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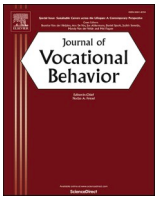

The psychological experience of flexibility in the workplace: How psychological job control and boundary control profiles relate to the wellbeing of flexible workers

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ABSTRACT

Rather than studying workplace flexibility as the availability or usage of flexible work practices, in this study, we theorize workplace flexibility as a subjective psychological experience influenced by employees' perceptions of control over where and when they work (psychological job control) and control over their social boundaries (boundary control). Based on boundary and border theory, using a two-wave study conducted at an Italian bank ($N = 1423$) and adopting a person-centered approach through latent transition analysis (LTA), we identified four flexibility profiles characterized by different levels of psychological job control and boundary control, with the same structure, dispersion, and sizes over time. The four profiles were: (1) flexible non-dividers (3.46 %), marked by high psychological job control and low boundary control; (2) flexible dividers (34.83 %), characterized by high levels of both psychological job control and boundary control; (3) non-flexible dividers (50.74 %), featuring low psychological job control but high boundary control; and (4) non-flexible non-dividers (10.97 %), with low levels of both types of control. Three of these profiles exhibited high within-person stability across time, while the flexible non-dividers profile was highly unstable, with many members transitioning to profiles with higher boundary control at Time 2. Organizational investments in training and communication programs may have contributed to these transitions from low to high boundary control profiles. Gender and age emerged as significant predictors of profile membership, with gender effects shifting over time: at Time 1, men were more likely to be in non-flexible dividers profile, while at Time 2, they were more likely to be in the flexible non-dividers profile. Age effects also changed: older workers were more likely to be in the flexible non-dividers profile at Time 1 but shifted toward the flexible dividers profile by Time 2. Parental status was not significant, whereas carer status was significant only at Time 1, where being a carer increased the likelihood of employees belonging to the flexible dividers profile compared to the non-flexible dividers. Our findings further revealed that the psychological experience of work flexibility positively impacts wellbeing when employees experience control over both work and social boundaries. Flexible dividers consistently exhibited the highest levels of work engagement, job satisfaction, and work-life balance across both Time 1 and Time 2. In contrast, flexible non-dividers showed a significant decline in these outcomes over time. Profiles with low boundary control, especially flexible non-dividers and non-flexible non-dividers, reported the lowest levels of wellbeing. Despite some improvements in non-flexible non-dividers profile from Time 1 to Time 2, it remained to have the

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lowest scores on all outcomes, emphasizing the critical role of boundary control in maintaining employee wellbeing over time. These findings provide a possible explanation regarding the "autonomy-control paradox," where flexibility in work location and timing may reduce autonomy unless social boundaries are effectively managed. Having control over one's social domains allows for the benefits of workplace flexibility and reduces the risk that flexibility in where and when to work undermines the autonomy it is meant to provide.

1. Introduction

Workplace flexibility has increased significantly over the past two decades, mainly due to the proliferation of modern digital technologies, which have substantially simplified remote communication and collaboration (Kossek et al., 2012), and the progressive improvements in work-life balance (Allen et al., 2013; Boccoli et al., 2022). Other pivotal reasons are the appearance of new talents seeking greater flexibility (Eversole et al., 2012), a general willingness to improve organizational effectiveness and productivity (Brumley & St George, 2022), and, more recently, the Covid-19 pandemic (Kerman et al., 2022), which forced the workforce into long periods of remote working (Milasi et al., 2020).

Following the end of the pandemic period, many firms as well as investment banks have recalled workers to the office in places like the USA, parts of the EU, and the UK as part of their post-pandemic strategy to return to pre-pandemic operational norms (Smith, 2022). However, this situation can create several challenges. After the Covid-19 outbreak, many employees expect greater flexibility as part of their psychological contract with their employers (Baruch & Rousseau, 2019). Organizations that recognize and respect these new expectations can strengthen their psychological contract with employees, thereby improving job satisfaction, work engagement, and organizational commitment (Baruch & Rousseau, 2019). This approach also aligns more closely with the expectations and values of the newer generations (Donald, 2023). In contrast, organizations that do not offer flexible working arrangements may place themselves in disadvantageous positions compared to their competitors (Donald, 2023).

Many scholars and practitioners state that flexible working arrangements are beneficial for employees, as evidenced by lower levels of work-related stress and exhaustion, and higher levels of affective wellbeing (Anderson et al., 2015; Charalampous et al., 2019). Others instead show that, when individuals work flexibly, they can feel obliged to work harder, to "repay" the organization for its concession (Kelliher & Anderson, 2010; Moe & Shandy, 2010; Richman et al., 2008), or longer, to make "amends" to colleagues (especially those not taking up the offer to work partially from home) who may have been aggrieved by their physical absences (Moe & Shandy, 2010).

The inconsistent findings in the current scientific literature have been linked to the "autonomy-control paradox" (Putnam et al., 2013), which states that flexible working policies can also create the contradictory situation whereby people who work flexibly (and autonomously) feel that they are not really free to decide how they manage their work. The fear of still having to work according to office routines may create the perception of being under greater control (Hylmö, 2004; Sennett, 1998).

With the world heading toward increasing levels of work flexibility (Kerman et al., 2022), we need to dissect the autonomy-control paradox thoroughly by exploring the factors that determine when the psychological experience of work flexibility is perceived positively (or not) by employees, thus influencing their wellbeing. Our study aims to contribute to this topic in several ways.

First, adopting a person-centred approach, we aim to identify flexible worker profiles based on psychological job control (the employees' perception of having control over where, when, and how they carry out their work (Kossek et al., 2012) and boundary control (the employees' ability to contract or expand their social boundaries (Clark, 2000). In line with boundary and border theories (Ashforth et al., 2000; Clark, 2000), workplace flexibility requires individuals to handle different social roles and boundaries successfully, thereby progressively combining and integrating their professional and private roles within the same physical environment (Kerman et al., 2022). These theories contribute to a broader perspective in which the concept of 'control' is not merely a work-centric source of job enrichment but also acts as a tool to simplify managing the transition between work and non-work-related roles (Kossek et al., 2023). Despite the theoretical connection between boundary control and psychological job control, this bond has been widely neglected in prior studies (Kossek et al., 2023). We theorize that the degree of boundary control should be examined in conjunction with the employees' perception of having control over where and when they are working to better understand the perception and implications of flexibility at work. Second, we will explore how the perception of flexibility may alter over time – especially after an organizational intervention on how employees can manage their social boundaries and workplace flexibility in general. Specifically, we will investigate whether the perceptions of psychological job control remain stable while the experience of boundary control shifts over time. This is important because it may confirm that people's perception of having control over work-related space and time (psychological job control) differs from their perception of having control over their social roles (boundary control). Different levels of psychological job control, analysed in combination with boundary control, may shape the person's overall psychological experience of work flexibility.

Third, we intend to examine how a series of personal attributes (such as gender, age, parenthood, and being a carer) may influence whether a person belongs to a specific profile. According to boundary and border theories (Ashforth et al., 2000; Clark, 2000), individuals express varying degrees of control over their social roles according to their personal attributes. Our hypothesis is that younger workers might feel they have limited job autonomy due to less workplace flexibility compared to older colleagues. Recent research indicates that job autonomy often increases with age and career progression (Donald, 2023). From a life stage perspective, younger workers are typically in the early stages of their careers, where roles often offer less autonomy (Baruch & Rousseau, 2019).

Furthermore, we expect to find that gender, parenthood, and caregiving could influence work experiences due to societal stereotypes and expectations. Men gain more from boundary control and work-life balance strategies, while women face greater challenges (Mellner et al., 2017; Rodríguez-Muñoz et al., 2020). Parents, especially mothers, use flexible work to manage family responsibilities, but this can increase family-to-work conflicts (Hilbrecht et al., 2008; Shockley et al., 2021), while caregivers for the elderly encounter unique challenges not faced by those caring for children (Braithwaite, 1992; Roth et al., 2020).

Fourth, while workplace flexibility is generally associated with greater autonomy and freedom, we aim to investigate if people can perceive these facets of flexibility as detractors of autonomy when they are unable to control their social boundaries. We hypothesize that people with high levels of both psychological job control and boundary control will show the highest values for job satisfaction, work engagement, and work-life balance. Conversely, those with low levels of both psychological job control and boundary control may exhibit the lowest levels of job satisfaction, work engagement, and work-life balance. This finding would reinforce the notion that boundary control is an intrinsic component of flexibility and offer a potential explanation for the autonomy-control paradox, suggesting that the lack of control over social boundaries could explain why flexible working practices undermine employees' wellbeing.

2. Theoretical background and development of research questions

2.1. Defining the psychological experience of flexibility through psychological job control and boundary control

The scientific literature on workplace flexibility contains significant ambiguity in its conceptualization and lacks consensus on the empirical and methodological approaches through which it can be studied (Hill et al., 2008; Kossek et al., 2023). Since its inception, the concept of workplace flexibility has been closely associated with the idea of autonomy, defined as "the degree to which the job provides substantial freedom, independence, and discretion to the employee in scheduling the work and in determining the procedures to be used in carrying it out" (Hackman & Oldham, 1975, p. 162).

