural expectations in Bangladesh differ from those in Western contexts where most studies are situated, this gap calls for a context-specific exploration. A qualitative, phenomenological inquiry can thus provide nuanced insights into how employees personally perceive and navigate flexible working hours within their daily professional lives. Given this

emphasis on lived experience and meaning-making, a phenomenological approach is particularly suited to capturing employees' subjective realities of flexible working hours.

1.2.2 Aim

The aim of this study is to explore how employees in Bangladeshi organisations perceive and interpret flexible working hours, and how their experiences shape motivation, creativity and work–life balance. The study seeks to capture the deeper meanings employees attach to flexible arrangements and generate insights that can support more human-centred management practices.

1.2.3 Motivation

The motivation for undertaking this research arises from both personal reflection and scholarly interest in understanding the human dimensions of workplace flexibility. Prior professional exposure within rigid work environments has revealed the strain caused by inflexible scheduling, including decreased concentration, heightened stress levels and reduced overall wellbeing. Simultaneously, the growing experimentation with flexible work policies by forward-looking Bangladeshi organisations presents a valuable opportunity to study their implications through an employee-centred lens. This study seeks to contribute to academic discourse and managerial practice by illuminating how flexibility shapes employees' sense of autonomy, motivation and balance. In doing so, it aims to generate empirically grounded and context-sensitive insights that can inform the development of more humane and sustainable management practices in Bangladesh.

1.2.4 Research Question

1. How do employees interpret and make sense of flexible working hours in their daily work lives?

Purpose: To gain a deep understanding of employees' personal perceptions and lived experiences of flexible working hours, revealing how they construct meaning around autonomy and time management in their organisational settings.

2. What meanings do employees attach to flexibility when considering their motivation and wellbeing?

Purpose: To explore how flexible working hours influence employees' intrinsic motivation, job satisfaction and overall wellbeing, thereby identifying the psychological factors that drive engagement under flexible schedules.

3. How do employees describe the relationship between flexible working hour and their work–life balance?

Purpose: To examine how flexible working hours affect employees' ability to manage personal and professional responsibilities, highlighting both the benefits and challenges that flexibility brings to achieving balance.

1.2.5 Objective

1. To explore how employees interpret and experience flexible working hours within their organisational context.

This objective directly addresses the first research question about how employees understand and make sense of flexible working hours in their daily routines. It focuses on uncovering individual perceptions and interpretations, which are central to a phenomenological and interpretive inquiry.

2. To understand the meanings employees attach to flexibility in relation to their motivation and wellbeing.

This aligns with the second research question that explores how employees connect flexibility with their motivation and mental wellbeing. It investigates the deeper psychological significance of flexible schedules through the lens of Self-Determination Theory, particularly focusing on autonomy and intrinsic motivation.

3. To examine how flexible working arrangements influence employees' experiences of work–life balance.

This relates directly to the third research question concerning the relationship between flexibility and balance. By analysing how flexible hours affect employees' ability to manage professional and personal roles, this objective contributes to understanding wellbeing and satisfaction outcomes.

4. To identify organisational and managerial factors that shape perceptions of flexible schedules.

This objective extends the analysis by examining how organisational culture, leadership style and managerial attitudes shape employees' experiences of flexible working hours

5. To generate interpretive insights that can inform more employee-focused management practices in Bangladeshi organisations.

This objective synthesises employees' lived experiences into interpretive insights that can inform employee-focused management practices in Bangladeshi organisations.

1.3 Significance of the Study

This study holds meaningful practical and scholarly value. For Bangladeshi organisations, the findings will offer evidence-based insights to guide the development of healthier, more sustainable, and productivity-oriented work environments. By examining employees' lived experiences of flexible working hours, the study provides a nuanced understanding of how flexibility influences wellbeing, motivation, and retention-issues that remain central to modern organisational practice.

Employees in the 25–40 age group often navigate demanding professional expectations alongside family responsibilities and personal aspirations. Gaining an in-depth understanding of how this cohort interprets and negotiates flexibility can support organisations in designing context-appropriate policies that strengthen both performance and long-term employee development. In this regard, the study's emphasis on subjective experience aligns with Creswell's view that qualitative research is most valuable when it "illuminates how individuals make meaning within their everyday contexts" (paraphrased from Creswell, 2013).

Beyond organisational implications, the research contributes to broader academic discussions on flexible work in emerging economies, where such practices are evolving and deeply shaped by cultural, structural, and managerial factors. By offering empirically grounded insights from the Bangladeshi corporate sector, the study helps address the existing gap in literature that often overlooks the contextual realities of non-Western workplaces. As a result, the study not only supports policy refinement within organisations but also advances theoretical and empirical understanding of workplace flexibility in developing-country contexts.

1.3.1 Actionable Contribution For

The outcomes of this research will benefit several key stakeholder groups. Organisational leaders and HR practitioners in Bangladeshi companies can use the findings to design more responsive and evidence-based flexible working policies that enhance employee wellbeing and reduce turnover. Supervisors and line managers will gain clearer insight into how flexibility is interpreted by employees, supporting more empathetic and effective management practices. Employees, particularly those balancing professional responsibilities with family or personal demands, may benefit from more inclusive, autonomy-supportive work arrangements shaped by their expressed needs and lived experiences. Beyond organisational stakeholders, the study also offers value to policymakers and labour regulators seeking to modernise national guidelines on flexible work in alignment with global trends. Finally, the research provides academics and future researchers with context-rich empirical data that can inform subsequent studies on workplace flexibility in emerging economies, enabling comparative analysis and theory development grounded in the Bangladeshi context.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

A literature review plays a central role in qualitative research by situating a study within existing scholarly debates and demonstrating its contribution to new knowledge. Rather than cataloguing prior studies, a rigorous review critically engages with theoretical and empirical work to trace conceptual development and identify key gaps (Creswell, 2018). Research on flexible working hours has largely focused on measurable organisational outcomes such as productivity, engagement, and performance, with comparatively less attention given to how employees experience, interpret, and attach meaning to flexibility in their everyday working lives.

