



# Flexible working arrangements as privilege or entitlement? Type of access to flexible working arrangements shapes reciprocal beliefs and social exchange relationships in hybrid work teams

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## Abstract

Literature suggests that employees reciprocate the ‘privilege’ for flexible working arrangements (FWA) with higher effort. Drawing on social exchange theory, our interview study investigated how leaders shape members’ beliefs about the need to reciprocate the access to FWA. Based on 20 interviews nested in ten teams from two organisations, we analysed how FWA are perceived and negotiated between team leaders and their members, and whether low or high prevalence of FWA in teams plays a role for establishing social exchange relationships. The interviews took place prior to Covid-19. While in one organisation access to FWA was negotiated individually only due to a specific need, in the other organisation it was facilitated more easily and granting FWA had evolved as a social norm. Our findings indicate that in both contexts FWA indeed initiated social exchange relationships, as team members often tried to return the favour for access to FWA by maintaining the performance and/or by showing high flexibility. When FWA were granted to selected members only (low prevalence), ‘score-keeping’ and ‘quid-pro-quo exchanges’ were mentioned as important exchange rules in the accounts. In the organisation with high FWA prevalence, cooperative team routines showed that members felt the need to reciprocate the favour to other team members or the organisation rather than directly to the leader. However, even in this organisation, leaders were able to establish employees’ belief in privilege and their obligation to reciprocate in order for them not to lose access to FWA. Our findings show the role of the leader in shaping and instrumentalising FWA. The study has high practical relevance for hybrid teams and discusses the essential role of leaders in FWA.

**Keywords** Flexible working arrangements · Hybrid teams · Social exchange theory · I-deals

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## Flexibles Arbeiten als Privileg oder Selbstverständlichkeit? Die Art des Zugangs zu flexiblem Arbeiten steuert reziproke Ansichten und soziale Austauschbeziehungen in hybriden Teams

### Zusammenfassung

Studien zeigen, dass Mitarbeiter:innen das ‚Privileg‘ flexibler Arbeitsregelungen (engl. *Flexible Work Arrangements; FWA*) mit höherem Einsatz erwidern. Unsere Interviewstudie stützt sich auf die Theorie des sozialen Austauschs (*Social Exchange Theory*). Wir untersuchten in zwei Organisationen, wie Führungskräfte den Zugang zu FWA instrumentalisierten, um Gegenleistungen von Teammitgliedern zu fördern. Basierend auf 20 Interviews analysierten wir, wie FWA wahrgenommen und zwischen Teamleiter:innen und ihren Mitgliedern ausverhandelt wurden, und ob eine niedrige oder hohe Prävalenz von FWA in Teams eine Rolle beim Aufbau sozialer Austauschbeziehungen spielte. Die Interviews fanden vor der Covid-19 Pandemie statt. Während in der einen Organisation der Zugang zu FWA nur aufgrund eines spezifischen Bedarfs individuell gewährt wurde, war der Zugang zu FWA in der zweiten Organisation die Norm. Unsere Ergebnisse zeigten, dass in beiden Kontexten das Gewähren von FWA den Beginn einer sozialen Austauschbeziehung darstellte: Die Teammitglieder versuchten, sich für die gewonnene Flexibilität zu revanchieren, indem sie die Leistung aufrechterhielten und/oder selbst mehr Flexibilität zeigten. Wenn FWA nur vereinzelt Mitgliedern gewährt wurden (niedrige Prävalenz), wurden in den Interviews häufig ‚score-keeping‘ und ‚Quid-pro-quo‘ als wichtige Austauschregel erwähnt. In der Organisation mit hoher FWA-Prävalenz zeigte sich, dass die Teammitglieder den Zugang zu FWA oft mit kooperativem und gemeinschaftlichen Verhalten gegenüber anderen Teammitgliedern oder der Organisation erwiderten, dh. sich nicht nur gegenüber der Führungskraft erkenntlich zeigten. Doch selbst in dieser Organisation gelang es einigen Führungskräften, FWA als Privileg, das bei Nichteinhaltung von Leistung und Einsatz auch wieder verloren werden kann, zu instrumentalisieren. Dies deutet auf die Rolle der Führungskraft bei der Gestaltung von FWA hin. Die Studie ist von großer praktischer Relevanz für hybride Teams und zeigt die essentielle Rolle von Führungskräften bei FWA.

**Schlüsselwörter** Flexibles Arbeiten · Hybride Teams · Soziale Austauschtheorie · Reziprozität

### 1 Introduction

Flexible working arrangements (FWA) are defined as employees' autonomy to decide working hours and/or place of work (Allen et al. 2015). Although traditionally offered as a privilege, some scholars argue that, in Western countries, FWA are no longer seen as a workplace benefit or reward, but as an entitlement (Clarke 2020; Cloutier and Barling 2020). For example, in the UK, employees have a legal right to request FWA if they have worked with their employer for more than six months (Flexible Working Regulations 2014). Nonetheless, in practice, the individual employee's 'right to request FWA' often translates into a 'right to ask' (Kelly and Kalev 2006, 1; Cooper and Baird 2015), implying that a team leader has the discretion to reject the employee's request (Clarke 2020). Despite the strong increase of FWA in Western Europe due to the Covid-19 pandemic (Chung et al. 2020), most organisational policies allow discretionary power for team leaders to grant or deny access to FWA (Porter and Ayman 2010). This turns the leader into a gatekeeper, who may instrumentalise access to FWA (Cooper and Baird 2015). In accordance with social exchange theory (Blau 1964; Cropanzano et al. 2017) it has been suggested that employees reciprocate the privilege of FWA with higher effort and commitment (Kelliher and Anderson 2010; Berkery et al. 2020). However, this might not be the case when FWA are highly prevalent in a team and

