

To Work or Not to Work?

By Yong Hsin Ning and Jochen Reb



Examining the paradox of part-time employees working overtime.

It is 3 pm in the office. Mary, a part-time tax accountant, is still trying her best to wrap up for the day. As a permanent part-time employee, she has an agreement with her employer to work till 1 pm each day. However, it is the third time this week that she has worked overtime.

This scenario is not unique. Many studies have revealed that employees on part-time work arrangements are voluntarily working either longer hours or more intensively than what they had contracted for. So why do part-time employees work overtime? And why is it important for organisations to understand the rationale for such behaviour? Despite the increasing relevance of part-time employment, there is little research on how to structure the work, engage, develop or retain part-time employees. For organisations to effectively manage these relationships, they need to first understand what drives part-timers to work above and beyond their contracted capacity.

Growing importance of part-time employment

Part-time work is becoming more prevalent across the world. In Singapore, it is the most common form of flexible work arrangement offered by local

companies. The latest survey from Singapore's Ministry of Manpower involving 3,800 private and public companies shows that 35.3 percent of local companies offer part-time work arrangements in 2016, up from 20.1 percent in 2007. This statistic is likely to continue to rise as the Singapore government aims to make flexible work arrangements, including part-time work, more available to address the challenges faced by working women who juggle between work and family.

Elsewhere in Asia, we see the Japanese and South Korean governments advancing their support of part-time work arrangements through the institution of legislative frameworks and the provision of a wide spectrum of tangible support for both companies and part-time employees. At a global level, the 2013 Workplace Flexibility Survey by WorldatWork shows that the trend continues to be strong, where 81 percent of the 457 firms surveyed offered part-time work arrangements.

This trend of increasing part-time employment is likely to become even more relevant in the face of emerging shifts in the workforce, demographics and technology. Currently, the bulk of part-time work arrangements is adopted primarily by women who seek

to balance work and family, but the profile of the part-time employee will likely change in the future. First, it will comprise millennials who are inclined to having 'portfolio careers', combining permanent jobs and freelance gigs. Second, it may include older workers with valuable skills, knowledge and expertise, who choose to remain active in the workforce, but at a slower pace through alternative work arrangements like part-time work. Finally, companies are likely to hire more part-time employees to plug the skill gaps in rapidly evolving jobs and job markets.



The part-time overtime paradox

A common experience in many part-time arrangements is the 'part-time overtime paradox' in which part-time employees work above and beyond their contracted capacity. This phenomenon is inconsistent, at least for those voluntarily on part-time employment, as the overtime incurred can bring their total number of working hours closer to full-time hours. In our research, we first examined the causes behind this paradox: Is it due to the design of the part-time role? Is it a lack of competency or planning on the part of the part-time employee? Or is it a personal characteristic that causes these employees to exhibit a great willingness to work beyond their contracted hours? Second, we attempt to develop some practical suggestions for what organisations and part-time employees can do to manage this paradox. We do so through the lens of queuing theory.

QUEUING THEORY

We conducted a series of interviews with 12 professionals across various functions, industries and levels of seniority to understand why part-time employees work longer hours than they have been contracted for. The interviewees comprised former and current part-time employees who were initially employed as permanent staff in their companies. We also sought the perspectives of a business unit manager and a HR leader to obtain a holistic view of the phenomenon.

The data revealed a striking similarity between a queuing system and the phenomenon of part-time employees working overtime. Queuing systems, based on the queuing theory, are typically used to model customer and traffic flow, network data packets, etc., to

determine the optimal waiting time for the subject under investigation. An illustration of a simple queuing system in a commercial bank can be found in Figure 1. In such a system, the units (e.g. bank customers) arrive at the service facility (e.g. the bank) and are served by one or more servers (e.g. bank tellers), after which they leave the system.

The elements of a queuing system can be mapped into the context of a part-time arrangement in three stages as follows:

- (1) Work 'arrives' from a source to the desk of a part-time employee who works on it. The work can arrive in a deterministic or random pattern.
- (2) Work enters a 'work queue' and waits for the part-time employee to act upon it based on his or her available capacity.
- (3) When the work is completed, it 'leaves' the hands of the employee.