Putnam et al. (2013, p. 414) defined workplace flexibility as "the opportunity to adjust the where, when and how of work", making it possible for employees to meet their personal needs, and thereby promoting a better work-life balance. Many organizations offer flexible working in some form in order to attract, retain, and motivate employees and/or nurture their wellbeing (Ferdous et al., 2021). Most studies focus on the implications of adopting flexible work arrangements and their usage (Ferdous et al., 2021), reaching the conclusion that they are linked to increased employee commitment, job satisfaction, and loyalty, and make employees less likely to want to leave their current jobs (Allen et al., 2013; Hill et al., 2008).

However, the use of formal and/or informal flexibility should not be confused with experiencing flexibility psychologically. Following Kossek et al. (2006, 2023), the psychological experience of flexibility could be explained through the concepts of psychological job control and boundary control. Psychological job control refers to the degree to which individuals perceive that they can control when, where, and how they work (Allen et al., 2014). From the phenomenological perspective (Husserl, 1970; Scanlon, 1972) of assuming that individuals interpret reality on the basis of their own personal perceptions, we suggest that flexibility can be analysed as a psychological process. Regardless of the actual circumstances, individuals may perceive their control over where, when, and how they work in different ways. As demonstrated by scientific research (Allen et al., 2014; Hill et al., 2008), it is the perception of flexibility that directly affects the employees' wellbeing, rather than the effective usage of work flexibility. Even when an organization offers flexible working, if its employees do not perceive this flexibility or do not make use of it because of their various concerns or fears, there will be limited benefits to their wellbeing. The perception of flexibility can influence their mental health, job satisfaction, and stress levels (Allen et al., 2013; Ferdous et al., 2021). In line with boundary and border theory (Ashforth et al., 2000; Clark, 2000), when individuals use flexible practices, they must manage multiple roles within and across different social domains. Individuals are increasingly straddling the boundaries of work and family on a daily basis, physically and psychologically (Ashforth et al., 2000). This state of affairs has intensified owing to the Covid-19 pandemic and the new ways of working (Kerman et al., 2022). Family and work domains are becoming more interconnected and boundaryless. Boundary control refers to the employees' perception of the control they have over these boundary crossings, and thus how they manage situations where they must enact different social roles (Ashforth et al., 2000; Kossek et al., 2012; Kreiner, 2006). Scholars have argued that individuals whose perceived boundary control is higher also have control over the frequency, timing, and direction of the boundary transitions they face every day when managing their multiple social identities and the demands of their respective roles (Allen et al., 2014; Hammer et al., 2011).

According to border theory (Clark, 2000), there are three main lines of demarcation (or borders) between social domains, which are physical, temporal, and psychological. The physical borders determine where role-domain behaviours are expected to be enacted and observed. The temporal borders refer to when role-specific work is undertaken. The psychological borders are rules generated by individuals apropos of emotions, behavioural patterns, and thinking patterns appropriate to specific domains but not to others (Clark, 2001). The objective of our study is to investigate whether individuals can manage their boundaries effectively, bearing in mind that to do so may involve crossing these psychological, physical, and temporal boundaries.

Adopting a person-centred approach (Spurk et al., 2020), we intend to identify the distinctive flexibility profiles consisting of different combinations of psychological job control and boundary control. Person-centred analyses prioritize individuals or profiles over variables. Their aim is to find profiles of individuals with shared characteristics or developmental paths. This approach is valuable to uncover subpopulations in a sample with distinct experiences, trajectories, or behaviours (Gillet et al., 2019; Meyer & Morin, 2016). Using this method helps to identify profiles of individuals with similar traits and examines how people's profiles evolve over time. Whereas variable-centred analyses assume that everyone (in our case, employees) comes from the same population, person-centred analyses (in our case, latent profile analyses) are designed to identify different subpopulations of employees each associated with a particular configuration of a specific construct/dimension (Gillet et al., 2019; Meyer & Morin, 2016). While previous studies on the

psychological experience of flexibility have primarily focused on psychological job control (Kossek et al., 2006; Kossek et al., 2012), our study intends to broaden our understanding of "control" not only as a work-centric source of job enrichment but also as a tool to help managing the transitions between work and non-work roles (Putnam et al., 2013). Indeed, as previously discussed, psychological job control refers only to employees' perception of having control over where, when, and how they carry out their work (Kossek et al., 2012). Thus, it does not address the shifts in roles that people who work flexibly often face. This means that while an employee may feel they have high control over where and when they work, this control can be perceived differently based on how social role shifts are managed. For instance, adding boundary control to our analysis of employee perceptions of workplace flexibility may provide a better understanding of the phenomenon of flexibility and its implications for employee wellbeing, as it allows us to consider how individuals manage the transitions between different roles. For example, an employee might feel in control of their schedule but still struggle with the boundary between work and personal life, or they might handle work tasks efficiently but find it challenging to switch back to family responsibilities (Allen et al., 2014; Kossek et al., 2023). Previous research has indicated that boundary control and psychological job control can vary independently (Allen et al., 2014; Mellner et al., 2017). For instance, Voydanoff (2005) found that individuals might experience high levels of psychological job control without necessarily showing high levels of boundary control, and vice versa, suggesting that these dimensions can vary independently of each other. Additionally, Kossek et al. (2006) showed that boundary management strategies can differ significantly even among individuals with similar levels of psychological job control, further supporting the notion of their independence.

Furthermore, this coupling may give an answer to the autonomy-control paradox (Putnam et al., 2013). It could, for instance, explain why, under certain conditions, flexibility could influence the conflicts between work-life balance and work-family more or less positively. In other words, boundary control may represent a key element in understanding the entire psychological experience of flexibility, expanding our knowledge about when individuals perceive psychological job control in a well-balanced manner and when they do not. Given the lack of prior guidance, we propose the following open research question:

Research question 1. Can workers be grouped into distinct profiles based on different configurations of psychological job control and perceived boundary control?

2.2. Flexibility profiles stability

Our study also explores the possibility that workers switch from one profile to another over time. In particular, we analyse the extent to which the nature of flexibility profiles remains similar (within-sample stability) and the extent to which employee's membership into these profiles (within-person stability) would remain stable (or unstable) over a seven-month period. A person's psychological perception of workplace flexibility can alter as time goes by in response to various factors, including changes in the work environment, organizational policies, and personal needs (Allen et al., 2014; Ashforth et al., 2000; Milasi et al., 2020). For instance, the organizational culture in a company may evolve, resulting in adjustments to its flexibility policies on matters such as telecommuting or flexible working hours. Similarly, individuals may face changes in their personal lives, such as becoming parents, making workplace flexibility more attractive as it helps them balance their work and family responsibilities more effectively. Added to these factors, significant historical events, market trends and other broader social-cultural changes can exert an influence on people's stance on workplace flexibility. The Covid-19 pandemic, for instance, induced many organizations to implement remote work policies. Nevertheless, people's perception of flexibility is coloured by individual experiences and organizational dynamics and likely to vary significantly from one employee to another (Kossek et al., 2023). For these reasons, we are interested in evaluating the within-sample and within-person stability of each profile by examining whether it changes over time. Prior studies have shown that both psychological job control and boundary control can vary over time due to personal and organizational factors (Allen et al., 2014; Kossek et al., 2006). Specifically, we are aware that the organization we were studying introduced a series of training initiatives in the middle of our study, between sending out the first and the second wave of questionnaires. These initiatives were intended to help workers manage the transition between their social roles more effectively by offering advice. More specifically, the HR department issued guidelines on time management and choice of work location (whether in the office or remotely), based on the task at hand. For instance, meetings with colleagues are probably more productive if held in person, while data entry tasks can easily be carried out from home. Indeed, research has shown that face-to-face interactions often enhance communication and collaboration, leading to more effective individual and organizational outcomes (Hinds & Bailey, 2003). Conversely, tasks that require less interaction, are well-suited to remote work environments (Martin & MacDonnell, 2012). Individual preferences and personal needs are also taken into consideration. Given this setting, it would be interesting to understand whether these actions could have influenced changes to one of the two key components of the psychological perception of flexibility (psychological job control and boundary control), thereby facilitating an employee's migration from one profile to another. Therefore, evaluating the within-sample stability of each profile and the within-person stability over time is crucial. Thus, we propose the following research question:

Research Question 2. Do the identified flexibility profiles display evidence of within-sample stability, and do workers transit from one flexibility profile to another over time (within-person stability)?

2.3. Predictors of flexibility profiles

Through our research, we also intend to see whether it is possible to predict which profile employees will fall into by looking at their personal attributes, in that these may have an influence on the way individuals perceive and handle the psychological experience of flexibility. In accordance with boundary and border theories (Ashforth et al., 2000; Clark, 2000), individuals express varying degrees of control over their social roles based on their family role, gender identity, and their current stage of life. Based on these factors,

individuals may feel more or less attached to a specific identity and social role, or find it more or less difficult to shift from one role to another. In many countries, for instance, women face greater challenges to balance their work and family roles because of social and cultural factors (Eagly & Wood, 2016; Vyas & Butakhieo, 2021). In addition, people in a particular life stage may feel more attached to a specific social role (e.g., that of work) rather than another (Clark, 2000). Furthermore, experience accumulated over time can help individuals manage their social roles more effectively. Specifically, in our study, we consider the role played by gender, age, parenthood and being a carer.