has become the norm. Then, team members are perceived to have the unspoken and onset right to work flexibly. To the best knowledge of the authors, there has been scarce research on how access to and loss of FWA are negotiated in (hybrid) teams and how exactly the 'favour' of FWA is returned. Hybrid teams are work teams where members use FWA to varying degrees, resulting in uncertain conditions when compared to virtual or co-located teams (Fiol and O'Connor 2005). Specific challenges of team coordination arise in hybrid teams with less co-presence in the office and a higher variation in working hours.

Hence, in this study we explore how FWA are viewed, negotiated, and returned both by leaders and members of hybrid work teams. We suggest that the prevalence of FWA and the ease at which the employees receive or lose this 'privilege' affects beliefs in reciprocity and the need to 'return the favour'. Our study makes the following contributions: Findings corroborate social exchange theory premises (Blau 1964) as team members in this interview study indeed reciprocated for FWA, often with homeomorphic exchanges or withholding deviant behaviours rather than with increased performance (Cropanzano et al. 2017). In teams with high prevalence of FWA, a more communal orientation and reciprocity towards the team and the whole organisation was apparent. Nonetheless, perceived need for reciprocity may vary depending on leaders' action. Thus, our findings imply that leaders (actively) shape beliefs of FWA as a ben-

efit or entitlement not only by selective access, but also by whether and how FWA, once granted, can be lost again. Finally, we derive implications for establishing team routines in hybrid work settings.

## 2 Theoretical background

A defining feature of FWA is that employees do not work standard hours at the organisation's premises; they are able to decide their times and place of work to a certain extent (Allen et al. 2015). While organisations usually have an FWA policy in place, this policy gives leaders discretion about whether and how to grant individual team members access to FWA (Kelly and Kalev 2006). FWA, then, are informal, customised arrangements negotiated between an individual team member and their leader (i.e., idiosyncratic deals or *i-deals*; Rousseau et al. 2006; De Menezes and Kelliher 2017). When FWA is negotiated on a case-to-case basis, FWA schemes vary among team members.

Generally, FWA result in asynchronous work patterns and less face-to-face contact among team members. This constitutes a challenge for coordination and knowledge sharing in interdependent work teams (Waerzner et al. 2017; Rockmann and Pratt 2015) and might also challenge the formation of social relationships and bonds at work (Gajendran and Harrison 2007). To overcome these team challenges, managerial support is decisive for team member performance and commitment in the FWA context (Gan et al. 2022; Van der Lippe and Lippényi 2020). Leaders must establish routines to enable team members to make decisions autonomously and 'without the feeling that someone is looking over their shoulder' (Dixon 2017). When employees work out of sight, leaders tend to apply more output-oriented control routines (Felstead et al. 2003); i.e., leaving more discretion to the employees for organising their workload. This requires employees to adopt new skills and behaviours beyond task proficiency, such as proactivity (Carpini et al. 2017). Proactive behaviours encompass the anticipation of future uncertainties, acting in a self-directed and effective way, including taking the initiative to make changes (Nguyen et al. 2017; Carpini et al. 2017). Individuals engaging in proactivity rely on others as part of this process (Vough et al. 2017). Thus, leaders are challenged to create the ground for effective team cooperation (Van der Lippe and Lippényi 2020), but also have to enable and motivate their team members to act proactively and reciprocate the gained flexibility.

Overall, leaders are often concerned that non-standard work arrangements might negatively influence employees' performance (Bolino et al. 2021; Gajendran et al. 2015). Despite leaders' concerns about slacking when working from home, empirical research suggests that FWA are as-

sociated with favourable performance-related outcomes as employees increase their work efforts (Kelliher and Anderson 2010) resulting in higher organisational profitability (Berkery et al. 2020) and return on labour (Kotey and Sharma 2019). Social-exchange theory perspectives (Blau 1964; Cropanzano et al. 2017) have been used to explain the beneficial effect on individual performance based on reciprocation. Leaders who grant access to FWA and negotiate an *i-deal* with their team members show an initiating exchange action which creates an obligation for members to reciprocate (Cropanzano et al. 2017; Kelliher and Anderson 2010). This access to FWA is considered a valued resource (i.e., more autonomy, flexibility, work-family balance, etc.) by the team members who are motivated to defend this additional resource from losing (cf., conservation of resource framework; Halbesleben et al. 2014; Hobfoll 1989).

Employees signal reciprocity through a series of mutual exchanges of resources, services, or other 'favours' resulting in trust and mutual commitment over time (Cropanzano and Mitchell 2005). These returns by employees can be made actively (e.g., engaging in desirable behaviour such as working more) or inactively by withholding undesirable behaviour (e.g., not engaging in unproductive work behaviour during FWA; Cropanzano et al. 2017). In exchange for the access to FWA, employees are likely to signal that their efficiency and productivity is not adversely affected (e.g., by maintaining visibility and presence, working to become more proficient and adaptable, showing willingness to be flexible).

