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## *Flexibility and Flows: Work Time, Commute Time and Getting in Line<sup>1</sup>*

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This article analyses the relationship between daily space and work (re)arrangements for more flexibility for worker-commuters, specifically organisational work-time adaptation and innovation in response to a sudden, prolonged interstate bridge closure. Human resources (HR) representatives at a small sample of organisations were interviewed regarding their employers' flexibility policies and practices, employees' use of flexibility options, their own use and their own experience of the catastrophic breakdown of the regional automobility system. Flexibility award winners adapted relatively seamlessly with one exception. Otherwise, adaptation occurred within limits, and some workers had to adapt personally. The HR representative's contradictory gatekeeping position was revealed as one that intersects organisation and community, not among the key urban actors who typically populate the scholarly literature.

**Keywords:** Commuting, human resources, organisational change, transportation, workplace flexibility.

### **Introduction**

Spatial form and social process are interrelated; configuration shapes activity, and social interaction creates the built environment. In capitalism's dynamic of expansion and crisis, new structures are built as old ones lose value over time (Harvey 1973, 1982, 2001). Sometimes, however, structures lose use-value precipitously and temporarily, as in cases of flood, fire, wind damage or other structural failure.

Time-space compression is a feature of capitalism's unrelenting search for profits (Harvey 1989). I assert that within compression there are moments of decompression — in this case resulting from sudden, prolonged unavailability of a bridge, engendering a conundrum for employers and workers: how does this calamity affect our workforce? How do I rearrange my life so I can get to work on time? Labour power as a commodity is distinctive in that it brings itself to market (Harvey 1982: 380).

This article analyses the relationship between daily space and work (re)arrangements for more flexibility for worker-commuters. Commuting to and from work marks most adults' day and is a key ritual of the urban experience. Arguably, consciousness of urban space is enhanced while traversing it. The 'rush' is a collective endeavour given form by local infrastructure.

Urban scholars often study local economies, but they do not go inside the employment relationship because that is the purview of other specialists. Here, however, the two broad specialties are joined in an investigation of a temporary reconfiguration that doubled, tripled and occasionally quadrupled normal 15- to 30-minute commutes. I analysed work-time adaptation and innovation during the unplanned five-month cross-river interstate bridge closure in the Louisville, Kentucky, USA area that disproportionately affected the 17% of the workforce that resided in southern Indiana (Pryor 2011). Four months after the bridge reopened there were incidental lane and ramp closures lasting several weeks during maintenance on a second cross-river interstate bridge in the nearby downtown area. A year later, construction on

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a new adjacent downtown cross-river interstate bridge began in earnest, disrupting the commute for two years. Although the organisational adaptations were specific to a local ‘decompression,’ they revealed the contradictory gatekeeping role of human resources officials, not among the key urban actors — politicians, business leaders, economic development practitioners, developers, school officials and community activists, for example — who typically populate the scholarly literature.

Flexible work has been studied as employer-provided benefits for work-family integration (see Negrey 2012 for a review of numerous studies) and as supply-side employer adaptations, such as part-time and temporary jobs (Katz and Krueger 2016, Negrey 2012). In this study, flexible arrangements are examined as organisational adaptations in response to a unique crisis in the organisation’s environment. On Friday 9 September 2011, one of two interstate bridges (one of three bridges in total) connecting to and in close proximity to the Louisville downtown area was closed during the evening commute by order of then-Indiana Governor Mitch Daniels upon the discovery a day prior, during a routine inspection, of two cracks in each of two steel support beams below the lower deck of the I-64 Sherman Minton Bridge, an east-west span over the Ohio River connecting the states of Indiana and Kentucky that had been built in 1962 (Quay et al. 2011). Anticipating extraordinary traffic congestion with the diversion of an estimated 90,000 vehicles per day from the Minton to the north-south I-65 John F. Kennedy Bridge (which normally carried 122,900 vehicles per day and routinely had its own congestion problems) and in close proximity to the Kennedy to the west, the north-south Clark Memorial Bridge (which connects surface streets and normally carried 21,900 vehicles per day), officials encouraged carpooling, staggered work times, telecommuting and no driving when possible during peak times. Then-Louisville Mayor Greg Fischer in particular urged employers to be as flexible as possible (Green 2011b, Green and Lord 2012, Lord 2012).