First, the image of a worker being a man is still quite common, and furthermore this stereotype is a man who is unaffected by domestic or care duties and so can concentrate fully on work-related matters - a throwback to the male breadwinner model (Hartner-Tiefenthaler et al., 2022). Social role theory on sex differences, as postulated by Eagly and Wood (2016) states that women are expected to assume caregiving roles, engage in family relationships, and prioritize family demands. Although the original male breadwinner model has been updated and modernized (Lott & Klenner, 2018), studies show that men benefit more from segmentation strategies applied to both boundary control and work-life balance, while women face difficulties with boundary segmentation strategies in a working life where the forces for integration and flexibility can be assumed to be strong (Mellner et al., 2017; Rodríguez-Muñoz et al., 2020).

Second, individuals working flexibly from home during the Covid-19 pandemic experienced high levels of stress, which was natural under the circumstances, but those over 55 years of age were affected most severely (Hayes et al., 2021). Empirical evidence has, however, also shown that flexible working is associated with higher levels of psychological distress in younger individuals (Evanoff et al., 2020; Shah et al., 2020). Other studies indicate that older employees find the increasing use of technology within a flexible working context harder to deal with (Morris et al., 2005; Vroman et al., 2020).

Third, individuals with young children tend to have greater family demands, leading to higher stress (Clark, 2000). Parents, especially mothers, usually see flexible work arrangements as a way to manage their family commitments more effectively. However, the blurring of boundaries when people working from home are also engaged in parenting can increase family-to-work conflicts (Hilbrecht et al., 2008; Shockley et al., 2021).

Fourth, apart from those with children, people who care for an elderly and/or disabled person will also perceive flexibility in a particular light. The emotional impact of providing care has not been investigated as widely as the impact of balancing childcare and work, and it may not be possible to generalize these findings to workers who are also carers for elderly people (Lee et al., 2001). Studies argue that carers of older adults may be faced with challenges such as physical and mental decline that are not typically encountered by those caring for children (Braithwaite, 1992; Roth et al., 2020).

Given all these considerations, we aim to understand if these personal attributes may influence the psychological experience of flexibility, determining whether workers belong to a particular profile:

Research Question 3. Can belonging to a particular flexibility profile be predicted by gender, age, parenthood, and being a carer?

2.4. Flexibility profiles and wellbeing

At present, there is a shortage of empirical evidence about the combined influence of psychological job control and boundary control on attitudes and organizational outcomes. One of the few studies on psychological job control (Kossek et al., 2006) reveals that there is a strong positive relation between psychological job control and wellbeing outcomes, rather than between the effective usage of flexible practices and wellbeing outcomes. Another empirical study has demonstrated that psychological job control can mediate the relationship between work-life fusion and work-life satisfaction and job satisfaction (Haeger & Lingham, 2014). More in general, the scientific literature has shown that flexible working arrangements may give individuals a sense of greater autonomy (Mache et al., 2020), help them experience higher levels of wellbeing and work-life balance (Ferdous et al., 2021), reduce their work-family conflicts (Putnam et al., 2013) and increase their level of work engagement (Ferdous et al., 2021; Kossek et al., 2006).

In contrast, other studies have demonstrated that, when employees work flexibly, they often tend to work longer hours (Kelliher & Anderson, 2010; Richman et al., 2008; Spurk & Straub, 2020), or feel bound to work harder, coming to the aid of colleagues who may have been upset by their physical absences (Moe & Shandy, 2010). The longer working hours caused by flexible working may threaten people' work-life balance, making it harder for them to meet their personal needs (Collins et al., 2021; Richman et al., 2008;). Furthermore, individuals working flexible hours could experience the negative outcomes of the spillover effect caused by boundary permeability (Kossek et al., 2012; Kramer & Kramer, 2020).

In our research, we investigate the relations between various flexibility profiles and their wellbeing. We are particularly interested in understanding which kinds of psychological job control and boundary control configurations positively influence the wellbeing of employees.

Following Warr (1987), we define employee wellbeing as the overall quality of an employee's experience and functioning level at work, and we consider three dimensions of wellbeing, i.e., work engagement, job satisfaction, and work-life balance. From an eudaimonic viewpoint (Ryan & Deci, 2001), wellbeing can be represented by work engagement, which refers to "a positive, fulfilling, work-related state of mind that is characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption" (Schaufeli et al., 2002, p. 74) and attachment toward one's own job role (Kahn, 1990). From a hedonic perspective (Grant et al., 2007), wellbeing can be represented by job satisfaction, defined as a "positive (or negative) evaluative judgment one makes about one's job or job situation" (Weiss, 2002, p. 175). The need to further explore this relation is reinforced by a recent study conducted by Donald and Jackson (2022), which highlighted that, during the pandemic, some students and recent graduates experienced a decrease in hedonic and eudaimonic wellbeing, while others reported an increase in hedonic and eudaimonic wellbeing. Alongside these two concepts, we also examine the ability to balance professional and private spheres, or work-life balance, as "a high level of engagement in work life as well as nonwork life with minimal

conflict between social roles in work and nonwork life" (Sirgy & Lee, 2018, p. 232).

Drawing on boundary and border theory (Ashforth et al., 2000; Clark, 2000), we theorize that workers will perceive their psychological experience of flexibility differently, depending on their ability to segment or integrate their social roles. The reason is because the segmentation/integration of one's social domains entails different costs and benefits. For instance, role segmentation may facilitate a person's attachment to a specific social role and reduce the negative effects stemming from a spillover. Conversely, role integration could help people engage in activities across different social domains, although they may experience the negative effects of spillover (Clark, 2000; Kossek et al., 2012). Thus, having control over social boundaries can enable individuals to determine when it is more appropriate to integrate or segment their social domains.

Taking into account the interplay of both constructs, studies indicate that boundary control can moderate the effects of psychological job control on different work outcomes. High levels of boundary control can reduce work-life conflict and stress by helping individuals manage work demands and prevent spillover into personal life (Derks et al., 2016; Hallsten & Lindfors, 2022). Conversely, low boundary control might reduce the benefits of high psychological job control, leading to stress and work-life imbalance even with significant job autonomy (Diestel & Hünefeld, 2020). In other words, psychological job control and boundary control can vary differently and influence each other in complex ways. Building on these considerations, we propose the following and final research question:

Research Question 4. Do different flexibility profiles predict different levels of work engagement, job satisfaction, and work-life balance?

3. Methods

3.1. Empirical context, procedure, and participants

To test our model, we gathered data through a survey conducted within a medium-large Italian bank in two waves. The first-wave questionnaire was sent out between April and May 2022. The second in December 2022. In the same period, the company introduced flexible working arrangements for its full-time employees, who could work remotely at least two days per week. Furthermore, employees could choose when to start and finish work within a given timeframe (starting between 08:00 and 10:00 and finishing between 17:00 and 19:00).

An email with the link to the questionnaire was sent to all 2918 employees with help from the company's HR department. Before sending out the email, employees were shown a video where the head of the HR department and one of the authors explained the research aims, and assured that all data gathered would be anonymous.

Data handling was achieved using a "pseudo-anonymization" technique based on a double alphanumeric code. The questionnaire covered all matters relating to the constructs being investigated, while the employees' socio-demographic information was provided by the company using the alphanumeric codes. We emphasized that, while the data were not fully anonymous, they were treated with strict confidentiality. This method ensured participant privacy while allowing us to connect responses to socio-demographic information. All questionnaires were completed in Italian. The translation process was managed by qualified translators proficient in both English and Italian languages and experienced in the relevant work sector. Each translator conducted a preliminary translation, followed by cross-checks to ensure accuracy. Expert review sessions were held to discuss and refine translations, ensuring conceptual coherence. Finally, the survey was assessed by key figures of the company involved in the research. Our study adhered to ethical guidelines and regulations as outlined by the Italian General Data Protection Regulation, while also following the ethical principles outlined in the Declaration of Helsinki.

The final sample was composed of 1423 participants (mean age = 3.76; SD age = 1.50), including 50.46 % males and 49.54 % females, who participated in at least one wave of data collection, with 798 individuals responding only to Time 1, and 505 responding only to Time 2. The age variable was coded as follows: 1 = up to 30; 2 = 31–35; 3 = 36–40; 4 = 41–45; 5 = 46–55; 6 = 55+.

3.2. Measures

Participants were asked to respond to the items in the questionnaire on a seven-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree).

3.3. Profile indicators

Psychological job control (alpha T1 = 0.77; alpha T2 = 0.79) was measured through four items from the scale developed by Kossek et al. (2006). A sample item is: "I can choose where to work".

Boundary control (alpha T1 = 0.81; alpha T2 = 0.79) was measured through two items from the scale developed by Kossek et al. (2012). A sample item is: "I can define boundaries between my work and my personal life".

