

Flexibility in the Complex World of Non-Standard Work: The Screen Production Industry in New Zealand

ANNE DE BRUIN* & ANN DUPUIS**

Abstract

The academic debate around workplace flexibility has resulted in an impasse. This article argues that polarised macro positions are not especially useful in illuminating the complexities of the operation of contemporary labour markets. To move beyond the current impasse, understanding the labour flexibility of particular industries and occupational groups is necessary.

New Zealand's screen production industry provides an example of a knowledge-based industry where workplace flexibility is a necessary prerequisite for its operation. Drawing on research with industry practitioners in Auckland, this article discusses the major features of this industry. Issues pertaining to project and employment uncertainty and the importance of social capital in securing and maintaining employment are highlighted.

Introduction

Labour market flexibility has been a major dimension of workplace change over the last quarter of a century in the developed world. A seminal text which signalled important implications of the transition from the previous dominant workplace organisational mode of mass production to that of workplace flexibility was Piore and Sabel's 1984 publication, *The Second Industrial Divide*. The very sub-title of the book *Possibilities for Prosperity* gestured towards the connection between new forms of workplace organisation and sustained economic outcomes. The key argument offered in this text was that the Fordist-type system of mass production, which had acted as the 'engine of growth' for the post-war period, was no longer able to sustain America's competitive position in the world economy, especially since developing countries were able to mass produce

* Anne de Bruin is Professor of Economics, College of Business, Massey University, Auckland.

** Ann Dupuis is Associate Professor in Sociology, College of Humanities and Social Sciences, Massey University, Auckland.

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goods at lower costs. They put forward, therefore, the prospect of jettisoning this system which had done so much to establish American industrial supremacy. In its place they recommended the adoption of flexible workplace systems. These entailed establishing new systems of workplace organisation that took advantage of worker participation and specialised knowledge which, in conjunction with continual workplace training, would result in workers being able to 'specialise flexibly', thus having the facility to rapidly alter their product and produce goods of high quality.

In the academic literature, the debate around workplace flexibility quickly became polarised. On the one hand, advocates for workplace flexibility - following approaches similar to Piore and Sabel's - argued for the value of, for example, just-in-time inventory practices, job expansion and rotation and the use of new technologies, as means through which greater worker engagement, creativity and responsibility would be achieved, at the same time as eliminating wastage and ensuring optimum efficiency. On the other hand, critics of workplace flexibility remarked on a situation where, even with significant organisational changes, workers still remain disadvantaged. Smith (1997) neatly sums up the dichotomised positions. On one side there are "newly skilled, continually learning, empowered and engaged workers, aided by entrepreneurial managers, [who] strive to relax and flatten rigid bureaucracies, trim excessive use of organizational resources (including time, space and people), and use their experiential knowledge to improve the way they produce goods or serve people". By contrast, others see flexibility as "little more than a new permutation of work that disadvantages workers but offers employers significant dividends" (Smith, 1997: 315-316).

In the New Zealand context, the rapid and major changes to the political economy in the 1980s and beyond meant that workplace flexibility was supported by both major political parties. Employers too encouraged workplace flexibility. Decentralisation and the deregulation of the industrial relations system were among the selected change mechanisms so that hours of work, pay and conditions of employment, amongst others, could be determined at the workplace level. One outcome of deregulation was the abolition of New Zealand's long-standing arbitration system and its replacement by a system of individual and collective contracts. Under the Employment Contracts Act (ECA) 1991, conciliation and arbitration were abolished, the monopoly bargaining rights and blanket coverage of unions was removed and freedom of association introduced in the workplace (Harbridge, 1993). Supporters of the Act within the business community, and particularly the Business Roundtable, felt that this would facilitate economic growth and increase employment, whereas the many detractors (see for example, Kelsey, 1997), highlighted the mounting vulnerability of workers in non-standard employment.

