

## Preferences of temporary workers: time, variety, and flexibility

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Part-time work—defined as less than 35 hours per week—is becoming increasingly important in the United States. Before World War II, only a negligible number of workers were classified as part time. Since then, the proportion of the civilian work force classified as part time has hovered around 18 percent. During economic upturns, this percentage tends to decrease, as many individuals desiring full-time employment are forced to work part time during recessionary periods.<sup>1</sup> Still, the percentage varies by only a few points from 1946 to 1983, as the majority of part-time workers do not want full-time jobs.

Within the part-time work force, temporary help constitutes a significant subgroup. Firms in the temporary help industry, such as Manpower and Kelly Services, send out their employees to complete assignments in various organizations. Afterwards, the employees return to the temporary help firms until additional assignments materialize. Hence, the workers are employees of the temporary help firms and not of the companies where they work. In 1956, there were only about 20,000 employees in this industry.<sup>2</sup> Today it is estimated that from 2 million to 3 million workers are employed as temporaries *at some time*—often for only a few hours, but more frequently for several days over a period of 3 or 4 months—during each year.<sup>3</sup> The number of temporary employees will probably increase substantially, because the industry provides job opportunities that do not require a full-time work commitment and, at the same time, helps businesses to solve many staffing problems, such as the need for additional workers during busy periods.

It should be emphasized that it is somewhat difficult to classify temporary help as either full time or part time, because many are seeking a full-time position, but only for a short while. However, the vast majority of these workers are employed less than 35 hours per week, as the temporary help firms typically do not have enough work to provide full-time employment opportunities.<sup>4</sup>

### Areas of study

This study focuses on two aspects of temporary help. The first is the specific time preferences of temporary employees, that is, when do they want to work. In contrast to the few previous studies,<sup>5</sup> it provides a relatively exhaustive analysis of these time preferences: days of the week, time of the day, and time of the year.

A second area concerns the relative importance (to the

employee) of flexibility in hours of work versus variety in the work or frequency in changing assignments. Some authors have argued that temporary employment is particularly attractive because it allows for variety in work.<sup>6</sup> However, the counterargument can also be made, that is, that the predominant reason for seeking this form of work is flexibility in scheduling hours, especially for working wives who may view work as subordinate to familial activities. Previous research suggests that flexibility and variety are independent dimensions or reasons for desiring temporary employment.<sup>7</sup>

Finally, it should be noted that the temporary help industry is generally considered to consist of three major sectors, and the percentage of employment in each of these sectors is estimated to be about 65 percent in the clerical/secretarial area, 30 percent in the industrial area, and 5 percent in the technical/professional area.<sup>8</sup> Previous studies rarely, if ever, go beyond a comparison of employees in the clerical/secretarial area and the industrial area. This study cuts across the three sectors, by focusing on the *relationship* between *skill level* and the issues of variety/flexibility and time preferences among employees in the *medical* temporary help area, which is the fastest growing segment of the temporary help market.

### Method of analysis

The study took place in a large, national firm that hires more than 50,000 health-care temporary employees each year. Four groups of workers were selected for intensive study: registered nurses, licensed practical nurses/licensed visiting nurses, nurses' aides, and homemakers. These groups were chosen because they represent the major occupations of the firm. More importantly, the skill level of each group is very distinct and decreases in the following order: registered nurses, licensed practical nurses/licensed visiting nurses, nurses' aides, and homemakers. Hence, it was possible to study the relationship between skill level and time preferences of the employees, all of whom were women.

Questionnaires were sent to 1,393 employees and the overall response rate was 79 percent, or 1,101 respondents.<sup>9</sup> The following tabulation shows the distribution of questionnaires among the occupations and the corresponding response rates (in percent):

	Received questionnaire	Response rate
Registered nurses .....	340	77.0
Licensed practical nurses/ licensed visiting nurses .....	275	80.5
Nurses' aides .....	517	79.0
Homemakers .....	261	80.5

To analyze the issue of time preferences, the respondents were asked to provide specific information on several aspects of their work preferences. For example, the respondents indicated whether they preferred to work some days

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of the week rather than others. Three answers were possible: yes, definitely; yes, but my preference depends on such factors as family responsibilities and time of the year; and no, I have no preferences.

The respondents were also asked to indicate which days of the week they preferred to work on a regular basis; they could select as many days as they desired. Hence, it is possible to analyze time preferences by day of the week and by total number of days per week the employees preferred to work.

The respondents were then requested to indicate which times of the day they preferred to work—morning, afternoon, evening, and night. Again, there was no limit on the number of categories that could be selected. As in the case of the days in the week, it is possible to analyze both the actual times of day and the total number of times per day that they preferred to work. In addition, the respondents were asked to indicate whether they wanted to work during a specific time or times of the day, and three responses were possible: yes, definitely on a regular basis; yes, but my preference depends on such factors as family responsibilities and time of the year; and no, I have no preferences.