3.4. Predictors of profile membership

Gender was measured by assigning 1 to men and 0 to women. Regarding *Age*, the company provided us with the following classes: 1 = (< 30 years); 2 = (<31–35 years); 3 = (36–40 years); 4 = (41–45 years); 5 = (46–55 years); 6 = (>55 years). We asked the respondents if they had children (yes = 2, no =1) and if they had carer responsibilities for older people (yes = 2, no =1).

3.5. Outcomes of profile membership

Work engagement (alpha T1 = 0.81; alpha T2 = 0.81) was measured through the three-item short version of the Utrecht Work Engagement scale (UWES; Schaufeli et al., 2002; Schaufeli et al., 2017). A sample item is: "I am enthusiastic about my job".

Job satisfaction (alpha T1 = 0.76; alpha T2 = 0.78) was measured through three items from the scale developed by Schriesheim and Tsui (1980). A sample item is: "How satisfied are you with the work you are doing?"

Work-life balance (alpha T1 = 0.95; alpha T2 = 0.95) was measured through the four items from the scale developed by Kossek et al. (2006). A sample item is: "I am happy with the way I divide my time between work and private or family life".

3.6. Data analysis strategy: preliminary analyses, model estimation and missing data

The psychometric properties of all multi-item measures were confirmed through confirmatory factor analyses. Details regarding these analyses (descriptive statistics, factor correlations, factor structure, composite reliability, and measurement invariance over time,) are reported in the appendices (Tables S1a to S3).

The main analyses relied on factor scores from these preliminary analyses (Huyghebaert-Zouaghi et al., 2022; Morin, 2016). To ensure comparability over time, factor scores were obtained from models specified as invariant longitudinally (Millsap, 2011), and estimated in standardized units (SD = 1; M = 0). Factor scores provide a partial control for unreliability (Skrondal & Laake, 2001) and preserve the structure of the measurement model (e.g., invariance; Morin, 2016). The analyses were performed using the maximum likelihood robust (MLR) estimator implemented in Mplus version 8.6. (Muthén & Muthén, 2021).

Missing responses were handled using full information maximum likelihood procedures (FIML), allowing us to estimate longitudinal models using all participants who responded to at least one data collection time ($N = 1423$), using all of the available information to estimate each model parameter, without having to rely on a suboptimal listwise deletion strategy including only participants ($N = 505$) who completed both measurements. FIML is recognized to be as efficient as multiple imputation, but less computationally demanding (Enders, 2010).

Latent profile analyses (LPA) are sensitive to the start values used in the model estimation process (Hipp & Bauer, 2006). For this reason, all models were estimated using 5000 sets of random start values, allowed 1000 iterations each, and final stage optimization was conducted on the 200 best solutions. These numbers were changed to 10,000, 1000, and 500 for the longitudinal analyses.

3.7. Latent profile analyses: identifying flexibility profiles

Latent profile analysis (LPA) was carried out following the analytical steps proposed in different relevant articles (Ferguson et al., 2020; Houle et al., 2020; Huyghebaert-Zouaghi et al., 2022). LPA models aim to analyse the multivariate distribution of scores on a set of profile indicators, summarizing this distribution by identifying a finite set of latent subpopulations of participants. These profiles are characterized by distinct configurations on the indicators (in our study, the profiles were estimated on the basis of the levels of psychological job control and boundary control), while allowing for within-profile variability on all indicators (McLachlan & Peel, 2000). These profiles are referred to as latent to reflect their probabilistic nature (Morin et al., 2018). Each participant is assigned a probability of membership in each latent profile, which helps assess the LPA model while accounting for classification errors.

Time-specific LPA models were first estimated using the constructs of psychological job control and boundary control as indicators. At each time point, solutions including one to six profiles were estimated. Although Morin and Litalien (2019) suggest allowing the means and variances of the indicators to be freely estimated, in our analysis, we only freed the means. This decision was based on the fact that freeing the variances can sometimes lead to nonconverging models or models that converge on improper solutions. Specifically, in our case, freeing the variances resulted in improper solutions at Time 2, changing the configuration of the profiles and making them difficult to interpret. Additionally, there is guidance indicating that constraining variances can help achieve model convergence and proper solutions (Wang & Hanges, 2011).

The decision on the number of profiles to retain at each time point depends on whether the profiles are meaningful, theoretically aligned, and statistically adequate (Marsh et al., 2009; Morin, 2016). Statistical indicators (McLachlan & Peel, 2000) can also be consulted. For instance, a lower value on the Akaïke Information Criterion (AIC), Consistent AIC (CAIC), Bayesian Information Criterion (BIC), and sample-size Adjusted BIC (ABIC) indicate better fitting models. Similarly, statistically significant *p*-values from the adjusted Lo et al.'s (2001) Likelihood Ratio Test (aLMR) and the Bootstrap Likelihood Ratio Test (BLRT) suggest a better fit compared to a model with one fewer profile. Research has demonstrated that the BIC, CAIC, ABIC, and BLRT are effective in identifying the number of latent profiles, whereas the AIC and aLMR are not as reliable (e.g., Diallo et al., 2016, 2017). For this reason, the AIC and aMLR have not been used for purposes of model comparison and selection and are only reported for purposes of transparency. These tests exhibit a significant dependency on sample size (Marsh et al., 2009). As a result, they frequently do not converge on a definitive number of profiles. Lastly, the classification accuracy, ranging from 0 to 1, is represented by the entropy value, which should not be utilized to determine the optimal number of profiles in a solution (Lubke & Muthén, 2007).

3.8. Examining the longitudinal stability of flexibility profiles

When considering within-sample stability, it should be noted that no formal guidelines exist, nor should they, to guide the interpretation of what constitutes high, low, or moderate rates of stability (Huyghebaert-Zouaghi et al., 2022). These interpretations will inevitably vary from one study to another, depending on the time interval and the relative within-sample stability of all profiles.

Aware of this and in line with Huyghebaert-Zouaghi et al. (2022), we consider within-sample stability rates of 70 % or higher may reflect high levels of within-sample stability.

Provided that the same number of profiles is extracted at both time points (Morin, 2016), the two time-specific LPA solutions can be merged into a longitudinal LPA to test within-sample profile consistency over time. Following the recommendations of Morin et al. (2018), and optimized for longitudinal analysis by Morin and Litalien (2017), this sequential approach starts by verifying if each measurement occasion results in the identification of the same number of profiles. The two time-specific solutions are then combined into a longitudinal model of configural similarity. Equality constraints are subsequently applied to the within-profile means (structural similarity), variances (dispersion similarity), and sizes (distributional similarity). The CAIC, BIC, and ABIC indices are used to compare these models, with each form of profile similarity considered supported if at least two of these indices decrease upon the application of equality constraints (Houle et al., 2020; Morin, 2016).

The most similar longitudinal LPA solution will then be re-expressed as a LTA to investigate within-person stability and transitions in profile membership (Collins & Lanza, 2010; Morin & Litalien, 2019). This LTA solution, as well as all following analyses, are specified using the manual three-step approach (Asparouhov & Muth'en, 2014) outlined by Morin and Litalien (2017).

3.9. Analysing the associations between the profiles, the predictors, and the outcomes

We investigated the stability of the relations between profiles, predictors (predictive similarity), and outcomes (explanatory similarity) over time. The predictors analysed included gender, age, parenthood, and being a carer, while the outcomes included work engagement, job satisfaction, and work-life balance.

First, we estimated a null effects model, assuming no relations between the predictors and the profiles. Next, we freely estimated the effects of the predictors, allowing them to vary over time and as a function of Time 1 profile membership, to assess their impact on specific profile transitions. In the third model, predictions were allowed to differ over time only. Finally, a model of predictive similarity was estimated by constraining the associations to be equal over time.

Time-specific outcomes (work engagement, job satisfaction, and work-life balance) were directly included in the final LTA and allowed to vary based on participants' profile membership at the same time point. Outcome measures at Time 2 were controlled for

Table 1
Results from the latent profile and latent transition analyses.