Leaders as 'donors' of FWA have discretion in defining the terms and conditions of the exchange, i.e., the exchange norms that govern the giving and receiving of benefits such as FWA: In so-called exchange or economic exchange relationships, members have the need to repay the benefit of FWA in comparable terms defined as homeomorphic exchanges (Gouldner 1960; Mitchell et al. 2012). In such *quid-pro-quo* relationships, both the leaders and team members are concerned about how much they owe and how much they should receive for the benefit of FWA. In communal (Clark and Mills 2012) or cooperative (Chen et al. 2013) exchange relationships, the parties typically require less specific reciprocity and equity, as the focus is on maintaining the relationship and trust. Thus, whether an exchange relationship is 'cooperative' and trustful or merely economic and based on scorekeeping may rest on a leader's attitude and practice of 'negotiating' FWA in a work team.

The important role of trust in hybrid teams has been commonly referred to in the literature (Breuer et al. 2016). However, little is known about how trustful relationships between leaders and members are built, and how expectations are shaped in hybrid teams. Whether the terms for the exchange had been *negotiated explicitly* between the parties or whether the initiating action by the leader was *recipro-*

cal without a clear and specific request for a return (Molm 2003), may make a difference on members' trust and reciprocal response. Leaders' communal attitudes may foster communal orientation by their members, despite the risk that the favour is not returned.

It is also likely that the prevalence and intensity of FWA in the organisation shapes a leader's behaviour and attitude and the way FWA are instrumentalised as a 'privilege' that needs to be returned. If FWA are highly prevalent and perceived as a norm in a team, using FWA as incentive or demanding returns might be more difficult to establish and maintain over time than if FWA access is conditional and has to be negotiated by each employee. When organisations grant FWA to all employees and FWA are highly prevalent, i-deals are potentially less distinct and scarce. This might weaken employees' motivation to proactively reciprocate for the 'privilege' and minimise anticipated negative reactions of the team leader (Gajendran et al. 2015). If FWA deals are selective or inhomogeneous in teams, negative social comparison effects among team members may arise as peers are affected and compare their situation to those of their co-workers (Vidyarthi et al. 2016). For example, Thatcher and Bagger (2011) show that non-telecommuters perceive unfairness when colleagues engage in telecommuting. Furthermore, high intensity telecommuting negatively affects relationships with co-workers (Gajendran and Harrison 2007). When telecommuting becomes more prevalent, the job satisfaction and flexibility of non-telecommuting co-workers drop, as the remaining office-bound members take on additional responsibilities otherwise handled by the teleworkers (Golden 2007).

Thus, the prevalence of FWA may impact the nature of exchange relationships at work: In remote work settings, face to face and dyadic exchange relationship between a leader and their members, as well as among peers, may become less frequent (Chernyak-Hai and Rabenu 2018; Cooper-Thomas and Morrison 2018). Moreover, for contexts such as knowledge workers, classic hierarchical dyadic relationships between leader and members may become less important or may be altered (Chernyak-Hai and Rabenu 2018; Cooper-Thomas and Morrison 2018). Thus, in the future, it may be even more crucial that leaders set the initial action and shape reciprocity beliefs, by perhaps urging the employee to reciprocate the favour of FWA to other actors than the leader (e.g., other team members). Although there has been increasing attention given to social contexts in organisational research (Johns 2018) and, in particular to leadership in remote working (Gan et al. 2022), little is known about how the practice of granting access to FWA shapes flexible working behaviours in flexible teams with high or low FWA prevalence.

## 3 Methodology

### 3.1 Research design

We applied an exploratory comparative case study design that relies on semi-structured interviews with flexible workers from the following two organisational contexts that differed in their FWA practices.

**FinancePublic (FWA as privilege)** is the finance department of a large public agency in a UK-based city. At the time of data collection, the organisation's FWA policies were restrictive (e.g., work from home or flexiwork around core hours). The availability of FWA differed between teams, and FWA were individually negotiated with team leaders (i-deals). Access to FWA was evaluated on a case-by-case basis, and restricted to employees with specific needs (e.g., long commutes, childcare obligations). Due to the distinctive access requirement, this case has been labelled 'FWA as a privilege'. Eleven informants including nine leaders were interviewed (see Table 1 for details). Due to the organisational structure, some interviewees had a dual role as both team leader and member.

**ConsultHealth (FWA as norm)** is a large public agency with multiple sites across the UK. The company has a formal policy defining the scope of FWA. Team leaders had discretion to informally grant or deny FWA via i-deals. Types of FWA differed across teams (e.g., compressed hours with working from home; flexitime with 1–2 fixed days of remote work). Although FWA needed to be requested, team leaders felt obliged to grant FWA because of the high prevalence of FWA. This case was therefore labelled 'FWA as norm'. Nine informants were interviewed, comprising three team leaders and their members (see Table 2 for details).