In 2000 the Employment Relations Act (ERA) was introduced, representing a deliberate shift by the Labour Government from the pure contractual approach which underpinned the ECA. As such, the ERA is more prescriptive and seeks to regulate the employment relationship on the basis of ensuring a greater degree of fairness or balance in the

employer-employee relationship (Deeks and Rasmussen, 2002; Rossiter and McMorran, 2003). The question still remains as to whether the regulation of alternative working arrangements will lead to any change in the nature of these relationships (Rossiter and McMorran, 2003).

Deregulation of labour relations is, however, only one facet of workplace flexibility. Other factors include workplace restructuring, rationalisation and redundancies. Macky (2004), in an examination of New Zealand workers' experiences of organisational downsizing and redundancies, defined downsizing as 'a deliberate reduction by management to reduce a firm's size in terms of the number of employees it has', and noted the various strategies through which this could be accomplished. These included: outsourcing of the work employees had previously performed; eliminating certain functions or activities that had previously taken place; delayering, or the cutting out of levels in the hierarchy; the elimination of business units; natural attrition in terms of not replacing workers when they left a firm; retirement incentives; and redundancies (Macky, 2004: 63).

A corollary of workplace flexibility has been the rise in non-standard work (NSW). While NSW itself has always existed, what has changed in recent times is the increase in the proportion and consistency of this phenomenon (Zeytinoglu and Muteshi, 1999; Firkin et al., 2003). NSW is generally conceptualised as work that is no longer characterised by certain features that have been regarded as standard. These include full-time hours, a regular working week, access to non-wage benefits, having the status of an employee, and being located in particular places (Burgess and Watts, 1999). Thus instead of working full-time for a single employer with the assumption of ongoing employment, the growing trend is towards self-employment, part-time work, irregular and less predictable hours and less security and continuity of job tenure. In addition, the reliance on direct employment decreases and instead, labour requirements are outsourced, or employees are provided by intermediaries. A complex web of relationships and arrangements have emerged and because of the numerous exchanges among individuals, teams and employers '[t]he interplay [of these] may seem downright chaotic' (Littleton et al., 2000: 101). Various descriptors have been applied to NSW including 'non-traditional', 'atypical', 'flexible', 'alternative', 'market-mediated', 'vagrant', 'vulnerable', 'precarious', 'disposable' and 'contingent' (Kalleberg, 2000: 2). The nuances associated with these terms indicate that NSW also has its supporters and detractors.

It is clear that neither workplace flexibility nor NSW are unitary phenomena. Such an observation is hardly novel. However, the point of this article is not to rehearse arguments regarding the extent to which they are characterised by homogeneity, diversity or fragmentation. Nor is it to argue for one or other normative position. Rather, the purpose is to highlight the complex nature of the intersection between the two phenomena. Our intention is to move beyond the positive/negative confines of the debates around workplace flexibility and NSW and demonstrate that it is necessary to explore particular instances of workplace flexibility within particular industries, to appreciate the complexities involved.

Drawing on recent research into the screen production industry in the Auckland Region (de Bruin and Hanrahan, 2003), we put forward the proposition that workplace flexibility is a necessary prerequisite and inherent component for this industry at least, and suggest this could be likely too for other similar knowledge-based industries. After a brief discussion on workplace flexibility and its dimensions we turn our attention to the screen production industry case study material, with particular reference to the structural aspects of this industry that make it necessary for flexible practices to predominate. The latter part of the article then examines two issues and problems that arise as a result of the dominance of these practices: uncertainty in the industry; and securing employment.

Workplace flexibility

The word 'flexibility' is understood in everyday language to have positive connotations. One common usage is in relation to physical flexibility, where having a flexible body is deemed a highly positive attribute. It is seen as a concomitant aspect of health and well-being associated with physical agility and freedom of movement. The Olympic gymnast or circus acrobat, who are physically flexible in the extreme, draw widespread admiration. In the world of finance, financial packages are marketed on the basis of their degree of flexibility. Thus for example, the array of designer mortgages that cater to the variety of needs and circumstances of borrowers can be seen as desirable in that they offer not only a range of choice but also flexibility to suit individual preferences. Be it in fashion, modes of learning or mix and match travel packages, it is assumed that there are benefits that go hand in hand with choice and adaptability.