Model	LL	#fp	S.C.	AIC	CAIC	BIC	ABIC	Entropy	aLMR	BLRT
Latent profile analysis time 1										
1 profile	−4038.323	4	1.001	8084.645	8093.259	8105.687	8092.981	Na	Na	Na
2 profiles	−3897.065	7	0.989	7808.129	7823.202	7844.953	7822.716	0.853	≤0.001	≤0.001
3 profiles	−3855.528	10	1.160	7731.056	7752.588	7783.661	7751.894	0.724	≤0.001	≤0.001
4 profiles	−3823.322	13	1.119	7672.644	7700.636	7741.030	7699.734	0.778	≤0.001	≤0.001
5 profiles	−3813.280	16	1.211	7658.561	7693.011	7742.729	7691.903	0.752	0.266	≤0.001
6 profiles	−3801.949	19	1.095	7641.898	7682.809	7741.848	7681.491	0.759	0.032	≤0.001
Latent profile analysis time 2										
1 profile	−4038.311	4	0.989	8084.622	8093.235	8105.664	8092.957	Na	Na	Na
2 profiles	−3910.220	7	0.993	7834.441	7849.512	7871.265	7849.028	0.833	≤0.001	≤0.001
3 profiles	−3845.224	10	1.186	7710.448	7731.980	7763.053	7731.287	0.741	≤0.001	≤0.001
4 profiles	−3810.778	13	1.089	7647.556	7675.548	7715.943	7674.647	0.794	≤0.001	≤0.001
5 profiles	−3796.229	16	1.040	7624.457	7658.909	7708.626	7657.799	0.763	1.001	≤0.001
6 profiles	−3784.131	19	1.155	7606.262	7647.173	7706.212	7645.856	0.713	0.168	≤0.001
Latent profile analysis: 4 profiles										
Configural similarity	−7634.100	26	1.104	15,320.200	15,376.183	15,456.973	15,374.381	0.786	Na	Na
Structural similarity	−7635.357	18	1.363	15,306.713	15,345.472	15,401.403	15,344.223	0.786	Na	Na
Dispersion similarity	−7636.650	16	1.494	15,305.299	15,339.751	15,389.468	15,338.641	0.785	Na	Na
Distributional similarity	−7636.709	13	1.798	15,299.419	15,327.410	15,367.806	15,326.509	0.785	Na	Na
Latent transition analysis with predictors										
Null effects model	−6645.142	22	1.369	13,334.285	13,381.655	13,449.908	13,380.022	0.940	Na	Na
Effects free across time and profiles	−6359.182	94	0.540	12,906.363	13,108.765	13,400.389	13,101.784	0.932	Na	Na
Effects free across time	−6369.253	46	1.025	12,830.507	12,929.553	13,072.264	12,926.139	0.932	Na	Na
Predictive similarity	−6556.359	34	1.356	13,180.719	13,253.927	13,359.409	13,251.403	0.911	Na	Na
Latent transition analysis with outcomes										
Effects free across time and profiles	−15,696.123	52	1.601	31,496.246	31,608.213	31,769.793	31,604.608	0.935	Na	Na
Explanatory similarity	−15,735.498	37	2.321	31,544.996	31,624.665	31,739.635	31,622.099	0.934	Na	Na

Note. LL: Model loglikelihood; #fp: Number of free parameters; Scaling: Scaling correction factor associated with robust maximum likelihood estimates; AIC: Akaïke information criteria; CAIC: Constant AIC; BIC: Bayesian information criteria; ABIC: Sample size adjusted BIC.

their shared variance with their Time 1 counterparts (i.e., stability), due to their joint inclusion in the model. The explanatory similarity was then assessed by constraining these associations to be equal over time. The multivariate delta method was used to test the statistical significance of between-profile differences in outcome levels (Raykov & Marcoulides, 2004).

4. Results

4.1. Identifying flexibility profiles

The statistical indicators associated with each of the time-specific LPA solutions are reported in Table 1 and are graphically illustrated in Figs. S1 and S2, in the appendix. These indicators did not identify a distinctly superior solution at either time point. Nevertheless, the elbow plots indicated inflection points aligning with a two and four profile solution. Therefore, solutions comprising two to five profiles were meticulously analysed. This analysis showed that incorporating more profiles added significant value up to four profiles, with each additional profile demonstrating a distinctly meaningful pattern. However, the inclusion of a fifth profile merely divided one profile into two smaller ones with a similar configuration. Consequently, we opted for the four-profile solution at both time points for further analysis.

The fit indices from all longitudinal models are reported in Table 1. Starting with a model of configural similarity including four profiles per time point, equality constraints were progressively integrated. The second model of structural similarity resulted in lower BIC and CAIC values, and was thus supported by data. Likewise, the dispersion and distributional similarity of the solution was also supported, considering the lower BIC, ABIC, and CAIC values. The model of distributional similarity was thus retained for interpretation and further analyses. This model is represented in Fig. 1, and detailed parameter estimates from this model are reported in Tables S4 and S5, in the appendix. As shown in Table S5, this solution is associated with a good and high level of classification accuracy, ranging from 73.6 % to 89.6 % across Time 1 profiles, from 71.4 % to 89.2 % at Time 2, and summarized in a good entropy value of 0.785.

Based on our analyses, we identified four distinct flexibility profiles (see Fig. 1). At both measurement times, we found similar configurations for the constructs considered.

Profile 1: at both times, Profile 1 shows high levels of psychological job control and low levels of boundary control and it is characterized by 3.46 % of the participants. We called this profile the *flexible non-dividers*. Although we found that these employees state that they have control over where and when they work, they find it difficult to handle different social roles.

Profile 2: at both times, Profile 2 shows high levels of both psychological job control and boundary control and is characterized by 34.83 % of the participants. We called this profile the *flexible dividers*. This profile includes individuals who perceive themselves as having control both over where and when they work and over their social boundaries.

Profile 3: at both times, Profile 3 shows low levels of psychological job control and high levels of boundary control and is characterized by 50.74 % of the participants. We called this profile the *non-flexible dividers.* Employees in this profile indicate that they have little or no control over where and when they work, but they are able to manage their social roles.

Profile 4: at both times, Profile 4 shows low levels of both psychological job control and boundary control and is characterized by 10.97 % of the participants. We called it the *non-flexible non-dividers*. Employees belonging to this profile indicate that they have no control either over where and when they work or over their social roles.

These results provide a comprehensive answer to the first research question, demonstrating that workers can indeed be grouped into distinct profiles based on different configurations of psychological job control and perceived boundary control.

4.2. Analysing the longitudinal stability of flexibility profiles

The transition probabilities estimated as part of the LTA are reported in Table 2. Membership into Profile 3 (*non-flexible dividers:*

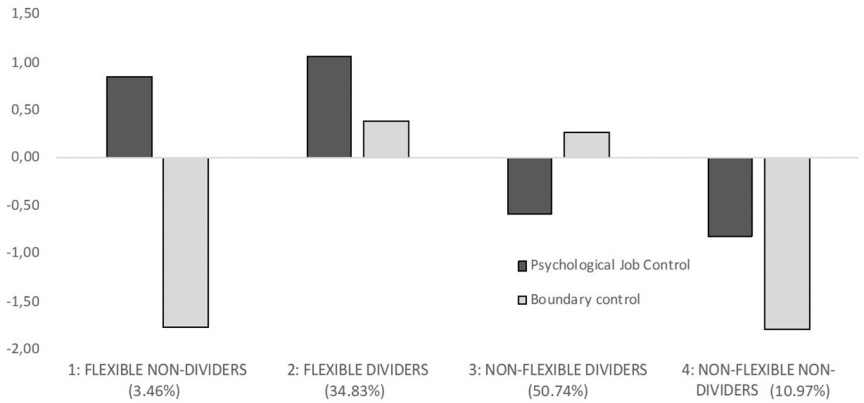

Fig. 1. Final 4-profile solution of distributional similarity. **Note.** Profile indicators are factor scores with mean of 0 and a standard deviation of 1.

within-sample stability of 100.0 %) was the most stable over time. Membership into Profiles 2 (*flexible dividers*: within-sample stability of 99.3 %), and 4 (*non-flexible non-dividers*: within-sample stability of 98.0 %) was also highly stable over time. In contrast, membership into Profile 1 (*flexible non-dividers*: within-sample stability of 3.6 %) was not stable. Thus, our results revealed a high level of within-sample stability that appears to decrease for those profiles with lower levels of boundary control. In other words, it seems there has been an increase in the workers' perception of boundary control over time as fewer employees reported low boundary control at Time 2.

Specifically, when participants initially presenting low levels of boundary control transitioned to another profile at Time 2, they tended to move toward a profile characterized by high levels of boundary control. Indeed, 36.1 % of participants in the *flexible non-dividers* profile at Time 1 transitioned to the *flexible dividers* profile at T2, and 42.4 % transitioned from the *flexible non-dividers* profile to the *non-flexible dividers* profile at Time 2. Moreover, 17.9 % of the employees from the *flexible non-dividers* profile transitioned to the *non-flexible non-dividers* profile at Time 2.

For members of the *flexible dividers* profile at Time 1, most remained in the same profile at Time 2 (99.3 %). Only a small fraction transitioned toward the *flexible non-dividers* profile (0.4 %) or the *non-flexible non-dividers* profile (0.3 %) at Time 2. Participants in the *non-flexible dividers* profile at Time 1 demonstrated complete within-person stability, with 100.0 % remaining in the same profile at Time 2. Similarly, members of the *non-flexible non-dividers* profile at Time 1 primarily remained in their profile at T2 (98.0 %), with a minimal transition to the *flexible dividers* profile (2.0 %).

These transition probabilities highlight the dynamic nature of boundary control perceptions among workers, showing a general trend of within-person stability, particularly among profiles with higher levels of boundary control, and significant movement from low boundary control profiles to higher boundary control profiles over time.

4.3. Analysing the associations between profile membership and the predictors

The lowest values on all information criteria were associated with the model in which the effects were free across time, indicating it as the best model for our analyses. Table 3 shows the results of the associations between the predictors and the profiles at both Time 1 and Time 2.