To determine why individuals wish to become temporary help employees, the respondent was asked to identify her most important reason for choosing to work for the firm. The following choices were provided: (1) variety in work, that is, frequent changes in assignment; (2) a stopgap measure until I can obtain a permanent job; (3) freedom to schedule my work in a flexible manner; (4) employment during school vacations; and (5) other.

Chi square was used to analyze the relationships. This statistical test measures whether two discrete variables are independent of or related to one another.

### Survey results

There was a significant relationship between the respondents' skill levels and their preferences to work some days of the week over others. (See table 1.) In particular, 55.0 percent of the registered nurses and 44.2 percent of the licensed practical nurses/licensed visiting nurses, but only 30.8 percent of the nurses' aides and 27.0 percent of the homemakers indicated that their preference depends on such factors as family responsibilities and time of year.

Table 1 also profiles the specific days of the week that the respondents desired work. Because the respondents were allowed to check as many days as desired, it was not possible to use chi square. However, 31.1 percent of the registered nurses, 32.2 percent of the licensed practical nurses/licensed visiting nurses, 22.8 percent of the nurses' aides, and 14.4 percent of the homemakers preferred Sunday. Thus, skill level was positively associated with the desire to work Sundays.

An important relationship was also established between skill level and the total number of days that the respondents preferred to work each week. (See table 1.) Only 44.2

percent of the registered nurses and 56.1 percent of the licensed practical nurses desired 5 days or more per week, while 70.9 percent of the nurses' aides and 66.3 percent of the homemakers were of a similar persuasion.

In addition, table 1 indicates that there was a significant correlation between skill level and the preference to work a particular time or times of the day (morning, afternoon, evening, or night). First, as skill level rose, there was an increase in the desire to work during a certain part of the day, and the preference depended on such factors as family responsibilities and the time of year. More specifically, as skill levels rose, so did the preference to work in the evening and at night. (Again, because the respondent could check as many times as she preferred, it was impossible to compute chi square.)

The relationship between skill level and the total number of preferences for a particular time or times of working during the day (morning, afternoon, evening, or night) is significant only at the .10 level. Still a significant proportion of all four work groups, regardless of skill level, prefer to work only during one time of the day (morning, afternoon, evening, or night).

Table 2 contains information on the issue of variety and flexibility. Only 16.6 percent of the entire sample cited

**Table 1. Relationship between skill level and preferences of temporary help employees**

Preferences	Skill level (high to low)			
	Registered nurses	Licensed practical nurses/licensed visiting nurses	Nurses' aides	Homemakers
Preference to work some days over others: <sup>1</sup>				
Yes, definitely . . . . .	31.0	38.1	50.1	44.5
Yes, but depending on family responsibilities and time of year . . . . .	55.0	44.2	30.8	27.0
No preference . . . . .	14.0	17.7	19.1	28.5
Specific days preferred on regular basis:				
Saturday . . . . .	33.2	28.1	29.9	23.0
Sunday . . . . .	31.1	32.2	22.8	14.4
Monday . . . . .	62.1	74.9	79.2	79.2
Tuesday . . . . .	65.8	70.8	80.6	84.8
Wednesday . . . . .	67.9	77.8	80.3	77.5
Thursday . . . . .	65.3	74.3	78.9	84.3
Friday . . . . .	58.9	66.1	78.9	74.7
Total number of days each week preferred to work: <sup>2</sup>				
One . . . . .	3.2	2.3	1.4	2.8
Two . . . . .	21.1	8.8	7.7	9.6
Three . . . . .	15.3	20.5	11.7	9.0
Four . . . . .	16.3	12.3	8.3	12.4
Five . . . . .	37.9	44.4	60.3	57.9
Six . . . . .	3.7	7.0	8.3	4.5
Seven . . . . .	2.6	4.7	2.3	3.9
Preference to work a certain time of day: <sup>3</sup>				
Yes, on a regular basis	56.9	61.6	57.8	54.5
Yes, but depending on family responsibilities and time of year . . . . .	37.7	32.9	29.6	25.7
No preference . . . . .	5.4	5.6	12.6	19.8
Morning . . . . .	64.4	58.5	69.5	82.2
Afternoon . . . . .	54.1	47.5	49.9	58.9
Evening . . . . .	35.1	35.0	26.3	21.7
Night . . . . .	28.2	31.5	22.7	15.0

<sup>1</sup>Chi square = 61.70 (p ≤ .001).

<sup>2</sup>Chi square = 80.71 (p ≤ .001).

<sup>3</sup>Chi square = 37.79 (p ≤ .001).

variety as the most important reason for becoming a temporary help employee, while 60.2 percent chose freedom to schedule work in a flexible manner. In addition, there was a significant relationship between skill level and the most important reason for working as this type of employee ( $p \leq .001$ ). The two groups highest in skill level, registered nurses and licensed practical nurses/licensed visiting nurses, cited freedom to schedule work flexibly much more frequently than did the two groups lowest in skill level, nurses' aides and homemakers. The opposite pattern emerged on the dimension of variety in work, that is, the two groups lowest in skill level cited this reason much more frequently than did the two groups highest in skill level.