Louisville has become a distribution and logistics hub, arguably a key node of time-space compression (Cañedo 2016), since UPS located there in the 1980s and subsequently expanded its Worldport cargo sorting facility alongside expansion of the Louisville Muhammad Ali International Airport (Negrey et al. 2011). Fears of substantial business losses subsided when it was learned that bridge repairs would take about six months (Green 2011a, Otts 2011). Manufacturing and transport/warehousing, the two sectors most closely linked to logistics, accounted at the time for more than 100,000 jobs or about 20% of all employment in the 13 counties in Kentucky and Indiana that comprised the metro area. Large companies such as UPS and Ford adjusted and experienced no problems (in theory, multi-site businesses have options that small businesses and workers do not have, although this was not studied). Some smaller companies reported shipping schedule adjustments and additional costs of fuel and driver overtime (Otts 2011).

The Sherman Minton Bridge reopened in February 2012, offering some relief. Subsequently, during June and July 2012, there were lane closures on the north-south I-65 Kennedy Bridge and selected ramp closures nearby during maintenance that caused extraordinary congestion during peak times, even with some traffic diverted to the Minton Bridge. Local law enforcement encouraged area employers to stagger employees’ work hours.

In September 2013 construction began in earnest on a new span linking Kentucky and Indiana via I-65. This bridge, the Abraham Lincoln, opened in December 2015 and carried both north- and southbound traffic for a time while a new round of maintenance was done on the adjacent Kennedy Bridge. Since the Kennedy returned to normal use, it carries southbound traffic and the Lincoln northbound. This major construction required numerous lane and ramp reconfigurations, closures and detours, inconveniencing motorists on both sides of the river, while more than 60 overpasses and bridges were re/constructed, more than 60 new retaining walls were set and nearly 50 miles of new roadway were built (Shafer 2016). Drivers were advised to travel off peak if possible.

Flexibility is often informal and more common at small workplaces (Glass and Estes 1997, Glass and Fujimoto 1995). Flexible scheduling increased over time but reached a plateau; demand exceeds supply, and use would increase if there were no negative repercussions to doing so (Altman and Golden 2007; Galinsky et al. 2005; Negrey 2012: 115-116). During the COVID-19 pandemic, remote work tripled (U.S. Census Bureau 2022). In the sociology of work, studies of flexible arrangements are usually concerned with family, not transportation, although increasingly authors acknowledge broader work-life integration, but commuting is not a focus. In urban studies, transportation is a matter of infrastructure, land use and local conflict (regarding the Messina Bridge, for example, see Mollica 2012 and Sacco and Scotti 2013 in this journal) and not generally investigated in relationship to work routines, although commute times and congestion are topics in their own right. Urban theorist Manuel Castells' (2000) notion of 'space of flows,' electronic flows in the 'network society,' also applies to transportation flows on the ground. The preference herein for the organisation as a unit of analysis advances the idea of their social productivity in the urban context (McQuarrie and Marwell 2009), addresses their role as participants in automobility (Urry 2004, 2007) and recognizes them as a mezzo linkage of individuals and the broader spatial-temporal-social system. This study reflects the divergent interests among employees, of employees and organisations and the tensions and complexities of work and employment relations (Townsend et al. 2019).

Urry (2007: 46) developed the mobilities paradigm in the social sciences, arguing that social life involves continual processes of shifting between co-presence and distance from others, which depend in part on multiple technologies of travel and communications (Urry 2007: 46-47). These processes stem from five interdependent mobilities, among them corporeal travel, such as but not limited to daily commuting, physical movement of objects and communicative travel (Urry 2007: 47).

In the modern world, automobility — its vehicles and related infrastructure — is the most powerful mobility system (Urry 2007: 50-51), and the contemporary city is organised around 'the objective architectonic of motion' — traffic (Scanlan 2004; Urry 2007: 55). 'Wayfinding occurs without reflection except when systems breakdown' (Urry 2007: 55), then the system reveals itself while drivers are trapped in an 'iron bubble' (Urry 2007: 120). The car is a place we inhabit (Laurier et al. 2008), perhaps most evidently during traffic jams, as we live life along the motorway (Laurier 2004, Urry 2004). The car is simultaneously flexible and coercive,

forcing people to juggle tiny fragments of time so as to deal with the temporal and spatial constraints it itself generates while endeavouring to complete the day's many tasks (Urry 2007: 119-120, 123-124). Hagman (2006), by contrast, has argued we have never been mobile — the majority of car travellers are stuck in queues and commuters adjust habits to life in a queue.