Consequently, this review foregrounds theories and empirical studies that emphasise employee perceptions, motivation, and lived experience, thereby justifying the phenomenological approach adopted in this study.

Although existing research has generated valuable insights into organisational performance, it is dominated by quantitative designs that privilege measurable outcomes over subjective experience. Such approaches often assume that flexible working hours produce uniform effects, overlooking the contextual and emotionally nuanced ways employees interpret flexibility within their work lives.

Phenomenological scholars argue that workplace phenomena cannot be fully understood without attention to individuals' conscious and meaningful experiences within their social contexts (Van Manen, 2014). From this perspective, flexible working hours are not merely organisational policies but lived experiences shaped by perceptions of autonomy, managerial trust, workload expectations, and cultural norms.

Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009) further suggest that phenomenological inquiry is particularly suited to exploring how individuals make sense of significant work-related experiences. As flexible working hours frequently blur boundaries between professional and personal life, understanding their impact requires methods that prioritise meaning-making rather than measurement.

This methodological need is especially pronounced in non-Western contexts such as Bangladesh, where hierarchical organisational structures, collectivist values, and power-distance norms may shape experiences of flexibility in ways that differ from Western settings. A phenomenological approach therefore provides a contextually sensitive means of capturing the complexity and ambiguity of employees' experiences of flexible working hours.

2.1.1 Theoretical Perspectives Relevant to Flexible Working Hours

Several theoretical perspectives have been used to explain how flexible working hours influence employee attitudes and behaviours. Among the most prominent are Self-Determination Theory (SDT), Work-Life Balance Theory, the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) Model, and Conservation of Resources (COR) Theory. These frameworks collectively emphasise motivation, resource allocation, psychological wellbeing, and the interaction between job demands and personal life.

SDT (Deci & Ryan, 1985) is particularly influential in flexibility research, as it explains how autonomy, competence, and relatedness shape intrinsic motivation and wellbeing. Flexible working hours are often framed as autonomy-enhancing practices, yet SDT also cautions that autonomy is meaningful only when employees perceive genuine control rather than managerial pressure. Work–Life Balance Theory (Greenhaus & Powell) highlights the spillover between work and non-work domains, suggesting that flexibility can either reduce or intensify conflict depending on contextual conditions. Similarly, the JD-R Model conceptualises flexible work as a potential job resource that may buffer stress, but only when demands such as workload and role ambiguity are adequately managed.

Together, these perspectives suggest that flexible working hours cannot be understood solely as a policy instrument; rather, they must be examined through employees' subjective interpretations and experiences, reinforcing the relevance of qualitative inquiry.

2.1.2 Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of the study moving from broad theoretical perspectives to more specific substantive concepts. At the widest level, interpretivism underpins the research, assuming that reality is socially constructed and best understood through individuals' lived experiences. Narrowing further, phenomenology provides the methodological orientation, focusing on how employees consciously experience flexible working hours in their organisational contexts.

Within this framework, SDT, Work-Life Balance Theory, and the JD-R Model function as mid-range theories that guide the interpretation of employees' narratives. These theories help explain how flexibility relates to autonomy, motivation, wellbeing, and perceived productivity. At the narrowest level of the cone are substantive concepts such as autonomy over time, boundary management, emotional responses to flexibility, and cultural expectations, which emerge directly from participants' accounts. This layered framework ensures theoretical coherence while remaining open to new meanings generated from the data.

Within this study, SDT, Work-Life Balance Theory and the JD-R Model are not treated as deterministic explanatory models, but as flexible interpretive lenses that sensitise analysis to issues of autonomy, wellbeing and work demands. Their application remains secondary to participants' lived accounts, allowing theory to illuminate experience without constraining the emergence of context-specific meanings.

2.1.3 Empirical Studies on Flexible Working Hours

Weideman and Hofmeyr (2020) – South Africa

Weideman and Hofmeyr (2020) conducted a qualitative exploratory study using semi-structured interviews with 24 employees to examine how flexible working hours influence employee engagement. Their findings indicate that flexibility enhances engagement primarily when employees experience genuine autonomy over their schedules. Participants reported increased motivation, reduced stress, and improved management of personal responsibilities. Methodologically, the study's strength lies in its in-depth qualitative design, which captures rich experiential data. However, its limitation is the relatively small sample and organisational scope, which restricts generalisability. Despite this, the study is methodologically valid and theoretically grounded in SDT, making it highly relevant to the present research. A minor limitation is that the authors focus more on engagement outcomes than on deeper cultural interpretations, a gap the current study seeks to address within the Bangladeshi context.

Mohiya (2024) – Saudi Arabia

Mohiya (2024) employed a mixed qualitative triangulation approach, including interviews with 30 employees, to investigate factors influencing productivity under flexible working hours in Saudi Arabia. The study highlights how contextual elements such as family obligations, commuting challenges, and energy levels shape employees' experiences of flexibility. While the triangulated design strengthens validity, the productivity-oriented framing somewhat limits exploration of deeper emotional and motivational meanings. Nevertheless, the study is a credible, peer-reviewed source and is highly relevant due to cultural similarities between Saudi Arabia and Bangladesh, particularly collectivist values and hierarchical workplaces. A short criticism is that phenomenological depth is secondary to outcome measurement, reinforcing the need for a purely phenomenological approach in the present study.