The masking effect of the commonplace association of the beneficial connotation of the term flexibility is that it pushes any negative aspects of labour market flexibility to the sidelines. Demasking the term can however, clarify its ideological underpinnings. Previous work we have been associated with (see for example Firkin et al., 2003; McLaren et al., 2004) has explored flexibility issues for two sets of non-standard workers – those skilled and qualified workers whose work had a knowledge or technology focus and who could best be described as occupying a relatively privileged labour market position and another set of workers in more traditional lower-paid and/or contingent work. While both sets of workers shared some common responses to flexibility issues, the major outcome was that those workers at the margins experienced much greater disadvantage. In the ensuing discussion, in order to highlight possible negative attributes associated with flexibility, we distinguish between both employer and worker flexibility.

Forms of labour flexibility have become part and parcel of the discourse and debate on the dynamics of the labour market, the changing world of work and work practices. In order to come to grips with the varied concepts of flexibility, however, we feel it is necessary at the outset to distinguish between employer or firm level flexibility, and worker flexibility. The former is often asserted to be necessary in order that the firm or organisation can adjust and operate in the face of the intense competition of a new era of globalisation. It

involves the ability of the firm to respond to changing economic conditions mainly by one or any combination of three means of securing flexibility: *numerical flexibility, functional flexibility and wage or reward flexibility* (Casey, Metcalf and Millward 1997; Mitchie and Sheehan, 2003).

Numerical flexibility is the ability to vary the quantity of labour by using NSW arrangements. As previously noted, the standard work model is characterised by full-time work with a single employer at the employer's site, with the expectation of ongoing employment, continuity of job tenure and regular, full-time working hours (de Bruin, Dupuis and Spoonley, 2004). By contrast, non-standard workers range from part-time, temporary, and seasonal workers, independent contractors or freelancers, short fixed term and casual contract employees, to home or outworkers. Firms may also use intermediaries – 'temp' agencies or third party labour suppliers, to enable numerical flexibility. Numerical flexibility can be further subdivided into external and internal numerical flexibility. External numerical flexibility refers to adjusting the number of employees according to employers' needs, whereas internal numerical flexibility has to do with the adjustment of employee working hours to accommodate company needs while retaining the same number of employees (Easton, 1997: 173-174).

Functional flexibility differs from the external labour market source of numerical flexibility in that it is an internal response. It involves the blurring of skill and job demarcations. Multi-tasking and team working is a feature of the organisation of 'core' work of the firm and workers acquire a 'knowledge portfolio' which enhances their flexibility and mobility (Carnoy, 1999). Wage or reward flexibility is the ability to adjust remuneration in order to respond to changing conditions or to incentivise productivity through such activities as performance-related pay schemes.

The notion of worker flexibility offers a perspective usually premised on personal choice of the worker. Thus for example, caring responsibilities of women with young children and the needs of students are two common reasons for the supply of NSW. The moot question, however, is the degree to which choice and constraint conflate. The constraints of low pay, insecurity, and the unpredictability of work hours and schedules, muddy the issue of worker flexibility and as our previous research showed, for some categories of non-standard workers choice may, in fact, be illusory (Firkin et al., 2003; McLaren et al., 2004).

Mitchie and Sheehan (2003) and Mitchie and Sheehan-Quinn (2001) make a distinction between 'low road' and 'high road' labour flexibility practices. The low road is the use of more readily available flexible labour practices arising from labour market deregulation, namely part-time and temporary contracts and similar 'non-traditional' contracts and a lack of employer commitment to job security. High road flexibility couples functional flexibility with employment security and is found in 'high commitment' organisations or 'transformed' workplaces. The latter form of flexibility is positively correlated with both

good corporate performance (Michie and Sheehan-Quinn, 2001) and innovation (Mitchie and Sheehan, 2003).