The multinomial logistic and multiple regressions predicting profile membership revealed that having children was not a statistically significant predictor of profile membership at the two time points. However, carer status at Time 1, increased the likelihood of employees belonging to Profile 2 (*flexible dividers*) compared to Profile 3 (*non-flexible dividers*) (OR [Odds Ratio] = 1.764, $p < .05$). This effect was not present at Time 2.

In contrast, gender and age emerged as consistently significant predictors of profile membership, although their effects varied across the two time points. For gender, at Time 1, being male significantly increased the likelihood of being in Profile 3 (*non-flexible dividers*) compared to Profile 4 (*non-flexible non-dividers*) (OR = 2.199, $p < .01$). Additionally, being male decreased the likelihood of being in Profile 2 (*flexible dividers*) compared to Profile 3 (*non-flexible dividers*) (OR = 0.549, $p < .01$). At Time 2, being male significantly increased the likelihood of being in Profile 1 (*flexible non-dividers*) compared to Profile 4 (*non-flexible non-dividers*) (OR = 2.200, $p < .01$). Furthermore, being male also increased the likelihood of being in Profile 1 (*flexible non-dividers*) compared to Profile 3 (*non-flexible dividers*) (OR = 2.095, $p < .01$).

For age, at Time 1, older individuals were significantly more likely to be in Profile 1 (*flexible non-dividers*) compared to Profile 4 (*non-flexible non-dividers*) (OR = 1.443, $p < .05$). Additionally, being older increased the likelihood of being in Profile 3 (*non-flexible dividers*) compared to Profile 4 (OR = 1.656, $p < .01$). However, being older at Time 1 decreased the likelihood of being in Profile 2 (*flexible dividers*) compared to Profile 3 (*non-flexible dividers*) (OR = 0.547, $p < .01$), while it increased the likelihood of being in Profile 1 (*flexible non-dividers*) compared to Profile 2 (*flexible dividers*) (OR = 1.595, $p < .01$). At Time 2, older individuals were again significantly more likely to be in Profile 1 (*flexible non-dividers*) compared to Profile 4 (*non-flexible non-dividers*) (OR = 1.600, $p < .01$) and in Profile 2 (*flexible dividers*) compared to Profile 4 (OR = 1.440, $p < .05$). Moreover, at Time 2, being older increased the likelihood of being in Profile 2 (*flexible dividers*) compared to Profile 3 (*non-flexible dividers*) (OR = 1.637, $p < .01$), a reversal from Time 1, where age decreased the likelihood of this comparison.

To summarize, gender and age were significant predictors of profile membership at both time points, although their effects differed between Time 1 and Time 2. Gender showed notable shifts, particularly between Profiles 2 and 3, while age remained a strong predictor of flexible profile membership.

Table 2
Transitions probabilities for the final latent transition analysis model.

	Transition probabilities to time 2 profiles			
	Profile 1	Profile 2	Profile 3	Profile 4
Time 1				
Profile 1	0.036	0.361	0.424	0.179
Profile 2	0.004	0.993	0.000	0.003
Profile 3	0.000	0.000	1.000	0.000
Profile 4	0.000	0.020	0.000	0.980

Note. Profile 1: Flexible Non-Dividers; Profile 2: Flexible Dividers; Profile 3: Non-Flexible Dividers; Profile 4: Non-Flexible Non-Dividers.

Table 3
Results from the multinomial logistic and multiple regressions predicting profile membership.

Time 1	Profile 1 vs Profile 4		Profile 2 vs Profile 4		Profile 3 vs Profile 4		Profile 1 vs Profile 3		Profile 2 vs Profile 3		Profile 1 vs Profile 2	
	Coeff (SE)	OR	Coeff (SE)	OR	Coeff (SE)	OR	Coeff (SE)	OR	Coeff (SE)	OR	Coeff (SE)	OR
Parenthood	0.089 (0.457)	1.093	0.364 (0.252)	1.438	−0.078 (0.158)	0.925	0.167 (0.478)	1.182	0.442 (0.250)	1.555	−0.275 (0.559)	0.760
Carer	0.584 (0.541)	1.792	0.570 (0.296)	1.768	0.002 (0.232)	1.002	0.581 (0.577)	1.789	0.568 (0.288)*	1.764	0.014 (0.635)	1.014
Gender	0.598 (0.424)	1.818	0.188 (0.215)	1.207	0.788 (0.152)**	2.199	−0.190 (0.430)	0.827	−0.600 (0.221)**	0.549	0.410 (0.483)	1.507
Age	0.367 (0.150)*	1.443	−0.100 (0.083)	0.905	0.504 (0.061)**	1.656	−0.137 (0.155)	0.872	−0.604 (0.087)**	0.547	0.467 (0.158)**	1.595

Time 2	Profile 1 vs Profile 4		Profile 2 vs Profile 4		Profile 3 vs Profile 4		Profile 1 vs Profile 3		Profile 2 vs Profile 3		Profile 1 vs Profile 2	
	Coeff (SE)	OR	Coeff (SE)	OR	Coeff (SE)	OR	Coeff (SE)	OR	Coeff (SE)	OR	Coeff (SE)	OR
Parenthood	−0.124 (0.149)	0.883	0.433 (0.450)	1.541	−0.018 (0.258)	0.982	−0.106 (0.251)	0.899	0.451 (0.525)	1.569	−0.557 (0.456)	0.573
Carer	−0.010 (0.227)	0.990	0.888 (0.506)	2.430	0.541 (0.315)	1.719	−0.552 (0.310)	0.576	0.346 (0.590)	1.414	−0.898 (0.529)	0.407
Gender	0.788 (0.145)**	2.200	1.058 (0.546)	2.880	0.049 (0.231)	1.050	0.739 (0.232)**	2.095	1.009 (0.593)	2.742	−0.269 (0.552)	0.764
Age	0.470 (0.056)**	1.600	0.364 (0.144)*	1.440	−0.129 (0.089)	0.879	0.598 (0.091)**	1.819	0.493 (0.163)**	1.637	0.105 (0.148)	1.111

Note. SE: standard error of the coefficient; OR: Odds Ratio. The coefficients and OR reflects the effects of the predictors on the likelihood of membership into the first listed profile relative to the second listed profile; gender was coded 0 for women and 1 for men; carer was coded 0 for no and 1 for yes; parenthood was coded 0 for no and 1 for yes; age was coded as follows: 1 = up to 30; 2 = 31–35; 3 = 36–40; 4 = 41–45; 5 = 46–55; 6 = 55+; Profile 1: Flexible Non-Dividers; Profile 2: Flexible Dividers; Profile 3: Non-Flexible Dividers; Profile 4: Non-Flexible Non-Dividers.

** $p < .01$.

* $p < .05$.

4.4. Analysing the relations between profile membership and the outcomes

To examine whether explanatory similarity, meaning that the same factors consistently explained the outcomes across time and profiles, was present, we tested a model based on this assumption. However, the model of explanatory similarity was not confirmed. Consequently, we opted for a model with effects estimated freely across time and profiles, as this model resulted in the lowest information criteria values, indicating a better fit to the data (see Table 1). Thus, we show the results for both Time 1 and Time 2. The profile-specific outcome levels are reported in Table 4. Results revealed clear differentiations across all profiles. At Time 1, the highest levels of work engagement were observed in Profile 2 (*flexible dividers*), followed by Profile 3 (*non-flexible dividers*), Profile 1 (*flexible non-dividers*), and Profile 4 (*non-flexible non-dividers*), with significant differences indicating that Profile 2 had higher scores on work engagement than the other profiles.

Similarly, job satisfaction and work-life balance at Time 1 were highest in Profile 2 (*flexible dividers)*, followed by Profile 3 (*non-flexible dividers*), Profile 1 (*flexible non-dividers*), and Profile 4 (*non-flexible non-dividers*). Significance tests indicate that Profile 2 had higher levels of job satisfaction and work-life balance compared to the other profiles. At Time 2, the patterns remained consistent with Profile 2 continuing to have the highest levels of work engagement, job satisfaction, and work-life balance, followed by Profiles 3, 4, and 1. In conclusion, the results suggest that individuals in Profile 2 (*flexible dividers*) exhibit the highest levels of work engagement, job satisfaction, and work-life balance at both time points. Contrarily, profiles with lower levels of boundary control or psychological job control, such as Profile 4 (*non-flexible non-dividers*), consistently showed the lowest levels of these work-related outcomes.

Comparing the results between Time 1 and Time 2, significant changes were observed in some profiles. In Profile 1 (*flexible non-dividers*), a significant decrease is exhibited in terms of work engagement, job satisfaction, and work-life balance from Time 1 to Time 2. For Profile 2 (*flexible dividers*), work engagement and job satisfaction significantly increased from Time 1 to Time 2, while work-life balance remained stable. Profile 3 (*non-flexible dividers*) showed no significant changes in work engagement, job satisfaction, or work-life balance, suggesting stability in these outcomes over time. For Profile 4 (*non-flexible non-dividers*), there were significant improvements from Time 1 to Time 2 in work engagement, job satisfaction, and work-life balance, although this profile still maintained the lowest levels of these outcomes compared to the others.