How does the notion of queues help organisations gain insights into this paradox? Through the lens of a queuing system, part-time employees work beyond their contracted hours for two independent but related reasons. The first relates to the demands of the work. The nature and design of the part-time work arrangement may increase the likelihood of work building up beyond the contracted capacity of the part-time employee. The second relates to the response of the employee towards the built-up work. Their choice to go beyond the contracted capacity stems largely from individual personality and value differences. It is also heavily influenced by the work environment, which includes situational factors like organisational culture, and relationships with colleagues and business partners (refer to Figure 2). With these research-driven insights, organisations have the levers to better manage, engage, develop and retain part-time employees.

The demand side: Factors driving a build-up of work

We identified three factors that drive the build-up of work beyond the contracted capacity of the part-time employee. Firstly, it is driven by a higher than expected volume of work over the duration of the part-time arrangement. This may be due, in part, to the fact that the supervisor cannot accurately estimate the workload to fit within the contracted capacity. This, in turn, may be because the supervisor is ill-equipped to design the part-time arrangement and therefore did not anticipate that the volume of work will exceed the employee's capacity.

Secondly, there may be a build-up because the rate and timing at which work arrives cannot be accurately estimated. For example, in some part-time roles, work continues to arrive even when the part-time employee is not working. The demands from internal or external customers continue regardless of whether the part-time employee is present at work. To exacerbate the problem, the lead time to respond to

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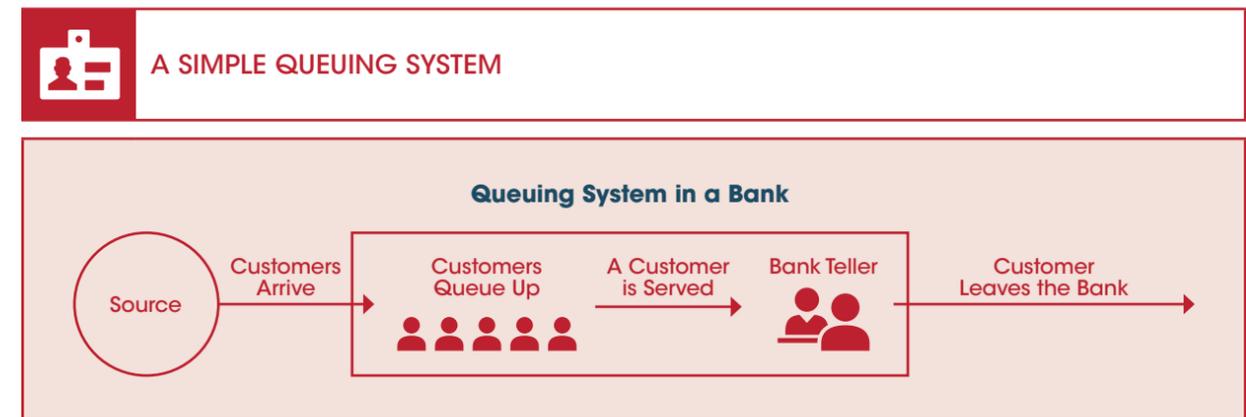