In the next sections we move away from normative issues. In fact, we go so far as to suggest there is something of a dissonance between theoretical arguments and perspectives that distinguish between high and low road labour flexibility and the exigencies of practice that operate in real workplace situations. We also argue that theoretical positions underpinned by normative considerations may be less than useful. Drawing on case study material from research on the screen production industry, we demonstrate that a way through the impasse of entrenched positions is to examine the specificities within distinct labour markets or industries. Once a deeper understanding of the specific nature of these phenomena is established, then recourse to normative positions becomes patently problematic.

Case Study: The Screen Production Industry

The Research

The study to which we make reference in this section, was commissioned by AREDS (Auckland Regional Economic Development Strategy) with the aim of providing improved understanding of labour market issues pertaining to the screen production industry in the Auckland Region. In addition to an examination of relevant literature, the qualitative component of the study comprised twenty six semi-structured in-depth interviews with participants who worked in the screen production industry in creative, technical, writing and production, and office roles. Recognising that these roles cut across various segments of the screen production industry it was decided to interview participants from six specific areas in the screen production industry: film production; broadcast television production – TV; television commercials production (TVCs); Maori screen production; animation; and post-production.

Given that personnel may undertake a wide range of tasks depending on their individual job role and that these could easily vary between firms and/or projects, it was deemed necessary to establish as well as get a 'feel for' what industry practitioners regarded as the generic/core skills and other requirements of various jobs; the nature of industry/firm specific skills, non industry/firm specific skills and transferable skills; and the shortage/surplus of these various skills. Integrally linked to the exploration of skills was an investigation into the impact and implications of current and future education and training regimes on the pool of skills for the industry. In the next subsections we use excerpts from the interviews with people working in the screen production industry to highlight salient features, specific to the industry, that support our contention that workplace flexibility is a necessary prerequisite of, and inherent component for, this industry.

Features of the Screen Production Industry

The screen production industry is a diverse, complex, multi-sector and multi-occupation industry. In New Zealand, it is small scale in scope and size and in terms of its funding base. One participant remarked that as a consequence high performance and quality were required.

In my job, we have got to really perform. We are supposed to be really efficient. That's why the New Zealand industry exists at all, because we're more efficient than other industries. It's a luxury. The money is so tight now. We spread it out so sparingly. We agonize so much over the budget. You really want the best that you can get for that money.

Its project-based nature is an industry hallmark. Like many such industries, there is a high concentration of independent contractors and freelancers and a predominance of small business operators. As such, it epitomises NSW patterns. Screen production is also a highly competitive industry.

We are out there competing with Toronto, competing with Montreal, competing with Vancouver, competing with Israel, competing with Florida and competing with South Africa, competing with Ireland definitely. We are not competing directly with Ireland. I have never been in a situation where they have gone New Zealand or Ireland but the sort of films that we have made in Ireland are the sort of films that could get made here. Ireland's population is 4,000,000, the same as New Zealand and their average wage is exactly twice what the New Zealand average wage is. This is interesting because they have subsidies to attract filmmakers and they are a very big industry. Things like Saving Private Ryan.

The research data indicated that in order to be competitive, industry operators were often forced into ways of operating that brought their own sets of problems. As one participant noted:

Suddenly there is a big contract in and it is a 24 part series and you suddenly have to hire everyone and anyone that is out there and a lot of those people are directly out of training schools, and I don't regard them as being ready for international work, so not only are you dealing with having to compete with Pacific rim countries that have studios full of thousands of people, you're also having to compete and train dozens of people at the same time.

At the global level, macroeconomic variables such as the exchange rate impact on the industry add to market uncertainties. Technology changes too have an important effect, while external factors, such as government incentives, tax treatment and subsidies and funding regimes, can all be critical to the industry's growth and development.

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The animation sector of the industry provides an interesting example of the impact of external factors. The size of the domestic market and the cost of animation limit domestic funding and consumption of animated television series with a local focus. International investment was seen therefore, as the only way to attract highly skilled and experienced staff to assist in the growth of the animation industry, especially in light of low rates of domestic investment.