Shahrodi (2024) – Iran

Shahrodi (2024) used qualitative interviews with 20 employees to explore experiences of flexible working hours and perceived productivity. The findings reveal a dual experience: flexibility enhances creativity, time management, and wellbeing, yet also blurs boundaries between work and home. The study effectively applies the JD-R Model to interpret flexibility as both a resource and a potential demand. While the methodology allows for rich insights, the study does not fully explore organisational power dynamics that may influence employee perceptions. Despite this limitation, the study is valid and relevant, particularly for understanding flexibility in emerging economies. Its emphasis on mixed experiences directly informs the current research's focus on lived meaning rather than simplistic positive or negative outcomes.

Recent phenomenological studies further highlight the value of interpretive approaches in understanding flexible working experiences. Like,

Grant and Parker (2019) conducted an IPA study exploring employees' experiences of autonomy under flexible work arrangements and found that flexibility was often experienced as simultaneously empowering and demanding. Participants described heightened control over

time alongside increased expectations of constant availability, illustrating the ambivalent nature of flexibility as lived experience.

Allen et al. (2021) used phenomenological interviews to examine work–life boundary management among professionals using flexible schedules. Their findings revealed that flexibility did not automatically enhance wellbeing; instead, outcomes depended on how organisational norms and managerial expectations shaped employees' perceived freedom to disengage from work. This reinforces the argument that flexible working hours must be understood through employees' subjective interpretations rather than policy design alone.

Kim and Chung (2022) explored employees' lived experiences of flexible work in collectivist organisational cultures and found that cultural expectations of availability and loyalty significantly shaped how flexibility was experienced. Participants reported reluctance to fully exercise autonomy due to concerns about relational harmony and managerial judgement.

These findings are particularly relevant to the Bangladeshi context and highlight the need for culturally sensitive phenomenological inquiry.

2.1.4 Critical Evaluation of Theoretical Frameworks

Substantive theories provide context-specific explanations that bridge abstract theory and empirical reality. In this research, Self-Determination Theory (SDT) serves as the primary substantive framework, offering a lens to examine how flexible working hours influence autonomy, intrinsic motivation, and wellbeing. Complementing SDT, Work-Life Balance Theory explains how flexibility interacts with family responsibilities and social roles, which are particularly salient in the Bangladeshi context. The Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) Model further supports analysis by accounting for how flexibility may function as a resource under certain conditions while simultaneously intensifying job demands.

Together, these theories align with the study's phenomenological aim of understanding how employees experience and interpret flexible working hours within their organisational and cultural environments. Their integration enables the research to move beyond policy-level evaluation to explore the meanings employees attach to flexibility in their everyday work lives. Despite their analytical value, SDT, Work-Life Balance Theory, and the JD-R Model require critical reflection when applied within non-Western organisational contexts. These frameworks were largely developed in Western socio-cultural settings that emphasise individual autonomy, egalitarian workplace relations, and low power-distance norms. As a result, their underlying assumptions may not fully reflect the lived realities of employees in more collectivist and hierarchical contexts such as Bangladesh.

SDT positions autonomy as central to motivation and wellbeing (Deci & Ryan, 1985). However, critics suggest that this conceptualisation reflects an individualistic understanding of autonomy that may be less applicable in collectivist cultures, where relational harmony, hierarchical authority, and group obligations are prioritised. Within Bangladeshi organisations, autonomy

may be experienced as relational and negotiated, shaped by managerial trust and organisational hierarchy. Consequently, flexible working hours may be perceived as autonomy-enhancing in principle while remaining constrained in practice.

Similarly, Work-Life Balance Theory assumes a level of individual agency in managing work-life boundaries that may not hold in contexts characterised by strong norms of availability and presenteeism. In Bangladesh, where extended family responsibilities coexist with demanding organisational expectations, flexible working hours may ease time pressures while simultaneously intensifying role conflict, resulting in ambivalent rather than uniformly positive experiences.

The JD-R Model is particularly useful in capturing this ambivalence by conceptualising flexible working hours as both a potential resource and a potential demand. However, the model has been critiqued for its tendency to frame demands and resources in functional terms, potentially underplaying the subjective and emotional dimensions of employee experience. Without attention to lived meaning, flexibility risks being treated as an abstract construct rather than a socially embedded practice.

Rather than rejecting these frameworks, this study adopts them as sensitising concepts that guide interpretation while remaining open to meanings emerging from participants' accounts. A phenomenological approach enables their reflexive and contextual application, ensuring that employees' lived experiences take precedence over theoretical assumptions. In doing so, the study responds to calls for culturally sensitive qualitative research that adapts—rather than imposes—Western theories within non-Western organisational settings.

2.2 Phenomenological Approaches in Qualitative Workplace

Research Phenomenology has been widely adopted within qualitative workplace research to explore how employees experience, interpret and assign meaning to organisational practices. Rooted in the philosophical traditions of Husserl and Heidegger, phenomenology seeks to understand phenomena as they are lived rather than as they are theorised or measured externally (Van Manen, 2014).

In applied organisational research, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) has become particularly influential. Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009) conceptualise IPA as an approach concerned with how individuals make sense of their major life and work experiences, recognising the active interpretive role of both participant and researcher. This double hermeneutic is especially relevant in studies of workplace flexibility, where employees simultaneously interpret organisational expectations and negotiate personal boundaries. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) further argue that qualitative inquiry grounded in interpretivist assumptions allows researchers to access meanings that remain inaccessible through structured surveys or experimental designs. Rather than seeking causal explanation, phenomenological research illuminates how organisational practices are subjectively experienced, emotionally negotiated and socially constructed.