Urry's roots are in the classical sociological theorizing of Georg Simmel, credited with the first attempt to develop a mobilities paradigm by analysing proximity, distance and movement in the modern city (Jensen 2006: 146; Urry 2007: 20). Path-building creates connections between places, 'freezing movement in a solid structure' (Simmel 1997: 171; Urry 2007: 20), reaching its zenith in bridges (Simmel 1997; Urry 2007: 20), which reorganise how people dwell and move (Heidegger 1993: 354; Urry 2007: 32).

Before the Sherman Minton Bridge closure, queues were predictable. Afterward, they became much longer by experience and local custom. Wayfinding and queuing became eventful in and of themselves similar to Bissell's (2007) notion of waiting-as-event. Stillness on a congested bridge permits feeling its movement — squeamish for those a bit phobic.

The reconfigured, retemporalised commute necessitated change in pre-travel planning, and new tie-ups led to new improvisation enroute (Peters et al. 2010). Improvisation could make matters worse, such as the morning a tractor-trailer crashed into a construction barrier and caught fire, shutting down that section of interstate, resulting in an unplanned tour of the countryside in pouring rain and very late arrival to destination (personal experience).

Sitting in traffic is experienced as a colossal waste of time; or it may be used productively in work-related calls and texts (Laurier 2004), calls and texts to family and friends, as a period of leisure while listening to music/radio and/or time of extended conversation among co-occupants of the car. Sitting in traffic is time to sit, however calmly or impatiently, with one's thoughts.

Ordinarily we conceive of work time and commute time as discrete, one beginning when the other ends. In lived experience, however, they are intricately related because the commute is the boundary between work and the rest of life, arguably an extension of work when, for example, mass transit riders work during the commute using mobile technologies. Managing life as a whole requires not only the integration of work via the work schedule but also the timing of the commute, when other household members may also be dropped off or picked up and errands run along the way, thus blurring the distinction between the commute and home (Jensen et al. 2015, McLaren 2018, Peters et al. 2010). During the Minton Bridge closure and subsequent Lincoln Bridge construction, timing the commute was more problematic than usual. While this 'decompression moment' took unique and specific dimensions in the Louisville area, it is a case illustration of similar difficulties that commuters experience in many places. In May 2021, for example, the I-40 Hernando DeSoto Bridge between Arkansas and Tennessee was closed to vehicular and barge traffic after a structural crack was discovered. On 28 January 2022, the Fern Hollow Bridge in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania collapsed, diverting almost 15,000 vehicles per day. Modernization of bridges is among the objectives of the recently enacted Biden administration infrastructure plan; such construction will surely disrupt workers' commutes.

## Methods

Urbanity expresses the multidimensionality of form and process and the relationship between micro and macro, in stasis and in change, in porous places we call cities (Cañedo 2016, Pardo and Prato 2018, Pardo et al. 2020, Thiessen 2011). Life is not lived in discrete conceptual blocks (Harvey 2001: 9). By interpreting lived experience, the holistic methods of qualitative sociology and classic anthropology (Pardo and Prato 2018, Pardo et al. 2020) are well suited to uncover this complexity in the deceptively mundane, such as the daily commute and the work schedule.

In addition to media accounts and implicit or explicit personal experience, this study analyses in-person semi-structured qualitative interviews I conducted in 2016 with human resources representatives at selected companies and organisations regarding the extent to which their employees were permitted to and used flexible work arrangements and/or telecommuting to adapt to the more difficult commute. HR representatives are in boundary-spanning roles that, despite the strain of role conflict inherent in them, link organisations to their environments and may aid adaptation to the environment by importing innovations to the organisation (Aldrich 2008: 263-264). Large companies and organisations ('major employers') in Louisville and southern Indiana were selected to maximise the likelihood of cross-river worker-commuters. These major employers were compared to a sample of companies and organisations that had won workplace flexibility awards near the time of but before the Minton Bridge closure. These award winners represented a local benchmark. I was particularly interested in organisations that offered few if any flexibility options prior to the 2011 bridge closure but acquiesced or expanded options in light of commuting difficulties of long duration. The question posed by Jiron and Imilan (2015) is turned on its head: how does flexibility change mobility practices becomes how do mobility practices change flexibility? Are employers willing to accommodate workers' reconfigured, retemporalised mobility? Insights were gained from this study regarding the distinctiveness of award recipients, major employers' history of workplace flexibility and (re)arrangements made by employers during the period of bridge closure/construction and for the future. It should be noted that none of the major employers were among the flexibility award recipients at the time of sample construction.

HR representatives were invited by phone or email to participate in the study. Interviews of 40 minutes to more than an hour were digitally recorded for accuracy, transcribed and coded by this author, then compared by categories of (1) award winners, (2) large Louisville employers and (3) large southern Indiana employers. The study was approved by the University of Louisville Institutional Review Board.