To analyse the team perspective, we aimed to interview leaders and members from the same hybrid teams. In total,

**Table 1** Team structures and team member hierarchical level in *FinancePublic* ("FWA as Privilege")

**Tab. 1** Team Struktur und hierarchische Gliederung innerhalb des Teams in *FinancePublic* ("FWA as Privilege")

Team	Pseudonym	Position	Structure
Team 1	Edward	Leader	–
Team 1	Alim	Member	Works for Edward
Team 1	Eve	Member	Works for Edward
Team 2	Isabelle	Leader	–
Team 2	Lynn	Leader	Works for Isabelle
Team 2 & 3	Lily	Leader	Works for Isabelle
Team 3	Olivia	Leader	Works for Lily
Team 4	Helen	Leader	–
Team 5	Lydia	Leader	–
Team 6	Jennifer	Leader	–
Team 7	Evan	Member	–

**Table 2** Team structures and team member hierarchical level in *ConsultHealth* (“FWA as Norm”)**Tab. 2** Team Struktur und hierarchische Gliederung innerhalb des Teams in *ConsultHealth* (“FWA as Norm”)

Team	Pseudonym	Position	Structure
Team 8	Sharon	Leader	–
Team 8	Lisa	Member	Works for Sharon
Team 9	Susi	Leader	–
Team 9	Angela	Member	Works for Susi
Team 9	Sandy	Member	Works for Susi
Team 9	Thomas	Member	Works for Susi
Team 10	Bradley	Leader	–
Team 10	Peter	Member	Works for Bradley
Team 10	Michael	Member	Works for Bradley

20 interviews were conducted with flexible workers from 10 different teams (6 teams captured more than one informant). All informants used FWA and were purposefully selected with the assistance of a personal contact within the organisation. Maximal variation in aspects such as hierarchical position, gender, age, and organisational tenure were sought to extract common themes across the divergent cases (Patton 1990). Interviews were undertaken prior to the Covid-19 pandemic in a face-to-face setting at the organisations’ premises, and all interviews were recorded and transcribed. Informed consent was obtained, and names were de-identified with pseudonyms for further analysis.

We followed a phenomenological approach to study employee experiences of working in a team where team members have FWA. This method is used to understand how employees feel FWA impacts on team performance and organisational productivity. The phenomenological method is ‘based upon descriptions of experiences as they occur in everyday life’ (Giorgi 1995, 39) and aims to identify how employees make sense of an experience, and how they understand and describe their feelings of belonging to a hybrid team in relation to team performance and productivity. As befits a phenomenological approach, the semi-structured interview questions follow a loose conceptual framework and are based around a broad research question: What is the experience of working in a flexible work team in relation to team performance and organisational productivity? Questions included individual experiences with FWA, perceived benefits, the practice of asking for or granting FWA, the effects of FWA on cohesion and communication in the team, and other ad-hoc questions during the interviews.

### 3.2 Data analysis

We analysed each leader’s and team member’s account to search for set of actions on how FWA is performed, negotiated, and reciprocated by both leaders and members in hybrid teams in order to find common patterns in the single

cases. In addition, we analysed the interviews on a team level (i.e., the leaders’ and their respective members’ accounts were co-analysed) and across organizations with distinct FWA prevalence. Individual practices mentioned may shed light on shared behaviours (routines) in the team context, for example common practices and ostensible routines to signal performance or availability while out of sight.

Our guiding framework for the analyses of social exchange relationships in the respective teams were informants’ references to social exchange *resources* (which type of resource was exchanged and reciprocated?), *exchange rules or norms* (to what extent did the FWA have to be reciprocated; were the exchange rules economic or communal?), and the social exchange *referents* of the exchange (e.g., did members reciprocate to the leader or to other referents in the team or the organization; cf., Cropanzano et al. 2017). In our analysis we laid particular emphasis whether and how leaders shaped these important dimensions of social exchange in their teams, and how the prevalence of FWA affected the behaviours and beliefs.

Thus, the following steps were taken to analyse the data: First, the entire body of material was read and analysed separately by the authors and quotes capturing performance were identified. In interpretation meetings, we fine-analysed whether and how the leaders and members in a team discussed their (economic) exchange resources, rules and relationships. Selected sequences were interpreted line by line using interpretive methodology reflecting the following questions: What is being said on the content level? What underlying assumptions and mental models could have provoked the interviewee to say what she/he has said? What language was used?

The findings are structured along the three underlying themes in FWA research—perceived autonomy, work-family conflict, and relationship quality—identified in Gajendran and Harrison’s (2007) meta-analysis. First, *autonomy* is the key feature of FWA as it inherently provides the opportunity to workers to decide when or where to work. Second, *work-family conflict* is controversially discussed in literature but generally seen as an important driver for FWA. Third, *relationship quality* captures organisations’ concerns that too much FWA might lead to relational impoverishment at work (Gajendran and Harrison 2007).

## 4 Findings

On the individual level, team leaders and members emphasise diverse benefits such as higher ‘efficiency’, ‘productivity’, or ‘effectiveness’ due to the opportunity to work flexibly. Since our interest lies in the exchange/reciprocation perspective encouraged by the access of FWA, we present those findings which best exemplify leaders’ and members’

reciprocal beliefs regarding each of the three dimensions of the framework by Gajendran and Harrison (2007).

#### 4.1 Perceived autonomy

Autonomy is generally considered as a job resource (Hobfoll 2011) and was found to function as a strong mediator between FWA and job satisfaction or performance (Gajendran and Harrison 2007). When people work flexibly, they have more discretion over their work time and workplace, which has positive effects on their performance (Gajendran et al. 2015).