New Zealand on Air give the most pitiful amount of money, which is fine if you are doing a live action film... it only takes half an hour to produce half an hours worth of footage, but with animation, to produce half an hours footage, you are talking about six months with a crew of six people to...it is just too expensive.

The industry is one of activity peaks and troughs. In large part this is due to the project-based nature of the work and the concomitant fluctuations in the demand for labour. The quote below, which is from the commercials sector of the market, encapsulates this in colourful terms:

...but I guess it's the tricky nature of the industry in the way that no one will have shot for a month or two – it'll be dead. Then suddenly the advertising agencies, all their clients, all decide that they want the job done, shot the same week, there's no cohesion and suddenly you can ring up and get any crew member you want, you can get the post booking you want, the luxury of the gear...a week later, it's a shit fight

Intensive work and long working hours is often characteristic of many jobs in the industry. This can arise both from the project nature of the work as well as passion for the job.

We do a lot of all-nighters here and certainly it's not even out of the normal to be working a weekend. ... just love it and they'll do 10-12 hour days. It's not unusual.

The screen production industry is generally perceived as a glamour industry. Clearly it is an industry that young people find enticing. When flexibility goes hand in hand with extreme uncertainty it is generally perceived as disadvantaging workers. However, when the nature of the industry is such that overlaying these circumstances is the gloss of glamour then, especially young people will put up with a lot simply in order to be associated within such exciting work environments.

Behind the Screen: problems and issues

A number of issues arose from the screen production industry research especially with regard to skills, labour supply and demand and questions around training. In this section, however, we take up two broader issues: those around uncertainty of employment; and issues pertaining to how people find employment in the screen production industry.

Uncertainty in the Screen Production Industry

In his work on the risk society, Ulrich Beck (1992) argues that one of the outcomes of living in a world dominated by risk has been the development of uncertain and insecure forms of lived experience, including the emergence of different forms of working arrangements and the growth of other pre-existing non-standard forms. Such a description could well apply to the screen production industry generally, especially in light of the project-based nature of the work. This sets up a very dynamic work context, whereby the high proportion of independent contractors and freelance workers tend to move quickly from one project to another, or even juggle multiple projects simultaneously. The feature of peaks and troughs noted earlier also means that the industry is characterised by fluctuations in the demand for labour and thus a lack of continuity of work. The implications for employers are obvious.

When you are dealing with short-term contracts you can't expect people to hang around waiting for you to be able to put in place another gig, when someone else offers them one. It's volatile and it's competitive. It is small.

Industry uncertainty, particularly with respect to the television segment of the industry, was a theme that emerged strongly in the research. Factors influencing this include the TVNZ charter and the rapid appreciation of the New Zealand dollar. A culture of freelance editors seems to characterise the television sector. Most people begin their work experience by working as an employee at a post-production facility before leaving to freelance. A lack of ongoing work means, however, that when large projects finish, the market is flooded. Post-production facilities are in direct competition with freelance editors for the smaller jobs during the downtimes within the industry. One participant described the significant pressures felt by business owners in the industry.

What tends to happen is we've got a culture of freelance editors and when I've had people to a certain level of skill, they tend to leave and go freelance. ...What happens is, is that those people can't get jobs. They may be well qualified, they maybe quite talented but there are only so many jobs and what's happening is for them to make ends meet, they're doing little jobs on the side, perhaps if they're into animation specifically they might buy their own computer and set up from home. That can...in an ironic manner, undermine what we're trying to do as a

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company because that takes away some of those little or lower end jobs that just keep you ticking over when you're not doing a big job.

The lack of continuity of work can also lead to a loss of skilled people who frequently go overseas to find more steady or full-time employment.

It has been difficult because there are some really good talents around, unfortunately most of them go overseas because they have got to pay their rent and I hire on a freelance basis, so if I can't get the work, they haven't got any.