## Sample Characteristics

HR representatives from 13 organisations agreed to participate in the study. Six had won flexible workplace awards, four more than once. Among the large area employers selected to compare to the benchmark award recipients, four were among the largest employers in Louisville (two with establishments on both the Louisville and Indiana sides of the river) and three were among the largest employers just north of the Ohio River in southern Indiana. Of the 13 participating organisations, eight were private sector companies, four were in the public

sector and one was a non-profit. Two large employers had employees represented by labour unions. The award winners ranged in size from 19 to 30 employees, with one outlier at 300 — making them distinctive in their small size and consistent with literature cited above that workplace flexibility is more common in small organisations. The large Louisville employers ranged in size from approximately 5,000 to 17,000 employees; the large southern Indiana employers, approximately 900 to 1,800 employees. All of the organisations were in service-sector industries including education, health care, information technology, professional services, protective services and retail trade. Three — all award winners — had salary employees only; the other 10 cases employed both salaried and hourly workers. Among five award recipients (the sixth did not provide an estimate), the majority of employees resided in Kentucky except for one company that estimated a 50-50 split of Indiana and Kentucky residents. Among the other award winners that provided an estimate, the number of Indiana residents was small, ranging from one to nine. Only one of the four large Louisville employers ventured an estimate of residential distribution — 75% Kentucky and 25% Indiana. Two of the three large southern Indiana employers provided estimates — 85% to 90% Indiana in one case, 65% in the other. The latter reported that this was an increase from 55% a few years earlier. More on this in the discussion below regarding the impact of bridge closure and construction on commutes.

## **Flexibility Practices**

### *The Award Winners*

Five of the six award winners offered work from home/remote work options and flexible schedules. Two of them also offered flexible or short Fridays to offset overwork demands of busy seasons. One had terminated mandatory weekend hours. All five were office-based organisations. The sixth award winner was a relatively unique employment situation by comparison to the other five; its flexibility practices were specific to its jobs in the form of short-time ‘trades’ in an occupational setting where full-shift trades are normative.

I should add a caveat here. The award competition required organisations to submit employer and employee surveys, thus reflecting initiative and employee morale. Award winners were proud that they had won awards, leading them to be generally very receptive and responsive to my interview.

Flexibility practices among the award winners had been in place in some cases for at least five years and in others more than a decade. What was striking about the award winners was that in most cases flexibility was available to almost all if not all employees. One organisation made the flexibility options available only to full-time salaried staff; the part-time employees, who were not offered additional flexibility, were few in number at this worksite. Otherwise, HR representatives in this category tended to say things like, ‘Everyone can work remotely,’ or that formal and informal flexibility options were available to ‘anyone’. At perhaps the most flexible extreme, the representative had this to say:

‘[...] because of the way our cycles work here there’s not a one-size-fits-all that works well. We offer the flex schedules in terms of a reduced schedule; we have

probably 25%, 20% to 25% on some sort of reduced schedule. It could be 50% to 92% that's just changing their hours to make it work for them to people who have different workweeks, some 7 to 3 [...] I have one that works Monday through Thursday, takes Friday off. The 7 to 3 is at 100%; the Monday through Thursday is 80%. A lot of people will do that, just have unique schedules. What we really encourage is what we call fluidity. What works for me is not going to work for you. [...] We really try to be a liveable work solution; everybody's got different responsibilities; everybody's got different pressures. If you want to come in here and work all the time, that's great, but that's not our expectation. [...] If you're younger it's a little bit harder because you're brand new and you're learning the trade, so it's important to be around. But as you grow and reach higher levels you can pretty much set your schedule, just let everybody know; we do ask just be available in case a question pops up because you may have the institutional knowledge that someone else doesn't.'

Among the award winners, employee retention, and in one case recruitment, was a common theme for why the organisation offered flexibility options. This was stated explicitly by three of the HR representatives in this category. For example, one said, we're 'trying to keep the workforce stable to where we don't have a lot of transition. We invest time in training; we need to do something to keep you here.' According to another,

'the talent pool is so tough to find and keep that you have to be flexible. The millennials, the way they work, it's just a totally different world. [...] We have a [...] committee, they tell us when we're falling behind. I love this about this firm. While we're building a legacy, we're trying to shore up the future. We rely heavily on what they want to keep them here.'

Similarly, a different representative said, '[...] the market is tightening up on good talent; [...] we do experience more and more competition from other employers for that same talent pool, so in order to keep up with options available to them at other employers [...]. we need to be able to offer some of the same options.'