At *FinancePublic*, typically this autonomy was granted only to selected employees on a case-by-case basis based on their explicit needs such as reducing commuting time or childcare. For example, Edwards, a team leader, would be “reluctant to let people work from home as a standard without knowing the individual and their own capabilities and productivity and discipline.” resembling the perceived threat of reduced work performance when working out of sight. This was in line with other leaders’ accounts who granted FWA based on needs and prior performance. Thus, an underlying theme was how performance can be ensured in the team despite FWA. Informants referred to (formalised) routines and their own responsibility for making sure that availability and performance norms were met. Leaders at *FinancePublic* particularly mentioned that they themselves signalled (constant) availability when working flexibly. For example, Isabelle, a team leader at *FinancePublic*, argues that her quick responses to e-mails are intended to signal support to her team members, but could also blur team members’ work-nonwork boundaries.

“My team knows when I’m not in that they can get hold of me, usually at night I will pick up my emails anyway, but equally I have had a few people working at night as well and the expectation is that if I am sending an email are they expected to respond, and they know quite well that they don’t, they only need to respond when they are in work. (...) I try to avoid if I think that will happen (...), and send them [emails] during work time, yeah (...) if something urgent happens, I’m expecting them there.” (Isabelle, team leader, *FinancePublic*).

Isabelle is one of the few leaders who was aware that team members are likely to copy her managerial expectations and behaviours. For example, Isabelle’s team member Lynn, who is a leader herself, shares her routine of being (constantly) available. However, just like Isabelle, she has established a routine which ensures that members can join meetings within their working hours.

“But when we arrange meetings, we always tend to try to arrange them after ten and before four o’clock. We haven’t sort of ever agreed on this as such, but it is a known thing(...) Yeah, we have got that kind of slot, where you think people will expect you to be in, sort of over those times.” (Lynn, team leader, *FinancePublic*).

Also at the second organisation, *ConsultHealth* (FWA as norm), some leaders and team members referred to the benefit of autonomy, and the need to signal performance and availability when working from home. For example, Thomas, a team member, explained that his line manager, Susi, grants him autonomy because he “has not slacked off” when working from home. Nevertheless, Thomas “would always let her [the team leader Susi] know” when he is working from home and makes sure he reciprocates to establish trust in FWA.

“I’ll also work longer hours or, you know, be in the office for a longer period of time when work demands it. And so, I think, you know, sort of fulfilling that side of the bargain.” (Thomas, team member, *ConsultHealth*).

While Thomas described FWA as a bargain that needs to be reciprocated with effort and higher flexibility and he applied the same logics with his own team member, other team members of Susi are less explicit and specific in their exchange norms and extent. However, they also felt obliged to show that their prior performance and availability is not undermined through FWA. For example, Sandy, usually wrote emails when working from home. She explained “(...) perhaps it’s an attempt to, I don’t know, demonstrate, I’m not doing anything wrong, I’m telling everyone I’m working from home, I’m not really taking a bath (...)” Other accounts from *ConsultHealth* resembled Thomas’ and Sandy’s efforts to return the benefit. Practices of keeping one’s team leader and other team members in the loop (e.g., by writing the flexible working hours in a calendar or informing the supervisor via a brief mail) to avoid FWA being seen as a vested right were frequently mentioned in different teams at *ConsultHealth*. Leaders only stepped in and tightened control when members allegedly violated performance or availability norms. This was different to *FinancePublic*, where leaders themselves stepped in and were often actively notified when the selected employees worked from home. However, also at *ConsultHealth*, sanctioning mechanisms became apparent when employees showed lack of performance when working remotely. Susi (Thomas’ leader) recalled changing her control mechanism with a team member who had not delivered the expected output after being granted FWA, and whose contract was ultimately termi-

nated. This made her shape FWA as a privilege that could be lost again:

“What I have learned though from that, is that any of these flexible arrangements need to be made on a trial basis and people need to understand that they are going to be on a trial basis, and that it’s not an acquired right (...). And that if it’s not working out and we are the ones who judge, you know, as managers, are the ones who judge where it’s not working out and, yeah. (...). But if it doesn’t work, then that’s a privilege that can be taken away basically.” (Susi, team leader, ConsultHealth).

Hence, while FWA access was prevalent at *ConsultHealth* and leaders felt more obliged to grant it than at *FinancePublic*, some leaders also made clear that team members can lose access if they do not fulfil the ‘bargain’ and performance standards were not maintained in FWA. Thus, even when FWA is highly prevalent, the threat of *losing* the benefit can be instrumentalised by leaders.

## 4.2 Work-Family conflict

Traditionally, FWA is introduced in organisations to overcome work-family conflicts, but studies show only small beneficial effects on work-family conflict (Allen et al. 2013; Gajendran and Harrison 2007). In our study, leaders and their team members with family obligations from both organisations acknowledged the benefit derived from FWA for reducing their work-family conflicts.

At *FinancePublic*, FWA were often granted to selected members based on care obligations. Edward, team leader of Alim and Eve, argued that all members reciprocated sufficiently, but particularly mentioned Alim who seems to benefit more from the flexibility than others:

“So he often has to, he has had to do it at short notice to take one of his children to hospital, and that, and he realises that’s a benefit of working within our team and the [COMPANY] that you don’t get within other organisations and that makes people work that little bit harder, that if they are invested in the team and I think he is.” (Edward, team leader, FinancePublic).

Alim and Eve both likewise perceived FWA as beneficial due to family obligations. While Eve did not refer to any explicit reciprocal behaviour during the interviews, Alim shared Edward’s belief of FWA leading to increased productivity due to less work/family conflict and stress with children: “Because flexible working works for us, it keeps us sort of happy and I think productivity is a lot better then (...).”