FIGURE 1

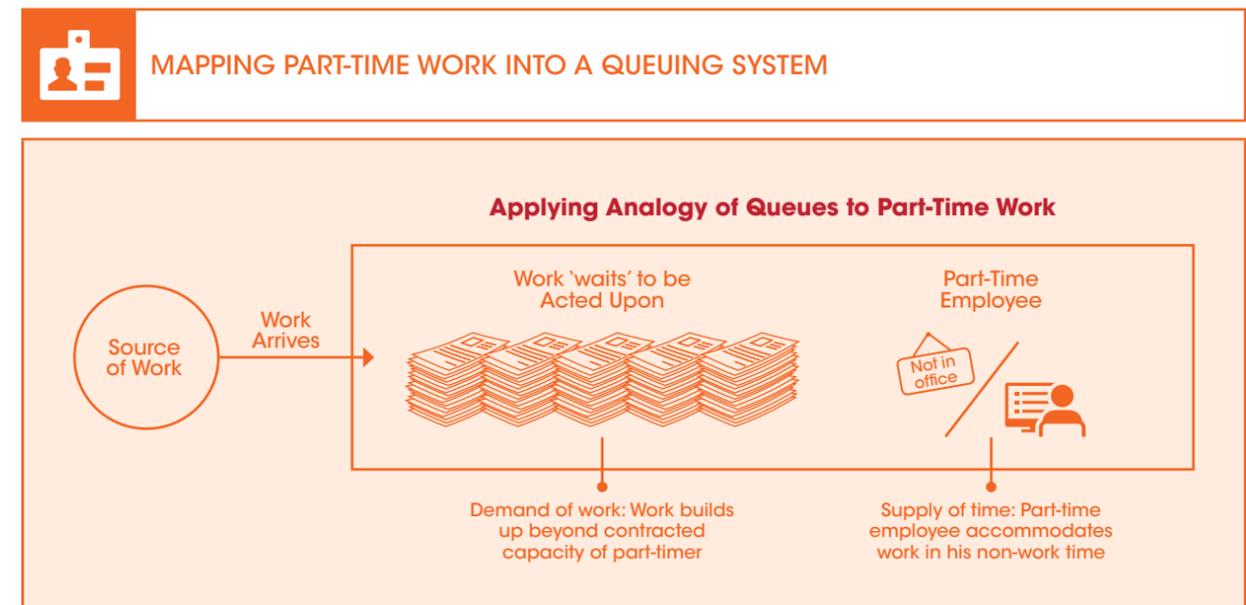


FIGURE 2

these demands may be very short and therefore cannot wait till the employee returns to work.

From the interviews, we also observed that people who reported many overtime sessions are typically involved in work that is characterised by high variability. For example, a business consultant from a consulting firm shared that although he was originally assigned to undertake business development during his part-time stint, he would sometimes be required to support project implementations when the need arose. Due to the high variability of the work and the timing at which the work presented itself, he worked approximately 30 percent more than his contracted hours.

However, fluctuations may also mean that there is a likelihood that the amount of work may be below the

contracted capacity of the part-time employee. We observed that many interviewees took actions to adjust their own working hours to compensate for overtime incurred earlier. However, it seemed that not all employees enjoy such flexibility. According to one HR leader in a consulting firm, flexibility is usually more easily exercised by senior employees, as no one will typically be keeping tabs on what they are doing.

The third factor driving a build-up in the work can be attributed to an unanticipated increase in the processing time required. From the interviews, we identified that the processing duration of work depended on two factors. The first is the extent to which the work is well-defined and the second is the expected competency of the part-time employee.

When a job is well defined, it is more likely that one will know the amount of resources and effort required to complete the work. Conversely, where the solution is ambiguous, it is difficult to estimate the effort required, and therefore the time required to complete the work may overrun the part-time capacity. Consulting work is an example where the solution is often ambiguous. As one interviewee elaborated, “Consulting work is knowledge work and fluid in nature. Therefore, there cannot be a strict start/stop time. The person performing the work will need to spend time thinking and be in discussions with other people.”

The duration of processing time is also dependent upon the competency of the part-time employee relative to the role. In this context, competency is defined as a function of the effectiveness as well as the efficiency of a part-time employee in undertaking the job role. If a part-time employee is more competent, the processing time would be shorter. In the same vein, many interviewees indicated that, over a period of time, they got better at managing the work within the contracted time frame, although it was inevitable to still incur some overtime.

The supply side: Factors driving response of part-time employee to incur overtime

In a queuing system, regulating the flow of subjects to maintain stability of the system is only half the story. The other half lies in the response of the part-time employee to the build-up of work. Through the interviews, we find that there are four factors influencing a part-time employee to accommodate work into their non-work time.

Firstly, we found that where the

employees had more spare capacity in their non-work time, they would be more likely to accommodate work. This is in line with a fundamental assumption in queuing theory whereby all available capacity of the server will be used. When the available capacity has been consumed, the work must stay in the queue unless there is additional capacity to be utilised. One interviewee acknowledged that this factor might have applied to her situation, “I found that the scheduling of my work was pretty flexible, and the scheduling of my non-work became pretty flexible...I didn’t commit to yoga class, I didn’t commit to lunch with friends, because I didn’t know if I had to work that day.”