Two also mentioned the nature of their business, including early morning and evening events and work at odd hours serving international clients. One said flexibility is simply a trend because of the demands of busy lives. Another mentioned employee mental health, adding that 'we want people to enjoy their job.'

### *The Large Louisville Employers*

By definition, the large employers were more complex organisations with a greater variety of jobs. While these employers offered flexibility options, they applied to selected positions. All four large Louisville employers permitted remote work in positions, typically office or administrative, that could accommodate absence from the normal worksite. Three of the four also offered flexible schedules for certain appropriate positions. At a large retail company, part-time schedules were the most common form of flexibility for non-administrative employees.

Leaves of absence were also available there. At a health care organisation, flexible workweeks and a special weekend program were available to nurses.

Among this small sample of large Louisville employers, flexibility practices were formalised just four years earlier in one case. In another, longevity varied by union contract with one form of flexibility, leaves of absence, having ‘always’ been available. Work at home was described as having emerged organically with the spread of electronic technologies. In a third case, reduced workweeks with long daily shifts were ‘common’ in the industry. Eligibility varied by job position in each case, for example in a hospital setting by nurses, doctors and staff, and in one organisation the only other major guideline was that employees be full time, otherwise supervisors had discretion to grant flexibility (or not). Employee retention was mentioned by one HR representative in this category as a factor in offering flexibility options, who also noted that certain flexibility practices are common within the industry; in another distinctive case, the options were the result of a top-down initiative to make the workplace family-friendly. Although this HR representative did not explicitly mention retention, that theme is implied. Work at home to offset high gas prices (several years before the interview) was also mentioned by this person.

#### *The Large Southern Indiana Employers*

Work from home was also the common denominator among the three large southern Indiana employers in positions, typically administrative, that could accommodate it. Flexible schedules were also available in certain positions. Schools, in particular, offered non-teaching staff comp time; intermittent family/medical leave was also available; and had experimented with job sharing. A third organisation offered paid time off and ‘make-up flex,’ the latter reverse comp time permitting workers to make up missed hours during the same week.

At one of the large southern Indiana employers, some flexibility practices had been in place for more than a decade while others had been added within the last five years. In another case, flexibility practices had developed with electronic technologies over the course of the previous decade. At one organisation, eligibility was based on job classification. One of the three seemed to be resistant to anything more than very limited flexibility and, therefore, did not have a history per se of options. At this reluctant organisation, only salaried employees could work from home, and in many cases this ‘flexibility’ was work in the evening or on weekends for special projects that could not be completed in the office. This theme was also addressed as a reason for offering flexibility when the HR representative said, ‘You know how salary employees work.’ The HR representative at another organisation in this category pointed to employees’ lives outside work as the main factor in offering flexibility options.

#### **Usage Patterns**

Among the award winners, family; other personal reasons, such as recreation, community activity and retirement phase-out; and the nature of work were equally likely to be mentioned by interview participants as factors in workers’ use of flexibility options. When the nature of work was a factor, it was because jobs required offsite meetings with clients or attendance at offsite work-related events. The representatives of the large Louisville employers mentioned



family reasons most often. There was more variation among the large southern Indiana employers. While one mentioned child and elder care specifically, another saw no patterns among that organisation's employees. The third said 'varied personal reasons,' adding that 'so much consumerism happens 9 to 5, or 8 to 6.' This representative also commented on the impact of large-scale events on traffic.

The role of technology in facilitating usage was mentioned by eight of the 13 HR representatives; specifically, four of the six award winners, two of the four large Louisville employers and two of the three large southern Indiana employers. An HR representative in professional services summed it up quite succinctly when she said, 'Once technology allowed for all of this to happen, that's how it grew.' Another, in the same industry, said, 'We've got the greatest technology in the world; we can do our jobs from anywhere. We let people work how they want to work.'