5. Discussion

5.1. Theoretical contributions

The main objective of this research was to identify various flexibility profiles on the basis of the psychological experience of job flexibility and boundary flexibility, to identify socio-demographic predictors of profiles and to analyse how these profiles relate to different aspects of employee wellbeing.

First, in contrast with previous studies where the aim was to investigate the usage and availability of flexible working practices (Gajendran & Harrison, 2007; Kossek et al., 2006), our study analyses workplace flexibility as a subjective and psychological experience. Adopting a phenomenological perspective, flexibility may be investigated as the individuals' perception of the experience of flexible working. In line with boundary and border theory (Ashforth et al., 2000; Clark, 2000), workplace flexibility causes frequent shifts in the employees' roles, and the control they feel they have over their roles can colour their psychological experience of

Table 4
Associations between profile membership and the outcomes taken from the model Effects free across time and profiles.

	Profile 1 M [CI]	Profile 2 M [CI]	Profile 3 M [CI]	Profile 4 M [CI]	Summary of significant differences
Time 1					
Work engagement (WE_T1)	−1.004 [−1.145; −0.863]	0.897 [0.821; 0.973]	0.075 [−0.054; 0.205]	−2.416 [−2.585; −2.246]	2 > 3 > 1 > 4
Job satisfaction (JS_T1)	−1.005 [−1.162; −0.848]	0.849 [0.783; 0.915]	0.141 [0.024; 0.258]	−2.543 [−2.737; −2.349]	2 > 3 > 1 > 4
Work-life balance (WLB_T1)	−0.600 [−0.742; −0.458]	0.578 [0.466; 0.691]	−0.035 [−0.143; 0.073]	−1.189 [−1.448; −0.930]	2 > 3 > 1 > 4
Time 2					
Work engagement (WE_T2)	−2.173 [−2.338; −2.008]	0.951 [0.875; 1.028]	0.062 [−0.065; 0.189]	−0.929 [−1.056; −0.803]	2 > 3 > 4 > 1
Job satisfaction (JS_T2)	−2.313 [−2.484; −2.141]	0.890 [0.823; 0.956]	0.136 [0.025; 0.247]	−0.905 [−1.059; −0.751]	2 > 3 > 4 > 1
Work-life balance (WLB_T2)	−1.039 [−1.265; −0.814]	0.570 [0.453; 0.686]	−0.033 [−0.140; 0.073]	−0.528 [−0.680; −0.375]	2 > 3 > 4 > 1
Significance of changes T1 vs T2	WE_T1 > WE_T2 JS_T1 > JS_T2 WLB_T1 > WLB_T2	WE_T1 < WE_T2 JS_T1 < JS_T2 WLB_T1 = WLB_T2	WE_T1 = WE_T2 JS_T1 = JS_T2 WLB_T1 = WLB_T2	WE_T1 < WE_T2 JS_T1 < JS_T2 WLB_T1 < WLB_T2	

Note. M: Mean; [CI]: 95 % Confidence Interval; Outcomes are factor scores with mean of 0 and a standard deviation of 1; Profile 1: Flexible Non-Dividers; Profile 2: Flexible Dividers; Profile 3: Non-Flexible Dividers; Profile 4: Non-Flexible Non-Dividers.

flexibility. Workers who feel they manage their job autonomously may experience the situation negatively if they are unable to balance work with their social responsibilities. At the same time, these same people could benefit from flexible working when they are able to handle their social roles. In other words, having control over when and where individuals work may be perceived differently depending on whether or not they can manage their social boundaries. Hence, the results suggest that psychological job control, coupled with boundary control, provides a more comprehensive understanding of how individuals perceive the psychological experience of flexibility.

Additionally, our study diverges from prior research by expanding the traditional focus on workplace flexibility to include control over social transitions during the workday. Unlike earlier studies where control is primarily examined from a work-centric perspective (Allen et al., 2013; Kossek et al., 2023), our findings introduce a more comprehensive view by incorporating control over social boundaries (boundary control). While previous studies investigated workplace flexibility by considering only control over where and when we work (psychological job control), our study also examines boundary control. We reveal that "psychological flexibility" not only increases job enrichment but also makes it easier to manage the transition between work and non-work roles. Using a person-centred approach, we identified four distinct flexibility profiles examined at two points in time. These are 1) people with high levels of psychological job control and boundary control (*flexible dividers*), 2) people with high psychological job control and low boundary control (*flexible non-dividers*), 3) people with low psychological job control and high boundary control (*non-flexible dividers*), and 4) people with low levels of both psychological job control and boundary control (*non-flexible dividers*).

Second, our results show that high or low levels of control over where and when someone works coexist with high or low levels of control over their social boundaries. Results reveal within-sample and within-person stability in the identified profiles (except for the *flexible non-dividers*), indicating that maintaining low levels of boundary control jointly with high levels of psychological job control may not be sustainable in the long term. Analysing the workers' shift from one profile to another, we highlighted that workers with high levels of boundary control remained in the same profile over time. Conversely, many workers with low levels of boundary control at Time 1 had switched to profiles with higher levels of boundary control by Time 2. This increase in the workers' perception of their boundary control over time could reflect the company's decisions following the first wave in the survey to invest in internal communication and training courses designed to improve their employees' boundary management strategies. At the same time, it may also be the case that individuals have learned to control their social boundaries through their personal resources. During the first data collection wave, many employees were unfamiliar with extensive workplace flexibility, and did not have the experience necessary to navigate through their social roles productively. Consistently with boundary and border theories (Ashforth et al., 2000; Clark, 2000), which explain that boundary control may change over time due to exogenous variables (like organizational interventions), these findings underscore how people's psychological perception of flexibility can fluctuate over time and be susceptible to a range of influencing factors. In this particular setting, we could postulate that the control over individuals' social boundaries may have been affected by the organizations' communication and training initiatives to help their employees negotiate their social boundaries and roles within the framework of flexible employment. However, it is also possible that the lack of within-person stability observed in the *flexible non-dividers* is due to the nature of this profile. Regardless of organizational interventions, maintaining a profile characterized by high levels of psychological job control without strong boundary control may be inherently challenging in the long term. This is because high flexibility could lead to blurred boundaries between work and personal domains, making it difficult for individuals to sustain clear role distinctions over extended periods. As boundary and role theory suggest, profiles with lower boundary control, such as the *flexible non-dividers*, may naturally experience more fluctuations as individuals struggle to manage the fluidity between their work and social roles.

Third, we investigated whether personal attributes can influence whether a person belongs to a specific flexibility profile. The results at both Time 1 and Time 2 show that age consistently predicts profile membership, but its effects differ between the two time points. Specifically, at Time 1, older individuals were more likely to belong to the *flexible non-dividers* profile compared to *non-flexible* profiles, while at Time 2, they were more likely to belong to *flexible dividers* compared to *non-flexible dividers*. Drawing on the concept of boundary management, it is possible that individuals developed more effective strategies to manage the interface between work and personal life as they gained experience. Older workers, having been exposed to workplace demands for a longer period, may have learned how to better manage boundaries. In contrast, younger employees, still early in their careers, may experience lower levels of autonomy due to less established roles and fewer opportunities to influence job conditions (Baruch & Rousseau, 2019). Over time, employees likely refine their ability to negotiate these boundaries, resulting in shifts toward profiles associated with higher psychological job control and boundary control as they progress through their careers. Gender also emerged as a significant predictor of profile membership, but its influence shifted between Time 1 and Time 2. At Time 1, men were more likely to belong to profiles with low levels of psychological job control, such as *non-flexible dividers*, but at Time 2, they were more likely to belong to *flexible non-dividers*, suggesting a shift in boundary management strategies and autonomy. Women, on the other hand, tended to belong to profiles with low levels of both psychological job control and boundary control at both time points. This finding may be explained by research showing that men often benefit from segmentation strategies applied to both boundary control and work-life balance, while women face difficulties with boundary segmentation strategies in a working life where the forces for integration and flexibility are strong (Mellner et al., 2017; Rodríguez-Muñoz et al., 2020).

As for parenthood, the results indicate no significant influence on profile membership across time points. This suggests that despite the higher family demands and potential for increased family-to-work conflicts (Hilbrecht et al., 2008; Shockley et al., 2021), parents may develop strategies to manage these challenges, maintaining boundary control at levels similar to non-parents. Finally, at Time 1, caregivers were more likely to belong to *flexible dividers* compared to *non-flexible dividers*. This finding was somewhat unexpected given that workers who care for an elderly relative tend to have greater family demands, leading to higher levels of stress and increased family-work conflicts (Hilbrecht et al., 2008). Carefully interpreting these findings as they await replication, it may be possible that

being a carer could have taught them how to juggle social roles, giving them the skills needed to manage their social boundaries.