At *ConsultHealth*, we found similar accounts which pointed to reduced work-family conflict due to FWA, and

also at this organisation, leaders differed how they communicated the need for reciprocation. For example, Henry, team leader of Peter and Michael, made explicit in the interviews that the flexibility offered by the organisation to tackle work and family demands needs to be reciprocated in fairly equal terms.

“You work flexibly to do the work that is required in the time. It’s a you scratch my back and I’ll scratch your back sort of approach from my perspective. (...) if I’m going to work at home because I’ve got a dental appointment at home and it’s 30 miles away, then I’ll just go to the dentist but I’ll continue working later on into the afternoon.” (Henry, team leader, ConsultHealth).

Peter, a team member of Henry, also referred to work/family facilitation due to childcare. He emphasised that the privilege of FWA has to be reciprocated: “They very much expect you to jump to it when they need you so it’s got to be, you know, pay back, hasn’t it?”

Interestingly, informants at *ConsultHealth* generally mentioned to reciprocate the benefit of FWA via communal behaviour towards other team members rather than directly to the leader.

“I think there’s a feeling within the team that there is that reciprocation and, you know, sort of, you know, I’ll ask things of them and they’ll ask things of me, you know, that’s fine. Yeah. I don’t think they owe it but I, you know, I was away for three weeks so I said to two other members of the team, ‘Look, I can’t do anything on the annual report for the next three weeks. Do you mind taking over the responsibility for it?’ Yeah. That’s fine, so, you know, it works all right.” (Peter, team member, ConsultHealth).

In line with that, Angela, a team member of Susi at *ConsultHealth*, considers functioning of the work processes as more important than individual tit-for-that behaviours (cf., Cropanzano et al. 2017), She did not reciprocate via “counting the hours”, but applied a more cooperative exchange norm and even worked overtime on a regular basis without charging the hours because “I personally see it as one of the things of having the freedom to work flexibly, why I’ve got that perception I don’t know, but I just kind of expect that I will do additional hours.”. Only when the costs are perceived as higher than usual (for example when she misses out on spending some quality time with kids on the weekend), Angela applied score keeping:

“It’s tricky to say, if I’ve just done a couple of hours, I wouldn’t, I wouldn’t bother asking for it back. I think partly is if it’s impacted on my life. I remember one weekend I worked and I was, the kids were asking

me things and I was telling them to go away (laughs), ‘I’m working’ and you feel really bad because it’s the weekend and it’s not the time that you should be working. So on that occasion I made a note to myself, I am going to take this time back, so if it’s kind of had an impact on me, I think.” (Angela, team member, ConsultHealth).“

### 4.3 Relationship quality

Research shows that although the relationship with the supervisor is rarely affected, the relationships among team members are impaired when they intensively telework (Gajendran and Harrison 2007). Thus, FWA might lead to a potential impairment of relationship quality due to a reduction of (social) interactions and bonds which also influences employee perspectives and perceived benefits from FWA. In our study, the two organisations showed different underlying relational foundations when discussing reciprocal returns.

At *FinancePublic* (FWA as privilege), the underlying notion was to prioritise team over individual needs requiring team members to cover for each other—although not everybody had the same right to work flexibly. Several team leaders mentioned that team members felt some unfairness, envy, or mistrust of others who had FWA privilege. For example, team leader Olivia points out that team members monitor each other’s behaviours with respect to FWA. “Coworkers will see if someone isn’t working and mention that (...). So they’re their own worst enemy. They will tell on each other.” At the same time, team leaders and members emphasized social control and their trust in their coworkers to never exploit the privilege as Lily, Olivia’s team leader, emphasises:

“My incoming office manager starts at half seven every day, and doesn’t go home until after five, and that’s just the nature of his job, and he wouldn’t dream of leaving his team to cover for him.” (Lily, team leader, FinancePublic).

Role-modelling and covering for team members was a frequently mentioned reciprocal norm for both leaders and members at *FinancePublic*, and it was considered necessary to avoid the negative effect of social comparison among team members.

At *ConsultHealth* (FWA as norm), where FWA was prevalent and intensive, feelings of unfairness with regard to FWA were not mentioned in the interviews. Rather, efforts to nurture social relationships when members hardly meet face-to-face were the underlying notion in the interviews. The importance of regular face-to-face contacts and nurturing social relationships was made explicit. Michael, a team

member of Henry, recounted that members regularly sit together in monthly meetings as “you cannot leave it up to chance”. Despite the high prevalence of FWA, many leaders at *ConsultHealth* stressed that members have become more aware of the need to directly engage in conversations with others. Hence, leaders encouraged routines to foster relationship building through face-to-face contacts. For example, Michael’s team leader Henry initiated routines to increase personal contact with his team members:

“(…) that’s then I think incumbent more on me so people want this, okay, I go trundling around the laboratory just to say—have physical face to face, how’s it going, hello type of thing.” (Henry, team leader, ConsultHealth).

### 4.4 Findings in the light of social exchange theory

FWA were regarded as beneficial on various dimensions in all interviews. However, the accounts differed in the way FWA was instrumentalised. Some leaders explicitly shaped the belief that the initial ‘favour’ of granting FWA needs to be reciprocated. When reciprocation was explicitly mentioned, it followed unwritten homeomorphic ‘exchange norms’ (Gouldner 1960), i.e., leaders granted flexibility but requested flexibility in return. Likewise, members felt the need to ‘pay back’ and reciprocate in comparable terms. Even at *ConsultHealth*, where access to FWA was considered to be a norm and not necessarily based on specific needs such as commuting or childcare, team leaders shaped the belief that FWA is not a vested right but a privilege that can be lost again.