**Conclusions**

Previous research has suggested that temporary help firms experience great difficulty obtaining employees during vacation periods.<sup>10</sup> This study confirms and extends this generalization to indicate that this difficulty will be exacerbated at particular times of each day and each week as skill level rises.

This finding is important in view of the fact that the technical/professional sector of the temporary help industry possesses great potential for expansion, and that industry needs a great number of highly skilled and educated workers. However, because the higher-skilled workers are less available than the lower-skilled workers, there will probably be a great amount of unmet demand in the marketplace.

As expected, the most unpopular times of the day to work are in the evening and at night, and on weekends. It is during such times that many temporary help firms must deny customer requests for workers.<sup>11</sup> Hence, such firms may not be able to expand into new markets because of the limited availability of employees.

Why are the higher-skilled employees less available? Previous studies have shown that the rate of moonlighting among the more skilled workers is significantly greater than among those of lower skill.<sup>12</sup> In effect, many of these workers appear to be using temporary help employment as a second job. Another possible reason for limited availability of high-skill workers may be that they possess greater financial resources than those having lower skills and hence do not need temporary work as much.

The present study also clarifies the concept that the temporary help employee is seeking a full-time job, but only for a short period of time.<sup>13</sup> The majority want to work 8 hours per day. However, a significant minority of these workers desired work for only one time of the day, regardless of skill level. Thus, it appears that many of these employees are seeking employment for a short period of time, but employment involving only 4 hours per day.

Finally, the research indicates that flexibility in scheduling is a much more important source of motivating individuals to apply to a temporary help firm than is variety, at least in terms of frequencies. The study also shows that, the higher the skill level, the greater the probability of citing flexibility in scheduling as the most important reason for becoming a temporary help employee. □

— FOOTNOTES —

- <sup>1</sup> Robert Bednarzik, "Short workweeks during economic downturns," *Monthly Labor Review*, June 1983, pp. 3-11.
- <sup>2</sup> Mack Moore, *The Role of Temporary Help Services in The Clerical Labor Market*, Ph.D. diss. (Madison, University of Wisconsin, 1963).
- <sup>3</sup> Martin J. Gannon, "An Analysis of the Temporary Help Industry," *Labor Market Intermediaries*, Special Report No. 22 (Washington, National Commission for Manpower Policy, March 1978), pp. 195-255.
- <sup>4</sup> Gannon, "An Analysis of the Temporary Help Industry."
- <sup>5</sup> W. Albeda and G. Veldkamp, eds., *Temporary Work in Modern Society. Part 2: Temporary Work within a Socio-Economic Framework* (The Netherlands, Kluwer, 1978).
- <sup>6</sup> Germaine Greer, *The Female Eunuch* (New York, McGraw-Hill, 1970). See also Alvin Toffler, *Future Shock* (New York, Random House, 1970).
- <sup>7</sup> Richard Leone and Donald Burke, *Women Returning to Work and Their Interaction With a Temporary Help Service* (Springfield, Va., National Technical Information Service, 1976).
- <sup>8</sup> Gannon, "An Analysis of the Temporary Help Industry."
- <sup>9</sup> This response rate was substantially higher than that reported in most previous studies, possibly because a dollar was attached to each questionnaire.
- <sup>10</sup> Leone and Burke, *Women Returning to Work*.
- <sup>11</sup> Informal interviews with executives in this industry confirm this trend.
- <sup>12</sup> Gannon, "An Analysis of Temporary Help."
- <sup>13</sup> Moore, *The Role of Temporary Help Services*; and Leone and Burke, *Women Returning to Work*.

**Table 2. The relationship between skill level and the most important reason for working at this temporary help firm**  
(In percent)

Reason	Entire sample	Registered nurses	Licensed practical nurses/licensed visiting nurses	Nurses' aides	Home-makers
(1) Variety in work, that is, frequent changes in assignment . . .	16.6	8.8	13.1	21.5	20.6
(2) A stopgap measure until I can obtain a permanent job . . . . .	8.2	9.2	8.0	7.2	9.0
(3) Freedom to schedule my work in a flexible manner . . . . .	60.2	70.3	65.3	55.9	50.8
(4) Employment during school vacation . . . . .	1.0	.8	0	.8	2.6
(5) Other . . . . .	14.1	10.9	13.6	14.6	16.9

NOTE: Chi square = 40.26 ( $p \leq .001$ ).

**Pay gains tempered in basic steel mills**

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The gain in steelworkers' pay lagged behind that of all workers in the durable goods manufacturing industries, according to a Bureau of Labor Statistics occupational wage