### **Shermageddon**

Two Louisville native sons, Michael and David Harpe, inspired by 'carmageddon' in Los Angeles, created a shermageddon website soon after the Sherman Minton Bridge closure, and local media followed suit in naming 'shermageddon' when referencing the commuting catastrophe. Generally, according to media reports, drivers adapted by adjusting departure times, doubling up or carpooling and adjusting routes. At least one local entrepreneur slept at her business when inclement weather threatened during the winter. One couple had an elaborate plan — she stayed with their two sons with a friend in Louisville near their school and her job; he stayed at home in Indiana near his office and where their daughter attended preschool — that lasted less than a month. Then she and the boys adjusted schedules and coped with daily gridlock like so many others (Lord 2012). After several weeks of trial and error, I found my optimal route that reduced my commute from 45 to 35 minutes, normally a 15-minute ride. A colleague shared her optimal route home with me (we had different schedules and did not consider carpooling); I treated this information as a state secret. A cardiologist whose practice required him to cross the river frequently to see patients at hospitals on both sides purchased a 1966 Amphicar that allowed him to cross in four minutes ([www.whas11.com](http://www.whas11.com)). The Transit Authority of River City (TARC) made schedule and route adjustments and put more buses into service. For a time, pedestrian ferry service was available on weekday mornings and afternoons via the Spirit of Jefferson (McAdam 2011). Walking and bicycle riding are always options using the sidewalks on both sides of the non-interstate Clark Memorial Bridge from Jeffersonville, Indiana to downtown Louisville. During the weekday morning commute, one of two northbound lanes of the Clark Memorial Bridge was converted to southbound, thus adding a third southbound lane; the reverse was done in the evening. At the critical interstate juncture of I-265 eastbound and I-65 southbound in southern Indiana about six miles north of the I-65 Kennedy Bridge, the Indiana Department of Transportation (INDOT) added a lane to the ramp to ease congestion there. An experiment in regulating traffic flow, the installation of barriers on the Kennedy Bridge between the right lane for traffic exiting at the south end of the bridge to head east or west and the centre lane for traffic continuing south, essentially failed over time as

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drivers knocked them down so they could move from the centre lane to the right lane on the bridge, as they had always done. Although my commute did not require making that lane change, I was caught in the congestion many times, and in observing the experiment fail I supported barrier-free lanes in this instance. There was less congestion without the barriers. Crashes increased more than 20% along one section of I-65 in Louisville and tripled on the non-interstate Clark Memorial Bridge (Lord 2012) during the Minton closure.

When the Minton reopened, one motorist summed up the experience when she said, ‘I’m just excited to get the time back’ and that the bridge closure complicated her life and required ‘a lot more scheduling.’ She added, ‘I just learned that you had to get in line. Nobody was special. We all had to sit there and wait and we all had to do it together’ (Lord and Hershberg 2012).

From four of my interviews:

1: (During the closure — author) I just remember being stuck on the bridge and you could feel it shaking and it made me uneasy. Traffic would be backed up into Clarksville (on the north bank of the Ohio River — author). There were people going down to Brandenburg (43 miles southwest of Louisville — author) then coming back up.

2: Traffic (during construction — author) has been a little bit of a nightmare. We pretty much let people come and go as they want; there’s very few that have to be here, maybe the receptionist. The trick is when they change the traffic pattern on you and you don’t get much notice [...]; probably the hardest was when the Sherman Minton actually closed, but that was because no one could get anywhere.

3: (During construction — author) Right now it doesn’t matter if I leave at 4 or 5:30, I don’t know if I’m going to hit no traffic and be home in 30 minutes or one day it took me two and a half hours just to get across the bridge and another 45 minutes to get home and barely got home to put my kids in bed.

4: [...] downtown has been kind of a mess for a while. Every single day there’s people trapped on 64 and 71 coming in, calling in [...] so we deal with it every day [...] I know myself what time I need to leave the house or I’m in trouble [...].

In the immediate wake of the bridge closure, HR consultants and employment attorneys offered advice to help employers establish telecommuting and other arrangements, adjust schedules, organise carpools and create equitable policies and accountability (Ivey 2011). What, if anything, did employers do? Because the award winners already had flexibility practices in place, it would seem that those organisations could adapt relatively seamlessly. One reported no impact of the bridge closure but in this case it appears to have had less to do with its policies and practices and more to do with the geographic distribution of its employees. The other five award winners all reported that employees affected by the bridge closure flexed their hours. One company, however, discontinued its routine of daily morning staff meetings to plan each day’s work. Instead, it reorganised by holding only one weekly afternoon staff meeting and calling project-specific meetings as needed. This representative explained,

(During the closure — author) ‘[...] there were days it would take me two hours to get to work [...] the trick of finding the most elaborate route to avoid the stops; there were days you just couldn’t. If we’ve had any issues with our flex, it was when we started doing morning meetings and required everyone to be here [...] the owner said no more morning meetings. At first, I didn’t like that, but it’s really worked out. People know what they’re supposed to be working on when they get here; it’s already in the system. They’re not waiting for me to dole it out.’