Similar to the out-flow to the overseas labour market, there is also the flow out of the screen production industry to occupational labour markets within New Zealand. Thus, for example, a person educated and trained as an architect, draughtsman, interior designer or industrial designer might return to that occupation when the project-based, set designer job contract is completed. There is thus high inter-occupational mobility of workers in the industry.

Entry level workers appear to be in a very different situation however. Their uncertainty relates to initial entry into the industry – literally getting 'a foot in the door'.

There is a definite surplus of young people coming in, sending CV's, writing, ringing, saying I have just done this course and I want to get into the film industry. It is endless, it is a tidal wave of them, and I feel sorry for them because you get to a point where you don't even want to see them because there is just too many of them.

The perceived over-supply of entry-level workers has implications for training providers. All of those interviewed mentioned that in the last decade there had been a proliferation of courses related to the screen production industry, resulting in large number of graduates wanting to enter the industry. It was not uncommon for some production companies to have a person or CV per day coming through their facility. In general, the tertiary education system was seen as a provider of entry-level people with a low skill and experience base, who still needed on-the-job training and experience. The problem for entry level workers was well recognised. In addition, the relevance to industry of some of the skills and material being taught was often questioned. There were also questions of accountability to fee-paying students. Sectors such as post-production and animation signaled that graduates from most institutions were being taught skill sets that were not relevant to the needs of industry.

I do feel sorry for these people wandering in, they have got no practical experience but they have been in a tertiary institution for six years getting these skills and then all of a sudden they find that they are getting the tea or something.

Uncertainty therefore, takes many forms in this industry – uncertainty for employers with respect to acquiring and managing projects and skill availability, for experienced workers there is the uncertainty of where the next job is coming from and for entry level hopefuls there is uncertainty around getting a first job and even whether a career in the screen production industry can be a viable option. Dex et al. (2000), commenting on uncertainty in the British television industry also note the connection between deregulation and the displacement of risk onto the workforce. Their study showed a range of strategies workers adopted in response to uncertainty. These included: diversification of their income portfolio; collecting information; building informal contacts (a point that we will develop in the following section); and having a spouse's income as a buffer in down times. Their article concludes with the salutary comment, 'The extent to which individuals continue to cope with uncertainty will influence the viability of the television industry's workforce to sustain its productive potential and the quality of the product' (Dex et al., 2000: 304). Such a comment appears equally applicable to the broader screen production industry in New Zealand.

Social Capital in the Screen Production Industry

According to Bourdieu (1986: 248-249), social capital is 'the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalised relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition – or in other words, to membership in a group – which provides each of its members with the backing of the collectively-owned capital'. Put more simply social capital is the resources one can call on due to one's membership of a group. Bourdieu argues that social capital operates as a credit which group members can call on. The 'volume' of social capital available to individuals depends on the size of their networks and the extent of the various forms of capital those in the networks possess. Social capital is produced through creating and sustaining relationships and interactions with family, friends, neighbours, co-workers and other relatively close associates. It is not necessarily consciously or intentionally pursued, although it can be. Portes (1998) defines social capital as the ability to secure resources, or benefits as an outcome of people's membership in social networks or other social structures.

The screen production industry research demonstrated that the exigencies of the nature of the industry were such that a 'situation of immediacy' regularly came into operation. New projects were commissioned and frequently these had very little lead in time. The problem for employers then became one of who to employ. The usual response was the selection of someone who was trusted and known to deliver. These people were chosen on either previous knowledge and experience of the quality of their work, or on reputation. Thus networks were vital for both the employer to secure workers and employees to secure work. A high level of social capital is thus critical for successful involvement in the screen production industry. The importance of on-going relationships and personal contacts in the industry is aptly demonstrated by the following comments:

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We all know each other, all the producers know each other well, so you can just pick up the phone and say, hey, we need an art person, who have you worked with recently that's good?