Beyond methodological technique, phenomenology aligns closely with constructivist foundations of qualitative research, as articulated by Lincoln and Guba (2013), who emphasise that realities are multiple, context-dependent and co-constructed through interaction. In the context of flexible working hours, this suggests that employees' experiences cannot be reduced to singular outcomes, but must be understood as situated interpretations shaped by organisational culture, managerial relationships and broader socio-cultural expectations.

Given the study's focus on meaning-making and interpretation rather than pure description, an interpretative phenomenological orientation is particularly appropriate.

2.3 Conceptual Framework

This study conceptualises flexible working hours not merely as an organisational policy, but as a lived experience shaped by employees' psychological needs, work demands, and socio-cultural context. The framework integrates Self-Determination Theory (SDT), Work-Life Balance Theory, and the Job Demand-Resources (JD-R) Model within an interpretivist-phenomenological lens to explain how employees experience and assign meaning to flexible working arrangements.

At the core of the framework is the assumption that the impact of flexible working hours is mediated by employees' subjective perceptions, rather than determined solely by formal policy design.

2.3.1. Relationships Between Theories

i) Flexible Working Hours as the Central Organisational Practice

Flexible working hours act as the primary organisational input in the framework. Rather than assuming uniform outcomes, the framework recognises that flexibility is interpreted differently depending on individual circumstances, organisational expectations, and cultural norms. This positions flexibility as a context-dependent phenomenon, requiring qualitative exploration.

ii) Self-Determination Theory (SDT): Psychological Mechanism

SDT explains how flexible working hours influence employee motivation and wellbeing. Within this framework, flexibility affects employees through three psychological needs:

Autonomy: Perceived control over work time and scheduling

Competence: Ability to manage work effectively within flexible arrangements

Relatedness: Sense of trust and connection with managers and colleagues

When flexible working hours genuinely support autonomy, they enhance intrinsic motivation and wellbeing. However, when flexibility is accompanied by implicit pressure or workload intensification, these psychological needs may be undermined. SDT therefore functions as the primary explanatory mechanism linking flexibility to employees' lived experiences.

iii) Work-Life Balance Theory: Contextual Spillover

Work-Life Balance Theory complements SDT by explaining where the effects of flexible working hours are most strongly felt—at the boundary between work and personal life. The framework assumes that flexible schedules influence:

Management of family responsibilities

Emotional spillover between work and home

Perceived harmony or conflict between roles

In collectivist and family-oriented societies such as Bangladesh, these dynamics are particularly significant. Thus, Work-Life Balance Theory situates flexibility within employees' broader life contexts, reinforcing the need to explore personal meanings rather than objective outcomes alone.

iv) Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) Model: Conditional Effects

The JD-R Model explains why flexibility produces mixed experiences. In the framework:

Flexible working hours function as a job resource when they reduce stress and enhance control.

They may simultaneously become a job demand when they blur boundaries, extend working hours, or increase availability expectations.

This dual role helps explain contradictory findings in the literature and supports the study's focus on ambivalence, tension, and complexity in employee experiences.

Integration Through Phenomenology

These theories are integrated within a phenomenological framework, which prioritises employees' lived experiences and subjective interpretations. Rather than testing causal relationships, the framework guides the exploration of:

- How do employees experience autonomy?
- How do they interpret balance or conflict?
- How do they make sense of motivation, stress, and productivity?

Phenomenology allows these theoretical elements to inform interpretation without constraining participants' voices, aligning with Creswell's (2018) guidance on qualitative inquiry.



This conceptual framework positions flexible working hours not as a uniform organisational policy but as a contextually situated and subjectively experienced practice. Flexible working hours are embedded within the organisational context, shaped by leadership style, managerial trust, performance expectations, and socio-cultural norms specific to the Bangladeshi corporate environment.

The framework integrates three complementary theoretical perspectives. Self-Determination Theory explains how flexible working hours influence psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness, thereby shaping motivation and wellbeing. Work–Life Balance Theory conceptualises flexibility as a boundary management mechanism through which employees negotiate balance or conflict between work and personal roles. The Job Demands-Resources Model captures the conditional nature of flexibility, recognising its potential to function either as a job resource or as a job demand depending on organisational conditions. These theoretical lenses converge on employees' lived experiences, emphasising how flexible working hours are interpreted and given meaning in everyday work life. Subjective outcomes-such as motivation, wellbeing, creativity, and perceived productivity are therefore understood as emergent products of employee sense-making rather than direct policy effects. Anchored in a phenomenological approach, the framework guides the study toward a contextually grounded understanding of how flexible working hours are experienced within Bangladeshi organisations.

Collectively, these studies demonstrate that flexible working hours are best understood not as uniform organisational interventions, but as lived experiences characterised by tension, negotiation and meaning-making, thereby reinforcing the appropriateness of a phenomenological approach for the present study. The dominance of Western-developed theories in organisational research raises important questions regarding epistemic transferability and cultural relevance. While such frameworks offer valuable conceptual tools, their uncritical application risks overlooking local meanings, power relations and cultural norms. By combining established motivational and wellbeing theories with an interpretivist phenomenological approach, the present study seeks to balance theoretical coherence with contextual sensitivity, ensuring that employees' voices remain central to knowledge production.

3. Methodology

3.1 Paradigmatic Foundation

Qualitative research is guided by underlying philosophical assumptions that shape how knowledge is understood, generated, and interpreted. In line with Creswell (2018), this study is grounded in an interpretivist paradigm, which is appropriate for exploring employees' lived experiences of flexible working hours. The paradigmatic foundation of the study is explained through its ontological, epistemological, and axiological assumptions.