Among the large Louisville employers, a variety of adaptations developed, most commonly flexible hours and/or work from home, depending on the position. Employees who could not flex their hours or work from home had to adjust and were expected to correct the problem if chronic lateness became an issue. At one organisation, under the force of a labour union contract, certain hourly employees would lose pay if they were late and they were not permitted to make up the time, although they could request a schedule change a few weeks in advance. Among the large southern Indiana employers, one employer permitted flexing hours and individualised, informal accommodation when the job would permit. The other two organisations expected employees to adjust. One case was particularly interesting in that the HR representative thought an increase in the percentage of that organisation’s employees residing in Indiana was a result of residential moves from Kentucky to Indiana. These residential moves could be in response to the bridge closure and/or in anticipation of tolls that would be charged on the Kennedy Bridge (converted to southbound only), the new Lincoln Bridge (northbound only), and the new east end bridge after construction (this construction linking I-265 in Indiana to I-265 in Kentucky where a bridge of any sort did not exist, began at about the same time as that for the downtown Lincoln Bridge — the two bridges were considered a single project, the Lincoln overseen by Kentucky, the east end overseen by Indiana — with the east end bridge completed in December 2016). One school representative discussed the effect of the bridge closure on school bus routes. Among all large employers in Louisville and southern Indiana, any work rearrangements were temporary to be returned to normal when commuting difficulties eased.

### **Monitoring, Naysayers and General Thoughts**

All award winners had means by which to monitor employees in flexible arrangements specific to the type of occupation and industry. Client billing was the check on those with billable hours. Formal arrangements negotiated with supervisors were a benchmark to establish accountability. Co-worker complaints exposed abuse. At one award winner, employees had a set amount of paid time off, and flexibility was utilised within that frame. This organisation also had electronic time tracking tied to specific projects. Among the large employers, monitoring seemed to be less formal, and study participants generally commented that productivity should not decrease. One large Louisville employer mentioned use of an electronic system; one large southern Indiana employer — of all organisations that participated in this study, the most reluctant to offer flexible arrangements — planned to install a time clock for monitoring hourly workers.

The award winners acknowledged that there may be naysayers in their midst, but they thought relatively few. At one award winner with a history of merging with smaller firms, culture clashes developed until merged-in employees became familiar with the company's work-flow technology. At another award winner, any resistance was said to be about how flexible arrangements would be implemented in practice, not the principle itself. One HR representative candidly admitted, 'If anybody [...] me,' when asked about naysayers at his award-winning company. He added, 'It drives me crazy . . . when someone's not here [...].'

At the large organisations, naysaying seemed to take the form of what one HR representative called 'fence-peeking.' Because they are large, with employees in many different types of positions, flexibility, to the extent it was available, was not available to all or on the same terms. Some employees were said to believe flexibility is 'unfair,' and some 'get upset when they are not able' to use flexible arrangements. Another HR representative commented that 'there are always cynics,' but that generally people understand their different roles.

As might be expected, the HR representatives at the award-winning organisations were for the most part strong proponents of flexible arrangements. One called them 'a great thing,' adding that they were 'a godsend' for her. Another said they are 'a necessity.' Both reiterated that they are valuable recruitment and retention tools. Another said they are 'vital to success.' And another believed flexibility has more effect on morale than financial incentives. The HR representatives at the large organisations were more nuanced in their comments, seemingly driven by consideration of the widely varied job duties of their employees. The general sentiment among them was 'do it when we can' and maintain productivity.

Some of the HR representatives shared personal experiences using the flexibility options available to them. One mentioned family issues that required leaving the office during the day. Another disclosed her own culture shock:

'I came from a different professional services background where it was very old school; you had to be there, be seen [...]. To walk into this environment was a little bit of a culture shock for me, too, but I can tell you where I am in my life and with my children it's been amazing; the value I get having that flex with my family and the job I love and everything else, I can't put a price on it because it's just that valuable to me. You don't always think about that when you're looking for an employer.'

A third said, 'I recognize the value personally so strongly that I feel like I advocate anywhere that is necessary to allowing other people to make their lives work in the same way whether it is for child care reasons or caring for parents or whatever. [...] Everybody has their lives to live.' And a fourth: 'I think [employer] is pretty generous. [...] because I'm in this department and have seen it. It's great because it allows people to do things [...].'

Finally,

'I'm going to speak from both sides. I was an hourly clerk, I've been in store management, now I'm in administration. I've seen all sides. When I was an hourly associate, I've seen the flex get better [...]. In terms of store management, I think that's less flex; [...] it's the nature of the business; [...] if that means working six

days a week, that's what we do; in terms of administration, this is probably the most flex in the company because we have the option to work from home [...] as long as I'm taking care of business my boss isn't going to question.'