...it's more down to relationships and how you've worked with them before – whether you work with them or not, it comes down to the most important individuals being available – doesn't it? 'Cause you would never...I mean, I'd never...if for instance Art Department was really important, we would never...you know...we wouldn't go with somebody we hadn't worked with or didn't know. You simply wouldn't take the risk. We'd change the shoot date.

The screen production industry is one that emphasises preserving relationships and not taking risks. Because of the short-term nature of independent contracting, one mistake by a crew member can cost them future work with that company whereas in a standard employment relationship, such a person might get a chance to prove themselves again and 'redeem' themselves.

However, connections may also mean that there is no necessary correlation between experience and ability:

Having said that, commercials also have what I call the director's girlfriend syndrome. Somebody might be highly experienced and absolutely pretty useless at the job, but because she has got a foot in the door through her boyfriend being the director or somebody...the agency producer's girlfriend or something, then she will get given a go and she might do really well and she might be a disaster. In the end it is always an industry about who you know.

The importance of contacts and informal recruitment processes in the industry is also borne out by overseas research (e.g. Blair et al. 2001 and Blair 2001, where the title of the article: 'You're only as good as your last job' says a lot about how the industry works and captures the essence of the importance of having connections within the industry. Blair (2001), drawing on a case study where a film was tracked through the eighteen months of its production, commented that for the crew she followed, family and friends were important 'mediators of entry, serving such functions as recommending or directly offering a job' (Blair, 2001: 167). As people's careers developed the type of contact used changed and colleagues or ex-colleagues became more important. However, the role of contacts remained pivotal to a successful career.

Conclusion

Workplace flexibility has been the subject of much academic debate. On the one hand, it is associated with many of the extreme neo-liberal reforms of the last two decades and seen as simply adding to the repertoire of practices that can be used to disadvantage

workers. Others see workplace flexibility in much more positive terms. It offers workers an opportunity for input and creativity unattainable under Fordist workplace organisation and employers the prospect of business viability in an increasingly competitive and globalised world. The argument put forward in this article is that such macro-level polarised positions are not especially useful in understanding the complexities of the operation of contemporary labour markets or many workplaces. To move beyond the current impasse it is necessary to drill further down to examine the meso-level of workplace flexibility as it relates to particular industries as well as the more micro-levels of employer (firm) flexibility and worker flexibility. While we drew attention to the latter level namely through the worker flexibility distinction and mentioning our earlier work on varied categories of non-standard workers and their experiences, the main focus of this paper was on the meso-level of a particular project-based industry.

The screen production industry in Auckland provides an example of a high-tech, knowledge industry where workplace flexibility is a necessary prerequisite for the industry to operate. The industry is a varied and multifaceted, multi-sector, multi-occupation industry. It is an industry that is highly competitive, both internationally and locally, and one that is strongly impacted upon by such factors as macroeconomic variables, the rapid nature of technological change and other external factors like government incentives, tax subsidies and funding regimes. Many of the specific features of the screen production industry derive from it being largely project-based in nature. It is an industry where workplace flexibility goes unquestioned.

Like many such industries the peaks and troughs that come with project-based work affect both workers and employers. Fluctuations in the demand for labour mean that the industry is characterised by uncertainty. In order to deal with this, workers might opt for work overseas or move into other occupations, especially when they have another profession they can call on. Alternatively, as freelancers they could compete head-on with employers in small scale jobs. Employers seldom have full-time, permanent staff on board, so the industry could be described as one where NSW is the norm.

The glamour of the industry means that it is extremely appealing for young people. Yet, as the research on which this article is based demonstrated, it is very difficult for young people, however well trained they might be, to get a foothold in the industry. The evidence from this research showed the importance of social capital with respect to securing and maintaining employment. In an industry where rapid completions and high quality work are mandatory, then trust and reputation are vital. Social networks therefore are an intrinsic feature of the screen production industry. An intriguing revelation from this research therefore, is the extent to which close ties and networks are an essential part of a post-Fordist labour market, like that of screen production. It is clear that 'the strength of weak ties' (Granovetter, 1995) still has salience for the contemporary world of work.

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