Thus, we assume: *Leaders actively shape their members’ beliefs in reciprocity for FWA.*

However, sometimes reciprocation was not explicitly, but rather implicitly seen as the driver for behaviour. In particular at *ConsultHealth*, where there was a lot of flexibility, the communal orientation and helping each other out was more focused on ensuring team or organizational functioning than on a perceived obligation to reciprocate for the FWA in comparable terms. At both organisations, we found accounts in teams where FWA were less instrumentalised. Moreover, exchanges and responses were not necessarily *active* behaviours such as higher performance or commitment as it is generally described in the flexibility literature following the exchange perspective (Kelliher and Anderson 2010). Rather, in specific teams, a sufficient return was to maintain the current level of performance and availability (and signalling it) and to withhold any negative behaviour during FWA (cf. Cropanzano et al. 2017). The more leaders stressed the view of FWA as an ‘economic exchange’ bargain and shared their perspective of FWA, the more we found similar beliefs in team members’ accounts, pointing



to the establishment of role-modelling and shared beliefs and routines regarding FWA irrespective of prevalence of FWA.

Thus, we assume: *The more leaders focus on reciprocity for FWA, the more will their team members focus on reciprocity when providing FWA for their team members (trickle down).*

Despite a high level of similarity between the two organisational contexts, we also revealed a contextual difference: At *ConsultHealth*, team members generally had a more communal orientation towards their organisation or other team members in order to ‘pay back’ the leader’s trust. This points to serial reciprocity (Moody 2008), where the benefit of FWA is not returned to the leaders themselves, but to other exchange referents in the organisation. At *FinancePublic* the exchange relationships were, overall, more dyadic and the leader was mostly viewed as the primary donor of FWA rather than the organisation. This may be because the leader grants the ‘privilege’ to selected employees only, which triggers more direct reciprocal behaviour. There, FWA had to be negotiated and argued with the leaders resulting in social comparison processes between employees enjoying the privilege to have access to FWA and those who do not have access.

Thus, we assume: *In case of high prevalence of FWA a communal exchange orientation is likely whereas in case of low prevalence of FWA an economic exchange orientation is more likely.*

## 5 Discussion

The aim of this paper was to investigate how FWA in hybrid work teams were perceived, and whether reciprocity beliefs and expected returns were negotiated differently depending on the prevalence of FWA. Interviews with leaders and members of ten hybrid teams in two organisations, where access to FWA was either a privilege for selected members or where FWA were highly prevalent, formed the basis of our analysis. This study is of high relevance, as not least due to the Covid-19 pandemic organisational policies on ‘FWA for all’ have become institutionalised and perceived entitlement limits leaders to deny the access to FWA and brings the question to the front how to effectively manage it in the team. Since our data were collected prior the pandemic, we could investigate the topic without risk to health when present in the office (cf., Sampat et al. 2022).

Our study contributes to the social exchange perspective (Cropanzano et al. 2017) and FWA research on i-deals (FWA) in the following ways: Firstly, we found empirical support for the widely resonated social exchange perspective (Blau 1964; Cropanzano et al. 2017) when FWA are granted via i-deals (Kelliher and Anderson 2010; Berkery

et al. 2020). In all hybrid teams, interviewees generally perceived FWA as a privilege that required them to provide a favour in return, often via flexibility; i.e., homeomorphic exchanges (Gouldner 1960; Mitchell et al. 2012). However, some members’ returns were not defined as an active increase in effort or commitment due to FWA, but rather maintaining (rather than increasing) the performance level, conceptualised as a withdrawal from negative behaviour such as taken long breaks while working from home (Cropanzano et al. 2017). Such passive exchange behaviours remain under-conceptualised in social exchange theory and the FWA literature. Moreover, we did find accounts where FWA were not explicitly negotiated as a benefit, neither by team leaders nor by their members.

The second contribution of this study deals with the role of the leader for shaping the exchange perspective. We showed that the respective team leaders were decisive in shaping FWA perceptions and the reciprocal behaviour by their members. Even when FWA were highly prevalent in teams (“FWA as norm”), some leaders requested returns and abolished the benefit when they saw the “golden rule of reciprocity” violated. The implication is that the type and extent of reciprocal exchange for an initiating action might largely depend on the leader’s attitude towards FWA and the leader’s specific requests. As such, leaders have the discretion to shape not only the value of the resource, but also the ‘exchange norms’ in their teams. This includes beliefs about why and when the FWA was granted, how ‘big’ the ‘favour’ or the expected return is, when the exchange rules are violated, and whether and how FWA can be lost again (e.g., by not showing communal orientation towards peers). Also, leaders may determine whether they require active positive exchanges (e.g., more effort, flexibility by the employee) or whether withholding of negative behaviours and maintaining the prior level of commitment or flexibility is a sufficient return. However, conceptualizing and communicating FWA as a bargain might raise ethical issues, as the leader’s behavioural integrity suffers from contingent reward and punishment (Hinkin and Schriesheim 2015). Notwithstanding the role of the leader, it needs to be taken into account that team members may also differ in their exchange behaviour depending on how much they value and benefit from FWA. As such, we recommend further (quantitative) research on how high valence of FWA (e.g., due to childcare flexibility) may lead to higher reciprocity beliefs and behaviours.