## Conclusion

This study investigated work (re)arrangements in the context of reconfigured, retemporalised commutes associated with a five-month cross-river interstate bridge closure that bled into several months of disruptive maintenance work on a second cross-river interstate bridge nearby and an additional two years of disruption associated with construction of a new adjacent cross-river interstate bridge.

Interviews were conducted with HR representatives from a sample of companies and organisations that had won flexible workplace awards and large (non-winner) organisations selected to maximise the likelihood of cross-river worker-commuters. Award winners provided a local benchmark of flexibility practices, but they were fundamentally different from the large employers by virtue of their small size. Among the award winners, flexibility options were available to almost all if not all employees with recruitment and retention concerns being a common theme. Flexibility policies were generally formalised, and options had been available five to ten years or more. The large employers were more complex organisations; thus, flexibility options were available to employees selectively, depending on position and contract where labour unions existed. Some options had been available a decade or more and were relatively well formalised; others were newer and informal. As such, innovations occurred on the margins of formality in cases of expanding options, or informality reigned where few options existed. These new options often emerged organically, facilitated by electronic technologies. Family and other personal reasons were common factors in usage of flexibility options within all organisations in this study, often facilitated by electronic technologies.

My particular question regarded organisational work-time adaptation and innovation in response to the sudden, prolonged bridge closure. The award winners adapted relatively seamlessly with little need for change because policies and practices were well established and most all employees were eligible to use them. The one exception was the company that terminated its practice of daily morning meetings, substituting one weekly afternoon meeting and project-specific meetings as necessary. Among the large employers, accommodation occurred within the limits of existing selective flexibility options and changes were agreed to be temporary. Workers whose occupations were beyond the reach of their employers' flexibility options had to adapt personally in whatever ways they could. Surprisingly, the HR representative at one large employer in southern Indiana speculated that an increase in the percentage of its employees living in Indiana was the result of residential moves from Kentucky.

Among the award winners there were few if any naysayers known to the HR representatives; the large-employer HR representatives spoke of 'fence-peekers,' as dubbed by one of them, who complained of injustice when flexibility options are available to some but not others, even when the occupational basis of such different treatment might seem reasonable.

The contradictory position (Wright 1976) of the HR representative became apparent in this study in that they are simultaneously enforcers of organisational policies and employees subject to the same policies. Some were able to avail themselves of their employers' flexibility options, others less so because they needed to be onsite to serve other employees. At what I called the reluctant organisation, where flexibility options were few, limited to use of vacation time, family/medical leave and part-time hours, the HR representative explained her ambivalence about flexibility:

'I do think you have to be careful with it. It's a very good thing for employees with the society today, but you do have to be careful to maintain accountability, to make sure they're trustworthy and that you trust them to do the work that they're set out to do. To me, as long as they get the job done, that would be fine with me. But it's all in how people perceive it. If they saw me out on a golf course two days a week and it came back, I would lose a lot of credibility even though I was sitting up most of the night doing my work; especially if you are in a lead role or in a management position, you are always being watched. You have to be careful to be that role model for everyone. I always err on the side of the employer; I will never short-change my employer. As long as people do that, I think it's fine to let them be flexible.'

Yet she could imagine more flexibility in clerical positions:

'I think it could be a very good thing for the mothers or fathers who want to spend more time with their children or need that flex to lessen the day care need [...] because that is so expensive these days. It's hard for a clerical person just to work. I think it would be good to allow that flex in a lot of cases.'

In this analysis of space-time-process, digital flow literally saved the day among those who could work remotely. For others, to construe decompression as relaxation would be wrong. The difficult commute was frustrating. Normal temporal structures were in conflict with reconfigured, retemporalised space; time was experienced as lost in an era when time-space compression is so tight (euphemistically, the time-squeeze) that daily life cannot absorb a rupture of significant duration without work and/or other rearrangements. The interview quote above suggests that HR representatives, as gatekeepers, could also be advocates for change. More workers are working remotely in light of the COVID-19 pandemic, and urban patterns are being transformed consequently. What organisations do and do not permit in terms of flexible hours and remote work will continue to affect workers' employment and life routines and their use of urban space. Human resources representatives will be critical agents in establishing and enforcing workplace policies that facilitate, or not, flexibility; in adjudicating the competing interests of employees among themselves as well as vis-à-vis the organisation; in enforcing employment laws; and, surprisingly perhaps, transforming urbanity.

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