Fourth, we contribute to the flexibility and wellbeing literature by showing that the psychological experience of work flexibility can generate positive effects on the employees' wellbeing when they feel able to control both when and where they work and also their social boundaries. Indeed, *flexible dividers* show the highest levels of work engagement, job satisfaction and work-life balance at both times. Employees who have control over their psychological, physical, and temporal boundaries perceive their psychological experience of work flexibility in a more satisfying way. In other words, the psychological experience of flexible working is positively related to the employees' wellbeing when they are able to manage their different social roles.

This finding allows us to propose a possible explanation of how the phenomenon of autonomy-control paradox occurs (Putnam et al., 2013). Workplace flexibility could result in individuals enduring the impact of the spillover effect and the permeability of social roles (Hyman et al., 2005; Kossek et al., 2012). However, the group of studies covering these points does not consider the role played by boundary control in the relations between workplace flexibility and employee wellbeing. Our results suggest that the psychological experience of work flexibility is significantly impacted by the employees' perception of having control over their social boundaries. Therefore, it is possible that individuals who have the flexibility of deciding where and when they work can face challenges in managing their social boundaries, meeting their personal needs, and/or experiencing conflicts between their family and work responsibilities.

In other words, high levels of both psychological job control and boundary control significantly influence work engagement, work-life balance, and job satisfaction of employees across the observed time points. Conversely, profiles that exhibit the lowest levels of boundary control (*flexible non-dividers* and *non-flexible non-dividers*) show the lowest levels of well-being. These results reinforce the notion that control over social roles plays a crucial role in determining the psychological experience of flexibility.

Finally, comparing the results between Time 1 and Time 2, significant changes were observed in some profiles. The *flexible dividers* showed a further increase in terms of work engagement, work-life balance, and job satisfaction, indicating that high levels of both psychological job control and boundary control positively influence the general wellbeing of employees over time. In contrast, results showed a significant decrease in all outcomes for *flexible non-dividers*, which suggests that while initially benefiting from high psychological job control, individuals in this profile may face increasing challenges in maintaining boundary control over time. This could lead to negative spillover effects between work and personal life, resulting in a decrease in terms of work engagement, job satisfaction, and work-life balance. While *flexible non-dividers* initially exhibited higher levels of wellbeing compared to *non-flexible non-dividers*, the decline in wellbeing of *flexible non-dividers* and the corresponding improvement in wellbeing of *non-flexible non-dividers* reversed this order by Time 2. This finding reinforces the idea that not only does boundary control play a crucial role in influencing employee wellbeing, but that the ability to adapt over time is equally important. Profiles like *non-flexible dividers*, which experience within-person stability, demonstrate that having control over social boundaries may offer a consistent approach to maintaining work-life balance, work engagement, and job satisfaction, even when psychological job control is lower. Similarly, *flexible dividers*, who exhibit high levels of both psychological job control and boundary control, not only maintain but also improve their wellbeing outcomes over time, further highlighting the importance of both autonomy and managing boundaries effectively. Profiles with high levels of boundary control are either able to maintain stable levels of wellbeing (in the case of lower psychological job control) or, in the best cases like *flexible dividers*, show continued improvement in work engagement, job satisfaction, and work-life balance. In contrast, the high level of psychological job control (and the lower level of boundary control) associated with *flexible non-dividers* may not be sustainable in the long term without additional resources or strategies to manage social boundaries effectively. Thus, the relationship between workplace flexibility and wellbeing is dynamic and depends both on the level of boundary control and the capacity to adapt to changing conditions over time.

5.2. Practical implications

This research provides useful indications for organizations and managers on how to deal with workplace flexibility. First, we suggest that, when business organizations decide to invest energy and resources into flexible work arrangements, they should be aware of all the issues connected to role transitions in organizational work life. For example, employees may struggle with unclear boundaries between work and personal time, leading to low levels of wellbeing or decreased performance. Additionally, there could be challenges in maintaining team cohesion when employees work remotely, or issues of fairness when some roles have more flexibility than others. Addressing these challenges may help organizations create more effective and supportive flexible work policies.

Second, organizations and managers aiming to enhance employee wellbeing through flexibility should consider the wider implications of flexible work arrangements. It's not just about where, when, and how one works, but also about how employees transition between work and non-work roles. By recognizing these broader dynamics, managers can better tailor policies and actions to meet the unique needs of different flexibility profiles. Furthermore, the Covid-19 pandemic taught us that flexible work practices can generate both positive and negative impacts on employee wellbeing (Donald & Jackson, 2022). The link between profiles and wellbeing outcomes may bring up distinctive intervention strategies which organizations can apply to different profiles. For instance, it may make sense for organizations to define policies and actions that increase the *non-flexible non-dividers'* degree of psychological job control and boundary control. This could include offering flexible scheduling options, providing workshops on effective boundary setting between work and personal life, or enabling greater autonomy in task management to help employees feel more in control of their work environment and responsibilities.

Third, we show through our study that, in order to ensure high levels of wellbeing, employees have to know how to control their own social boundaries. Thus, it would be useful to plan training courses on how to manage flexible working practices. For instance, organizations could offer courses to help employees manage and balance work and personal time.

Finally, we suggest that organizations and managers should not underestimate the implications connected to role transitions. Managing multiple roles involves facing issues that come from two different social domains and may affect both. Supervisors can play a key role in supporting employees by providing regular feedback, offering flexibility in managing tasks, and encouraging open communication about the challenges of balancing work and personal roles.

5.3. Limitations and further research

This research is based on employees working for a bank located in Italy. Our study could be replicated in different countries, as well as in different work sectors. This would help verify the generalizability of our findings across different settings and populations, and investigate the differences and/or similarities caused by contextual and cultural factors, which could influence the relations between the identified profiles, predictors, and outcomes. Moreover, it is important to note that our data were collected in April/May and December 2022. Since 2023, banks in the USA, EU, UK, and Italy have started recalling workers to the office (Smith, 2023). This new scenario offers an opportunity to replicate the study in contexts where workplace flexibility differs from what was experienced during the pandemic.

Our measures were based on self-assessment, and it would be useful to gather data from other sources as well (e.g., remote working metrics, performance metrics, etc.). It could, for instance, be helpful to understand the bias between someone's perception of flexibility and the effective usage of flexible working practices. However, as Conway and Lance (2010) argued, using self-assessment is appropriate when respondents have to answer questions regarding private constructs and when the measures used have construct validity.

Future research may build on the person-centred approach by investigating how the flexibility profiles vary over time (and shift from one profile to another) through latent transition analysis. It could also be interesting to investigate new outcomes related to the other dimensions of employee wellbeing. For instance those belonging to the physical and relational spheres, such as experiencing reduced stress and physical exhaustion, as well as better communication, and a greater sense of social support in the relational domain. This analysis could help researchers, as well as practitioners, gain a wider understanding of the impact of workplace flexibility on the employees' general wellbeing.

Relatedly, it could also be useful to consider metrics relating to the employees work performance, in view of analysing the relations between performance, the flexibility profiles, and the employees' wellbeing.

Another avenue for future research could be to focus on the factors that influence and help individuals to control their boundaries. Adopting a more interpretative research approach could provide greater depth in understanding these factors, and examining their positive or negative impacts on employees' ability to manage their boundaries. Specifically, using different empirical approaches, such as qualitative or mixed-methods, could offer deeper insights into the observed phenomena.

Finally, it is important to conduct further analysis on elements such as the division of responsibilities between genders, single-parent status, and the employment status of partners and how they determine the perception of psychological flexibility and wellbeing.

5.4. Conclusions

This study expands on previous knowledge about the psychological experience of flexibility, emphasizing the importance of boundary control when employees work in a flexible working environment. Our findings underline the importance of studying workplace flexibility as a psychological experience. The process involves considering not only the employees' perception of having control over where and when they work but also their control over social boundaries, thereby expanding the concept of control, which has traditionally been analysed from a work-centric perspective. Furthermore, gaining a wider understanding of the psychological experience of work flexibility (combining psychological job control and boundary control) can offer a possible explanation of the autonomy-control paradox. When working in a flexible work setting, individuals often find themselves playing various overlapping roles (e.g., worker, father/mother, etc.), a situation that can impact on their wellbeing in various ways. We applied a person-centred approach and identified four distinct flexibility profiles, each associated with different levels of psychological job control and boundary control at two different times. Our findings show that age, gender, and parenthood are predictors of belonging to a specific flexibility profile. In addition, our results show that, when individuals present high levels of both psychological job control and boundary control, they record the highest values of wellbeing in terms of job satisfaction, work engagement and work-life balance.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Gabriele Boccoli: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Supervision, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Conceptualization. **Maria Tims:** Writing – review & editing. **Luca Gastaldi:** Writing – review & editing. **Mariano Corso:** Writing – review & editing.

Declaration of competing interest

We, Gabriele Boccoli, Maria Tims, Luca Gastaldi, and Mariano Corso, declare that we have no financial or personal interests that may conflict with the subject matter or materials presented in our research paper "*The psychological experience of flexibility in the workplace: How psychological job control and boundary control profiles relate to the wellbeing of flexible workers*"

We affirm that any potential conflicts of interest have been disclosed transparently and that we have conducted ourselves in

accordance with the principles of integrity and objectivity.

Data availability

The authors do not have permission to share data.

Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jvb.2024.104059.

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