Third, the respective prevalence of the FWA in a team was less important for shaping beliefs and returns than expected. In particular for members’ behaviours regarding signalling availability/performance and reciprocating for more flexibility, we did not find substantial differences between the two organisational contexts. However, our findings indicate that the respective FWA prevalence matter for the

relationship quality in the team: When FWA was negotiated as privilege for selected members, leaders mentioned social comparison effects, and explicitly demanded covering up for other team members as return. In contrast, when FWA prevalence was high, members communal orientation towards other team members was more prevalent, not only to the leader but also towards the organisation and the team as a whole. This points to an easier institutionalisation of communal/cooperative exchanges (Clark and Mills 2012) when access to FWA is considered a norm rather than a privilege for a few. In contrast, social comparison effects between ‘privileged’ and ‘non-privileged’ members may increase ‘transactional’ and economic exchanges (including tit-for-tat and scorekeeping), and make it more difficult to develop trustful relationships and communal reciprocal behaviours in a team.

### 5.1 Implications for leaders

Working flexibly may have become standard for many knowledge workers, and this appears to have been accompanied with feelings of entitlement for access to FWA. However, this challenges team coordination, but little is known about how routines for effective cooperation might be established in hybrid teams (Baumgaertner and Hartner-Tiefenthaler 2022). Establishing routines for effective coordination and nurturing social relationships and team spirit is key for leaders of hybrid teams irrespective of FWA prevalence (Terkamo-Moisio et al. 2022; Sampat et al. 2022).

Depending on the social context, leaders need to apply control mechanisms other than a purely transactional exchange orientation and output control (Taskin and Edwards 2007) to influence team members’ behaviours and build trustful social exchange relationships in flexible work teams. When focusing solely on specific (behavioural) exchanges and output control of the remote worker, responsibility for challenges might not be effectively shared between leaders and members, and communal relationships between peers may be diminished. Moreover, when all employees work flexibly, the lack of presence in the office and direct exchange may reduce leaders’ ability to monitor employees, and the exchange relationships between peers may eventually become more important. However, as our study showed, even when FWA are considered as a vested right, leaders shaped employees’ beliefs and reciprocal behaviours. Despite its effectiveness of using FWA as a transactional good, we argue that caution is needed when FWA become over-instrumentalised as ‘privilege’ and members only return the benefit to the leader rather than to other team members or the organisation. Particularly when access to FWA remains distinct, leaders are challenged to foster communal orientation among their team members. This

is even more important, as often team members take over their leaders’ beliefs and routines, copying their leaders’ behaviour for managing their own team. However, further research should investigate whether copying leaders’ behaviour leads to actual internalisation within team members and team member emulation of the behaviour (social learning), or whether mirroring leaders’ (proactive and communal) behaviour is a way to reciprocate for FWA, i.e., as part of a social exchange transaction without an actual learning effect (Madison et al. 2020).

### 5.2 Limitations and further research

There are, however, some inevitable limitations to our approach. Both organisations differed regarding their organisational culture which is also reflected in FWA access and affects underlying beliefs about FWA. In the second organisation (knowledge workers) where members often had more ‘communal’ oriented exchange norms towards team members and the organization, dyadic and direct exchanges with the leader might play a less salient role than the dyadic leader-member-exchange relationships operational work settings (Chernyak-Hai and Rabenu 2018, Cooper-Thomas and Morrison 2018).

A further limitation might be that interview accounts are potentially shaped by effects of social desirability and impression management, i.e., not all reported behaviours and beliefs about reciprocity behaviour might have reflected real-life behaviour. To reduce this bias, we have asked the informants to also provide examples of such behaviours. Nonetheless, exploring team members’ beliefs via anonymous quantitative approaches could add further knowledge about team beliefs and behavioural dynamics within and across different hybrid teams.

Additionally, longitudinal data from a broader sample would allow further insights into processes that unfold dynamically (for example, whether the perceived obligation to return the ‘favour’ of FWA changes over time). One interesting avenue for further research would be the exploration of potential reciprocal relationships on a longitudinal perspective by also taking into account resource gain spirals (Hobfoll 2011).

To further delve into social exchange theory, further research should explore on the emergence of serial reciprocity chains, where the benefit of FWA is not returned to the perceived donor, but to other parties such as team members or the organisation as a whole. Privileged access to FWA via the leader may sustain the perception of the leader as sole exchange referent. Perceiving the leader as ‘donor’ and the sole social exchange referent could pose challenges for future hybrid work settings, especially for contexts that require teamwork or where all team members are entitled to flexible work via the organisational policy.

## 6 Conclusion

In organizations that provide FWA for their employees, direct team leaders often act as gatekeepers regarding the access to FWA. Our qualitative analysis adds further insight into the social exchange perspective of FWA. Irrespective of the prevalence of FWA, team leaders shape social exchange relationships among their team members, depending on how access to the valued resource of autonomy is granted, and whether it can be lost again. Leaders need to establish team routines to ensure team functioning by shaping beliefs (about reciprocity). They can and need to actively establish a sense of responsibility and proactivity among their members via routines and modelling behaviours both on- and offsite.

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