3.1.1 Ontology

Ontology concerns assumptions about the nature of reality. This study adopts a relativist ontology, which assumes that reality is not singular or objective but multiple and socially constructed. Employees' experiences of flexible working hours are shaped by personal circumstances, organisational culture, managerial expectations, and socio-cultural norms.

From this perspective, flexible working hours do not have one fixed meaning or outcome; rather, their significance varies across individuals and contexts. This ontological position aligns with the study's aim to understand how employees interpret and make sense of flexibility, rather than to measure its effects in an objective or universal manner.

3.1.2 Epistemology (Nature of Knowledge)

Epistemology refers to how knowledge is generated and what counts as valid knowledge. This study is informed by a subjectivist epistemology, which assumes that knowledge is co-constructed through interaction between the researcher and participants. Understanding employees' experiences of flexible working hours requires engaging with their narratives, reflections, and meanings as expressed in their own words.

In this research, knowledge emerges through in-depth qualitative engagement, particularly through interviews, allowing participants to articulate how they experience autonomy, motivation, wellbeing, and work-life balance. This epistemological stance supports the use of phenomenology, as it privileges participants' voices and lived experiences as legitimate sources of knowledge.

3.1.3 Axiology

Axiology concerns the role of values in research. This study acknowledges that research is value-laden, particularly in qualitative inquiry. The researcher's interest in humane and employee-centred management practices informs the choice of topic and research questions.

Rather than attempting value neutrality, this study embraces reflexivity by recognising how the researcher's experiences and assumptions shape the research process. Ethical sensitivity, respect for participants' experiences, and transparency in interpretation are prioritised throughout the study. This axiological stance aligns with phenomenological research, where empathy, reflexivity, and ethical engagement are central.

3.1.4 Research Paradigm

Taken together, the study is situated within an interpretivist research paradigm. This paradigm assumes that social reality is constructed through human interaction and that understanding organisational phenomena requires exploring meaning, context, and experience.

The interpretivist paradigm is particularly suitable for this research because it enables an in-depth exploration of how employees in Bangladeshi organisations experience flexible working hours within their specific cultural and organisational environments. It also supports the study's objective of generating context-sensitive insights rather than generalisable laws.

3.1.5 Justification of Paradigmatic Choice

Qualitative research may be situated within several paradigmatic traditions, including interpretivism, critical theory, constructivism, and pragmatism, each with distinct ontological, epistemological, and methodological implications. While these paradigms share some overlapping assumptions, this study adopts an interpretivist stance as the most appropriate framework for exploring employees' lived experiences of flexible working hours.

Interpretivism is particularly suited to this research because it prioritises understanding how individuals construct meaning within specific social and organisational contexts. The study seeks to explore how employees perceive and interpret flexible working hours in their everyday work lives, rather than to evaluate organisational practices against normative standards or to advocate structural change. This paradigm therefore aligns closely with the study's phenomenological focus on subjective experience, meaning-making, and contextual understanding.

Critical theory was considered but not adopted, as its primary concern lies in exposing structural power relations and promoting emancipation. Although issues of hierarchy and power are acknowledged, the study does not aim to critique organisational systems or advocate structural transformation. A critical theoretical stance would risk shifting analytical emphasis away from lived experience toward normative critique, which lies beyond the scope of this inquiry.

Constructivism shares interpretivism's assumption that reality is socially constructed; however, constructivist research often emphasises collective meaning-making and discursive processes. In contrast, this study adopts a phenomenological orientation that foregrounds individuals' subjective experiences. While acknowledging social construction, an interpretivist phenomenological approach allows for deeper engagement with personal meaning and experiential nuance, which are central to the research questions.

Pragmatism was also considered due to its focus on practical problem-solving and outcomes.

However, pragmatic research typically prioritises instrumental solutions and methodological flexibility over philosophical coherence. As the aim of this study is not to evaluate policy effectiveness but to develop an in-depth understanding of employees' experiences and interpretations, pragmatism was deemed less suitable.

For these reasons, an interpretivist paradigm, aligned with phenomenological inquiry, provides the most coherent philosophical foundation for exploring the lived experiences of flexible working hours within the Bangladeshi organisational context

3.2 Creswell's Five Qualitative Approaches

Creswell (2018) identifies five major qualitative research approaches: Narrative Inquiry, Phenomenology, Grounded Theory, Ethnography, and Case Study. Each approach serves a distinct research purpose and is grounded in different methodological assumptions.

3.2.1 Overview of Creswell's Five Approaches

- Narrative Inquiry focuses on individuals' life stories and how experiences are narrated over time.
- Phenomenology seeks to understand the essence of a shared lived experience among individuals.
- Grounded Theory aims to generate a theory grounded in data about a social process or interaction.
- Ethnography explores shared cultural patterns within a defined group over an extended period.
- Case Study involves an in-depth examination of a bounded system, such as an organisation or programme.

3.2.2 Justification for Phenomenology

This study adopts a phenomenological approach, as its primary aim is to explore how employees experience and interpret flexible working hours in their everyday work lives. Phenomenology is particularly appropriate when the research seeks to understand the meanings individuals attach to a shared phenomenon (Creswell, 2018).

Flexible working hours represent a common organisational practice, yet employees experience this phenomenon differently depending on autonomy, workload, managerial trust, and personal responsibilities. Phenomenology enables the researcher to capture these experiences in depth

and to identify the essence of flexibility as lived and perceived by employees, rather than as formally designed by organisations.

The focus on motivation, wellbeing, and work-life balance further strengthens the suitability of phenomenology, as these constructs are inherently subjective and experiential.

3.2.3 Justification for Not Using the Other Four Approaches

Narrative Inquiry was not selected because the study does not aim to construct detailed life stories or longitudinal personal narratives. While participants' experiences are important, the focus is on a shared organisational phenomenon rather than individual biographies.