This factor was subsequently validated quantitatively in a separate study that involved 31 part-time staff who were permanent employees in their respective organisations. It was found that the more uncommitted or discretionary time the part-time employees had during their non-work time, the more likely were they to incur overtime. However, it was also found that overtime increased at a decreasing rate whereas the time allocated to family and personal activities increased at an increasing rate.

The second factor is the perception that there will be penalties for letting work remain in the queue. From the interviews, the penalty manifested as customers, co-workers and supervisors forming negative perceptions about the individual if the work is not completed within an expected timeframe. We noted that these expectations were mostly self-imposed by the interviewees, and shaped from the organisational culture or their own work ethics and beliefs, rather than explicit demands from an external party. The part-time employees’ concern

about the perception of their work may be at its peak at the beginning of the part-time arrangement as the individual would like to establish credibility, having recently transitioned from a full-time to a part-time role. As such, confidence against perceptions of co-workers or supervisors is important if the individual would like to reduce the amount of overtime worked. One HR manager interviewed told us that the part-time arrangement would work out, “...if you are not bothered about what others might think and if you do not respond to work during off-days.”

The third factor is the explicit prioritisation of work over other non-work commitments. This scenario is analogous to the multiple-class model in the context of queuing theory. This means that part-time employees consciously undertake overtime work because they accord it higher priority than other non-work commitments. However, not all work is equal. Different work can be accorded different levels of priorities. The more granular the tasks, the easier it is for the part-time employee to tackle only what is critical and hence avoid incurring overtime for all backlog. For example, one interviewee recounted an incident where she was working on a specific piece of work during her holidays, but the rest of the work that came in during that period was put on the backburner.

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The final factor relates to individual differences. Many interviewees said that the decision to work overtime boiled down to the individual’s personality and values. One interviewee said that her decision to work overtime was due to her values and preferred way of working. Another interviewee said that it depended on the working style of the individual. “Some people can just ‘switch-off’, others are natural worriers and cannot ‘switch-off’. The latter group of people have the most difficulty adjusting to a part-time arrangement.”

Addressing the paradox

Organisations can do a lot to proactively manage the paradox. For demand-side factors, an intuitive response would be to redesign the part-time work within the boundaries of organisational constraints so that the likelihood of build-up is reduced. For example, one interviewee re-crafted her role such that it became project-based and she had a longer lead time to deliver the output. However, in many cases, both the company and the individual are new to setting up such an arrangement, and it may be unclear at the onset how it will unfold along the way. As such, it is important that the organisation has some form of mechanism to monitor and adjust the nature of the work when the arrangement is already ongoing. Alternatively, the organisation can empower the individual to exercise some flexibility to adjust their workload over a period of time.

Although the supply-side factors above are primarily about the individual’s responses, and therefore it is up to the individual to regulate, companies can also play a significant role in influencing them. For example, companies can develop an environment that is conducive to the part-time nature of the work. This may include giving guidance and support to part-time employees to shape the work arrangement, as well as educating fellow workers to develop new ways of working. More importantly, companies can develop ‘part-time role models’ who can demonstrate how an individual can be on a part-time arrangement and yet progress successfully like their full-time colleagues.

The final insight that companies can draw from this model is the notion of ‘fit’. In the factors that we have identified on both the demand and the supply fronts, there are levers that can be changed and those that cannot. As such, one alternative to redesigning the work is to select candidates who fit the existing nature of work. For example, work with high variability would suit an individual who has the flexibility to organise his or her non-work commitments.

Conclusion

As we progress into the future economy, the demand for part-time work arrangements is expected to increase. On the one hand, it has to meet the traditional needs of women in the workforce who want to balance family and work. On the other hand, it has to cater to the demands of millennials who will take on a portfolio of permanent and freelance jobs, and the older workers who choose to remain active in the workforce. Understanding what drives part-time employees to work beyond their contracted capacity is an important step in addressing the part-time overtime paradox and moving towards an evidence-based approach to manage, develop, and grow part-time employees.

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