Grounded Theory was deemed unsuitable because the purpose of the study is not to generate a new formal theory explaining flexible working hours. Instead, existing theories such as Self-Determination Theory and the JD-R Model are used to sensitise interpretation rather than to emerge inductively as a new theoretical framework.

Ethnography was not adopted because the study does not involve prolonged immersion within a single organisational culture or group. The research seeks insights across employees from different organisations rather than an in-depth cultural analysis of one setting.

Case Study was also considered inappropriate, as the study does not focus on a bounded organisational case (such as a single company). Instead, it prioritises employees' subjective experiences across organisational contexts, which aligns more closely with phenomenological inquiry.

3.3 Research Design and Methods

3.3.1 Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative research design to explore how employees in Bangladeshi organisations experience and interpret flexible working hours in their everyday work lives. Qualitative research is particularly appropriate when the aim is to understand meanings, perceptions, and subjective realities rather than to measure predefined variables or test hypotheses.

The focus of this research is not on assessing whether flexible working hours “work” in a generalised sense, but on understanding how employees make sense of flexibility, how it influences their motivation, wellbeing, and work–life balance, and how these experiences are shaped by organisational and cultural contexts. Such depth of understanding can only be achieved through qualitative inquiry, which allows participants to articulate their experiences in their own words.

3.3.2 Relevance to the Research Topic

Flexible working hours represent a complex organisational phenomenon that is experienced differently by employees depending on role expectations, managerial practices, and personal responsibilities. In the Bangladeshi corporate context, where traditional work norms often coexist with emerging flexible practices, employees' interpretations of flexibility are particularly nuanced.

A qualitative, phenomenological design aligns closely with the study's aim to capture these lived experiences. Through in-depth engagement with HR and management professionals, the research seeks to uncover how flexibility is perceived as autonomy, support, pressure, or constraint. This design therefore supports the study's conceptual framework, which positions flexible working hours as a lived experience rather than a uniform policy outcome.

3.3.3 Justification for Choosing a Qualitative Approach

A qualitative approach was chosen for three key reasons. First, the research questions are exploratory and interpretive in nature, focusing on "how" and "what meaning" rather than "how much" or "to what extent." Second, existing studies in the Bangladeshi context have predominantly used quantitative methods, leaving a gap in understanding employees' subjective experiences. Third, qualitative research enables sensitivity to cultural and organisational context, which is essential when studying work practices in non-Western settings.

By using qualitative methods, the study allows participants to reflect on their motivations, emotional responses, and work-life experiences, providing rich and nuanced data that would not be accessible through surveys or numerical indicators alone.

3.3.4 Creswell's 8 Approach

This study reflects Creswell's (2018) eight defining characteristics of qualitative research in several ways.

- i) The research is conducted within a natural setting, as data will be collected from employees within their real organisational contexts rather than through artificial or experimental conditions. This allows participants to describe their experiences of flexible working hours as they occur in everyday professional life.
- ii) The researcher acts as the key instrument of data collection and interpretation. Through semi-structured interviews, the researcher engages directly with participants, listens to their

narratives, and interprets meanings while remaining reflexive about personal assumptions and positionality.

- iii) The study draws on multiple sources of data to enhance depth and understanding. While in-depth interviews form the primary data source, reflective field notes and contextual organisational documents (where appropriate) will be used to support interpretation.
- iv) Data analysis follows an inductive process, moving from specific participant accounts toward broader themes and patterns. Rather than testing predetermined hypotheses, meanings emerge progressively from participants' descriptions of flexible working hours.
- v) The study prioritises participants' meanings, focusing on how employees themselves interpret flexibility, autonomy, wellbeing, and work–life balance. This aligns closely with the phenomenological aim of understanding lived experience from the participant's perspective.
- vi) The research design is emergent, allowing interview questions, prompts, and analytical focus to evolve as understanding deepens during the data collection process.
- vii) Reflexivity is embedded throughout the study. The researcher maintains awareness of how personal background, organisational familiarity, and assumptions may shape interactions and interpretations.
- viii) The study aims to produce a holistic account of flexible working hours by situating individual experiences within broader organisational, cultural, and managerial contexts in Bangladesh.

3.3.5 Guba & Lincoln 4 Feature

To ensure methodological rigour, this study adopts Guba and Lincoln's (1989) four criteria for trustworthiness: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

Credibility will be enhanced through prolonged engagement with participants, the use of in-depth semi-structured interviews, and member checking, whereby participants are given the opportunity to clarify or confirm key interpretations of their accounts.

Transferability will be supported through thick description, providing detailed contextual information about organisational settings, participant roles, and work environments. This allows readers to assess the relevance of findings to other organisational contexts.

Dependability will be addressed by maintaining a clear audit trail documenting research decisions, interview procedures, coding processes, and analytical steps. This ensures transparency and allows the research process to be traced logically.

Confirmability will be strengthened through reflexive journaling, where the researcher records reflections, assumptions, and analytical decisions throughout the study. This helps distinguish participants' meanings from the researcher's interpretations and minimises personal bias.

3.3.6 Triangulation

Although phenomenological research primarily relies on in-depth interviews, this study adopts data source and analytical triangulation along with interviews to enhance trustworthiness. Data source triangulation is achieved by engaging participants from different roles within HR and management, allowing diverse perspectives on flexible working hours to be explored. This variation supports a richer understanding of how flexibility is experienced across organisational hierarchies.

Analytical triangulation is incorporated through the use of multiple theoretical lenses—Self-Determination Theory, Work–Life Balance Theory, and the Job Demands–Resources Model—to interpret participants' accounts. Rather than forcing convergence, these frameworks help illuminate different dimensions of the same lived experiences.

This approach aligns with phenomenological principles by deepening interpretation while maintaining a primary focus on participants' narratives.

3.3.7 Debriefing

Peer debriefing forms an important component of the study's quality assurance process. The researcher will engage in regular, structured discussions with academic peers and the research supervisor to critically reflect on emerging themes, analytical decisions and potential interpretive bias. These discussions provide an external check on the research process, supporting reflexive awareness and enhancing analytical credibility.

Supervisor debriefing, in particular, plays a central role in challenging assumptions, refining interpretations and ensuring that analytical claims remain grounded in participants' accounts rather than the researcher's expectations. This ongoing reflexive engagement strengthens methodological rigour while preserving the interpretive openness central to phenomenological inquiry.

3.3.8 Ethical Considerations

This study explores employees' lived experiences of flexible working hours within Bangladeshi organisational contexts, focusing on motivation, wellbeing, and work–life balance. Given that the research is conducted within hierarchical workplace settings characterised by uneven power relations, ethical considerations are treated not as a procedural requirement but as an ongoing, reflexive process embedded throughout the research design, data collection, analysis, and reporting. Ethical approval will be obtained from the relevant institutional review body, and all research activities will adhere to established professional and institutional ethical guidelines. The study is guided by the Flinders Ethical Framework for Social Research Ethics (Israel & Hay,

2006), which is particularly suited to qualitative, interpretivist, and phenomenological research. The framework emphasises researcher responsibility, reflexivity, and context-sensitive ethical judgement, recognising ethics as a situated and evolving practice rather than a fixed set of rules. This orientation aligns closely with the phenomenological aim of understanding participants' lived experiences as they are subjectively perceived and meaningfully interpreted. At a methodological level, the framework's emphasis on reflexivity and integrity supports key phenomenological practices such as epoché and bracketing by requiring ongoing awareness of the researcher's assumptions and interpretive positioning. The principle of beneficence extends beyond harm avoidance to include ethical responsibility in interpretation, ensuring that participants' accounts are represented faithfully and without distortion. Ethical conduct is therefore treated as integral to phenomenological rigour rather than separate from methodological practice.

Although the Flinders framework was developed primarily within Western research contexts, this study critically adapts its principles to the Bangladeshi organisational environment. Bangladesh is characterised by relatively high power-distance norms, collectivist values, and hierarchical workplace structures (Hofstede, 2001), which may shape how voluntary participation, informed consent, and confidentiality are experienced. Employees may feel implicit pressure to participate due to respect for authority or fear of organisational repercussions. To address these risks, recruitment will be conducted independently of organisational reporting lines, and participants will be clearly informed—both verbally and in writing—that participation is entirely voluntary and that withdrawal is possible at any stage without explanation or consequence. This approach reflects guidance from cross-cultural research ethics literature cautioning against universal assumptions of autonomy and consent (Cheah & Nelson, 2004).

Power dynamics are also acknowledged in relation to researcher positionality, including academic status, organisational familiarity, and association with Western academic institutions. Participants may have concerns regarding how their accounts are interpreted or represented, particularly when discussing workplace practices. To mitigate this, interviews are designed to focus on personal experiences and interpretations rather than organisational evaluation or managerial performance, thereby reducing perceived risk and encouraging openness.

The researcher's partial insider status presents both ethical and methodological challenges (Unluer, 2012). While organisational familiarity may enhance rapport and contextual understanding, it also risks assumption-making or selective interpretation. Heightened reflexivity is therefore maintained throughout the research process. Reflexive journaling and regular supervisory debriefing are used to document assumptions, emotional responses, and interpretive decisions, supporting phenomenological bracketing and ensuring that analysis remains grounded in participants' accounts.

Although the study involves no physical risk, reflecting on workload pressures or work–life challenges may evoke emotional discomfort. Participants will be informed of their right to decline questions, pause interviews, or withdraw without consequence. All data will be securely stored using password-protected systems accessible only to the researcher. Researcher integrity is maintained through transparent and respectful representation of participants' narratives, preserving complexity and ambivalence rather than reducing findings to simplified conclusions. Overall, the Flinders Ethical Framework provides a coherent and flexible ethical foundation for this phenomenological study. By integrating ethical reflexivity with methodological practice, attending to cultural context, power relations, and researcher positionality, and prioritising

participant autonomy and wellbeing, ethical responsibility is sustained throughout the research process. Ethics is thus positioned not merely as compliance but as a core component of rigorous, context-sensitive qualitative inquiry within the Bangladeshi organisational environment.

3.3.9 Framework for Interpretation and Discussion

The discussion of findings will be guided by the study's interpretivist and phenomenological orientation, with analysis grounded primarily in participants' lived experiences and meaning-making processes. Findings will be interpreted thematically, with themes emerging inductively from interview data and subsequently examined in relation to the study's theoretical framework.

Self-Determination Theory will be used as a sensitising lens to interpret how participants experience autonomy, competence and relatedness within flexible working arrangements, without imposing predetermined assumptions. Work–Life Balance Theory will support interpretation of how participants negotiate boundaries between professional and personal domains, while the Job Demands–Resources Model will assist in understanding the dual role of flexibility as both a potential resource and a potential demand.

Throughout the discussion, theoretical insights will be integrated reflexively, allowing participants' accounts to take analytical precedence. Particular attention will be paid to contextual and cultural factors shaping employees' experiences, ensuring that interpretations remain grounded in the Bangladeshi organisational environment rather than abstract theoretical generalisations.

3.3.10 Limitations

This study has several acknowledged limitations arising from its interpretivist, phenomenological research design.

1)The study is grounded in an interpretivist paradigm and adopts a phenomenological approach that prioritises participants' lived experiences and subjective meanings rather than objective or generalisable claims. Consequently, the findings do not seek statistical generalisation or causal explanation but offer contextually situated insights into how employees interpret flexible working hours within their organisational environments. This limitation is inherent to phenomenological inquiry and aligns with the study's focus on meaning-making rather than measurable outcomes.

2)The research draws on data from a limited range of organisational contexts and participant roles, primarily within HR and management functions. While this supports in-depth experiential exploration, it may not fully capture the perspectives of frontline or operational employees whose experiences of flexibility may differ. In line with qualitative research principles, transferability is addressed through thick description rather than representativeness, enabling readers to assess relevance to comparable contexts.

3)The study relies on self-reported interview data, which may be influenced by reflexive self-presentation or organisational sensitivity. Participants' accounts are therefore treated as meaning-laden narratives rather than objective representations of organisational reality. Measures such as anonymisation, confidentiality assurances, and open-ended questioning are employed to support openness and trustworthiness.

4)The study is cross-sectional, capturing experiences of flexible working hours at a single point in time. As phenomenological research focuses on lived experience in the present, the study does not account for how interpretations of flexibility may evolve in response to organisational change or shifting personal circumstances.

Findings

In keeping with phenomenological research, these anticipated themes are not hypotheses but sensitising expectations informed by existing literature and the study's conceptual framework. While the study's findings will emerge inductively from participants' lived accounts, prior research suggests several themes are likely to arise. Employees may describe flexible working hours as enhancing autonomy and control over time, contributing positively to intrinsic motivation and perceived wellbeing. However, this autonomy is expected to be experienced as conditional rather than absolute, shaped by managerial expectations, organisational trust, and hierarchical power relations.

Participants are also likely to report ambivalent experiences of work–life balance. Flexible working hours may support the management of family and personal responsibilities while simultaneously blurring boundaries between work and non-work domains. This boundary permeability may intensify availability expectations and emotional strain, particularly within organisational cultures that value visibility and responsiveness.

Finally, findings may highlight how cultural norms and organisational context shape the meaning of flexibility. In the Bangladeshi context, flexibility may be interpreted through relational and collective lenses, emphasising harmony, obligation, and respect for authority over individual preference. These anticipated insights underscore flexible working hours as a complex lived experience rather than a uniformly beneficial organisational practice..

Reflection

Reflecting on the design and methodological positioning of this study, its limitations also highlight important opportunities for further research. Grounded in an interpretivist paradigm and a phenomenological approach, the study prioritises depth, context, and meaning-making over breadth and generalisability. While this enables a nuanced understanding of how employees experience and interpret flexible working hours, it also constrains the scope of claims that can be made. These constraints should be understood not as weaknesses but as characteristics of a design that privileges lived experience within specific organisational and cultural contexts. Future research could extend these insights through longitudinal qualitative designs, enabling exploration of how employees' interpretations of flexible working hours evolve over time in response to organisational change, career progression, or shifting personal responsibilities.

Such approaches would complement the cross-sectional focus of the present study by capturing temporal dimensions of meaning-making. Further phenomenological inquiry involving frontline or non-managerial employees would also broaden understanding of how flexibility is experienced across organisational hierarchies, particularly where autonomy and control over work time may be more constrained.

Beyond qualitative extension, mixed-methods or quantitative studies could examine the prevalence and organisational implications of flexible working arrangements across a wider range of sectors in Bangladesh. This would situate interpretive insights alongside pattern-level evidence, enhancing policy relevance. Comparative cross-cultural studies may further illuminate how socio-cultural norms shape the ethical, organisational, and experiential dimensions of workplace flexibility, building on the contextual depth of the present study while addressing its methodological boundaries.

Scope for Future Research

The interpretivist and phenomenological focus of this study also highlights important opportunities for further research. Future studies could adopt longitudinal qualitative designs to explore how employees' lived experiences and interpretations of flexible working hours change over time, particularly in response to organisational restructuring or evolving work-life demands. Additionally, further phenomenological inquiry focusing on frontline and non-managerial employees would deepen understanding of how flexibility is experienced across organisational hierarchies. Comparative studies across cultural or national contexts may also offer insight into how socio-cultural conditions shape employees' meaning-making around flexibility. Together, such research would extend the contextual depth of the present study while addressing its methodological boundaries.

Conclusion

This study advances an interpretivist, phenomenological understanding of flexible working hours as a lived, contextually embedded organisational experience within Bangladeshi workplaces. It proposes a qualitative, phenomenological exploration of how employees in Bangladeshi organisations experience and interpret flexible working hours. Grounded in an interpretivist paradigm, the research recognises that flexible working arrangements are not experienced uniformly, but are shaped by individual circumstances, organisational practices and socio-cultural norms.

The study makes several anticipated contributions. Theoretically, it extends existing frameworks such as Self-Determination Theory, Work-Life Balance Theory and the Job Demands-Resources Model by applying them reflexively within a non-Western context, highlighting their strengths and limitations when examined through lived experience. Empirically, the research addresses a significant gap in the literature by providing context-sensitive insights into employees' subjective experiences of flexible working hours in Bangladesh. Practically, the findings are expected to inform more humane and employee-centred management practices,

supporting organisations in designing flexible work policies that acknowledge both autonomy and constraint.

By foregrounding employees' voices and prioritising meaning-making, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of workplace flexibility as a lived phenomenon rather than a purely managerial or policy-driven intervention. In doing so, it responds to growing calls for qualitative, culturally grounded research that captures the complexity of contemporary work experiences in emerging economies.

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Abbreviation

HR – Human Resources

SDT – Self-Determination Theory

JD-R – Job Demands-Resources

COR – Conservation of Resources

IPA – Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis