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Flexible Work as a Political Allocation of Career Opportunity

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Abstract

Flexible work is commonly framed as an employee benefit, a work-design choice, or a productivity arrangement. These framings understate how organizations distribute access to flexibility and how its use may reshape access to information, visibility, managerial support, and career-relevant opportunities. This original conceptual theory article develops a proposed Politics-of-Flexibility Theory to explain how formal arrangements may become an organizational allocation regime. The theory links four proposed mechanisms: a flexibility eligibility gate, an informal information channel, an evaluative visibility filter, and a managerial discretion converter. Together, these mechanisms may influence employees' access to developmental assignments, consequential voice, influential relationships, sponsorship, recognition, and advancement consideration. The article distinguishes formal permission from effective access, visibility from performance, individual preference from organizational allocation, and career opportunity from realized career outcomes. It further proposes that repeated differences in information, evaluation, and sponsorship may produce cumulative opportunity drift, while transparent eligibility, persistent information practices, output-relevant evaluation, auditable opportunity allocation, and shared managerial accountability may interrupt that process. The theory does not presume that flexible work is inherently harmful or that managerial discretion is necessarily illegitimate. Its relationships are conditional on occupational status, task feasibility, team interdependence, remote-work intensity, career stage, organizational culture, technological affordances, and national context. Testing requires longitudinal, multilevel, experimental, network, and qualitative designs that separate selection effects from organizational conversion processes. The contribution is a bounded theory of how flexibility may become politically consequential for careers without claiming causal validation or universal applicability.

Keywords: The politics behind flexible work, Unequal access to informal information, Visibility bias and career risk, Managerial discretion and informal control, Equity-oriented organizational responses, Flexible

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Introduction

Flexible work is often discussed as though an organization first decides whether to offer it and employees then decide whether to use it. That sequence obscures the organizational processes between nominal availability and substantive career consequences. Access to flexibility, control over its form, and the resources available to make it workable vary across occupational status positions [1]. Flexible work is therefore not only a private arrangement between an employee and a job. It is also embedded in hierarchies that determine whose work can move, whose schedule can change, and whose absence from shared space remains professionally legitimate.



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The political character of flexibility becomes clearer when use carries interpretive costs. Employees may anticipate that flexible working signals lower commitment, weaker ambition, or reduced suitability for advancement, and those perceptions can be gendered [2]. Such stigma matters even when formal policy is neutral because employees act under expectations about how managers and colleagues will interpret their choices. The organizational problem is not simply whether flexibility exists, but whether employees can use it without surrendering access to recognition, developmental work, influential relationships, or favorable assumptions about future potential.

A benefit-centered framing is also incomplete because flexible arrangements can generate adverse consequences alongside autonomy and work-life gains [3]. Isolation, intensified availability, blurred boundaries, and reduced informal contact may be produced by the same arrangements that reduce commuting or increase schedule control. These outcomes should not be treated as inevitable. Their coexistence instead indicates that flexible work is configured through organizational systems, social expectations, and work practices that can distribute benefits and burdens unevenly.

Gender and institutional conditions further shape how flexibility is enacted and evaluated [4]. Yet a political account should not reduce the issue to gender alone or assume that all caregivers experience flexibility similarly. Occupational position, task design, team dependence, managerial trust, career stage, and national norms can alter both access and consequence. The relevant unit is therefore not only the flexible worker. It includes the manager granting or interpreting flexibility, the team redistributing coordination, and the organization defining legitimate presence and contribution.

This article develops an original, non-empirical theory of flexible work as a political allocation of career opportunity. Organizations can reproduce inequality through routine practices that appear administratively ordinary rather than explicitly exclusionary [5]. Building on that premise, the article proposes that flexibility becomes politically consequential when formal rules are converted through information access, visibility judgements, and managerial discretion. The proposed Politics-of-Flexibility Theory integrates these mechanisms without assuming that they form a validated causal chain. Its purpose is to specify constructs, propositions, rival explanations, and decision boundaries that can be tested, challenged, or rejected.

Flexible work as an allocation system

Flexible work can expand opportunity when it relaxes unnecessary geographic constraints. In a bounded high-skill setting, geographic flexibility was associated with productivity gains after employees were permitted to work from a wider range of locations [6]. This finding establishes an important countercase to penalty-only accounts. Flexibility may increase access to suitable places, reduce mobility constraints, and enable organizations to retain specialized labor. It does not, however, establish that the opportunity to obtain flexibility or convert it into career advantage is equally distributed across jobs or employees.

Randomized field evidence likewise shows that hybrid work can improve retention without damaging measured performance in a particular organizational setting [7]. That result challenges assumptions that physical absence necessarily reduces contribution. Yet measured performance and retention are not equivalent to career opportunity. Employees can meet output expectations while receiving fewer developmental assignments, less sponsorship, or weaker access to influential networks. A theory of allocation must therefore examine what is distributed beyond the arrangement itself.

Career consequences appear conditional rather than uniform. Telecommuting's relationship with objective career success varies with factors such as intensity, workplace normativity, and face time [8]. These conditions suggest that flexibility is evaluated relative to local expectations. The same schedule may be ordinary in one team and interpreted as deviant in another. Selection also remains plausible: trusted, experienced, or already successful employees may obtain more flexibility, while roles with limited advancement pathways may be overrepresented among remote arrangements.

Allocation also occurs through individualized negotiation. Flexibility i-deals are personally negotiated arrangements whose value depends on organizational support and surrounding demands [9]. Such agreements can accommodate heterogeneous needs, but they can also make access dependent on bargaining confidence, supervisor relationships, replaceability, or perceived worth. The existence of discretion does not prove unfairness. It does show that nominally similar employees may encounter different pathways to effective flexibility.

Accordingly, this article proposes a flexible-work allocation system as the combined formal and enacted processes through which employees obtain, use, and retain flexibility and through which that flexibility affects career-relevant resources. The construct extends occupationally stratified access [1] by incorporating team configuration, managerial approval, technological support, and evaluative consequences. It distinguishes policy availability from effective access and employee autonomy from organizational responsibility for coordination. The allocation-system interpretation is proposed rather than established and requires direct comparison of eligibility, uptake, work design, and downstream opportunity.

Unequal access to informal information

Flexible work can alter the structure through which organizational information travels. Large-scale digital-trace evidence indicates that remote work may make collaboration networks more siloed and less dynamically connected across groups [10].

Such network change does not reveal the content or career value of every interaction. It nevertheless raises a specific organizational question: whether some employees become less likely to encounter early, tacit, interpretive, or relational information that is rarely captured in formal systems.

Information access should not be reduced to message volume. Communication quality and supervisor expectation-setting can matter more than frequency for remote-worker adjustment [11]. Repeated meetings or messages may create visibility and workload without delivering context, candid feedback, or opportunity awareness. Conversely, deliberate explanation, clear response norms, and purposeful inclusion may preserve access even when coworkers are rarely colocated. The proposed mechanism concerns consequential information, not the preservation of every spontaneous office interaction.

Technology creates possibilities rather than automatic equivalence. An affordance perspective shows that digital tools can support coordination, documentation, and connection while constraining other forms of team interaction [12]. A platform may make messages persistent yet leave employees uncertain about which conversations matter, who has decision authority, or how informal interpretations are formed. Technological capability should therefore be separated from social access and legitimate influence. Digital availability does not itself ensure that employees receive the information needed to shape decisions or pursue opportunities.

The location of coworkers also matters. Home-working patterns can be associated with individual and team performance, indicating that flexibility is a team configuration rather than only an individual choice [13]. A worker's access may depend on who else is remote, where managers are located, how interdependent tasks are, and whether important exchanges are documented. These cross-level dependencies caution against attributing outcomes solely to personal preference or self-management.

This article therefore proposes an informal information channel: the organizational process through which employees gain timely access to uncoded, unscheduled, relational, and interpretive knowledge relevant to task understanding and career opportunity. Remote-work network evidence supports the plausibility of altered access [10], but it does not establish that remote employees universally receive less information or experience career disadvantage. The channel may be strengthened by persistent documentation, intentional bridging, high-quality communication, and distributed decision practices. It may also be irrelevant where work is highly codified, opportunities are transparently posted, and evaluation is independent of informal relationships.

Visibility bias and career risk

When work is distributed, employees may attempt to replace physical copresence with costly signals of availability and commitment. Qualitative evidence shows how workers can produce face time through sacrifice, responsiveness, and strategic presence in order to attract evaluator attention [14]. Such behavior demonstrates that visibility is actively constructed rather than passively observed. It does not show that every manager rewards presence or that all distributed workers engage in signalling.

Visibility becomes politically consequential when observable cues are treated as evidence of potential. Experimental evidence indicates that deviation from ideal-worker expectations can reduce anticipated career success [15]. These judgements may reflect assumptions about unrestricted availability rather than demonstrated performance. The distinction is critical: career risk concerns exposure to less favorable recognition or opportunity, whereas an actual career penalty requires observed differences in assignments, pay, promotion, or sponsorship.

Flexibility stigma is also context dependent. Cross-national evidence shows that national settings can shift the extent to which flexible workers are stigmatized [16]. Organizational cultures, labor-market institutions, and policy norms can therefore alter how a similar arrangement is interpreted. National patterns are probabilistic rather than deterministic, and within-country variation may remain substantial.

Digital visibility does not resolve the problem automatically. Longitudinal evidence links communication visibility and persistence with stress and technology-assisted supplemental work [17]. Increased observability may generate additional responsiveness without proving greater contribution or career value. Digital traces can capture activity while omitting task difficulty, relational labor, judgment quality, and work completed outside visible platforms.

Visibility-related career risk is conditional on telework intensity and normativity, ideal-worker expectations, and the national context in which flexible work is interpreted [8, 15, 16]. The proposed construct of visibility bias refers specifically to disproportionate reliance on presence, responsiveness, communication traces, or sacrifice as proxies for contribution, commitment, or potential when those signals are incompletely diagnostic. It does not imply that visibility is irrelevant: some roles require timely coordination, accessibility, or observable leadership.

Table 1 organizes the evidence, constructs, relationships, uncertainties, and boundary conditions required for definitions, constructs, and conceptual boundaries for flexible work as a political allocation of career opportunity.

Table 1. Definitions, constructs, and conceptual boundaries for Flexible Work as a Political Allocation of Career Opportunity.

Construct or component	Definition	Problem addressed	Distinction from adjacent concepts	Proposed role	Uncertainty	Boundary statement
Formal flexibility	Official schedule or location options.	Nominal access.	Policy, not use.	Input condition.	Eligibility may vary.	Availability is not effective access.
Enacted flexibility	Arrangement employees can obtain and sustain.	Policy–practice gap.	Use, not preference.	Proposed allocation outcome.	Bargaining effects remain unclear.	Does not imply unfairness.
Allocation system	Rules, exceptions, technologies, and judgements distributing flexibility.	Fragmented benefit framing.	Broader than work design.	Proposed core construct.	Requires direct measurement.	Not every system is unequal.
Informal information channel	Access to tacit, unscheduled, interpretive knowledge.	Unequal opportunity awareness.	Not message volume.	Proposed mechanism.	Content is rarely observed.	Network change is not career harm.
Evaluative visibility	Observable presence, responsiveness, or communication traces.	Limited evaluator information.	Visibility is not performance.	Evidence-grounded input.	Signals may be diagnostic.	Presence can be job relevant.
Visibility bias	Overreliance on weakly diagnostic visibility cues.	Misattributed merit or commitment.	Bias, not mere observability.	Proposed filter.	Actual decisions need testing.	Risk is not realized penalty.
Managerial discretion	Latitude in permission, assignment, feedback, and evaluation.	Formal rules require enactment.	Discretion is not arbitrariness.	Proposed converter.	Can enable accommodation.	Manager motives cannot be presumed.
Career-opportunity portfolio	Access to learning, voice, networks, sponsorship, recognition, and advancement consideration.	Narrow focus on promotion.	Opportunity is not realized success.	Proposed outcome domain.	Components need validation.	No guaranteed career effect.

Table 1 clarifies that visibility bias is narrower than visibility itself and that career opportunity is broader than promotion but more specific than general well-being. The evidence supports conditional evaluative risk, not the proposition that flexible workers are less capable, less committed, or universally disadvantaged. These boundaries preserve room for legitimate coordination needs, positive flexibility effects, and organizational settings in which information and opportunity are distributed transparently.

Managerial discretion and informal control

Formal flexibility policies rarely specify every circumstance in which an arrangement will be approved, modified, or treated as legitimate. Managers therefore retain latitude over permission, coordination expectations, and the conditions attached to use. Policy-capturing evidence indicates that mistrust, anticipated coordination difficulty, fairness concerns, and employee or job characteristics can shape willingness to allow telework [18]. These judgements may protect legitimate operational needs, but they can also make effective access dependent on assumptions that are not applied consistently.

Discretion continues after permission is granted. Employees and supervisors may disagree about whether supportive behavior has occurred, and the implications of that disagreement depend partly on segmentation preferences and work–family culture [19]. Formal permission can therefore coexist with expectations of constant responsiveness, attendance at poorly timed meetings, or private negotiation of exceptions. Informal control operates through these unwritten signals. It can transfer responsibility for making flexibility workable from the organization to the employee while preserving managerial authority over whether the employee appears cooperative.

Schedule-flexibility i-deals illustrate the constructive and unequal potential of discretion. Such arrangements may mediate relationships between supervisor emotional support and employee outcomes [20]. A manager can use latitude to accommodate heterogeneous needs that a standardized rule cannot anticipate. The same process, however, may favor employees with stronger bargaining positions, closer relationships, or greater perceived replaceability. Statistical mediation does not establish a causal negotiation sequence, and individualized agreements do not by themselves demonstrate inequity.

Informal control can also be distributed across teams rather than imposed by a single manager. Colleagues may schedule consequential discussions around copresent members, reward rapid replies, or interpret absence from optional gatherings as weak identification. These practices can emerge without explicit intent and can disadvantage office-based employees whose schedules differ from dominant rhythms as well as remote workers. The relevant comparison is therefore not remote versus

present in the abstract, but whose arrangement aligns with the temporal and relational pattern through which work, attention, and opportunity are organized.

This article proposes a managerial discretion converter: the process through which managers translate formal flexibility, available information, and evaluative impressions into assignments, feedback, sponsorship, recognition, and advancement consideration. It is paired with informal control, defined as unwritten expectations that shape where, when, and how visibly employees work despite nominal flexibility. The converter is not presumed to be arbitrary or harmful. Its political significance arises when comparable contributions receive different opportunity consequences because access, interpretation, or accountability differs. Direct testing must separate warranted job-specific judgement from relational favoritism, unsupported mistrust, and unequal administrative burden.

Proposed politics-of-flexibility theory

Managerial evaluation is not a neutral endpoint at which objective merit is simply recognized. Managers can differ in how they understand and apply merit, thereby shaping which evidence is treated as relevant and which employees are judged deserving [21]. In flexible work, this interpretive process may determine whether reduced presence is read as autonomy, weak commitment, efficient work design, or diminished leadership potential. The theory therefore treats evaluation as an organizational conversion process rather than a transparent reflection of contribution.

Career opportunity is also relational. Organizational inequality emerges through status and power relations that structure access to resources and claims on those resources [22]. Politics-of-Flexibility Theory accordingly defines career opportunity as a proposed portfolio comprising developmental assignments, learning access, consequential voice, influential relationships, sponsorship, recognition, and promotion or pay consideration. An employee may perform effectively yet possess a narrower portfolio because opportunity is allocated before formal career outcomes become visible.

Figure 1 presents the original conceptual synthesis for politics-of-flexibility theory, showing how the article's principal constructs, mechanisms, uncertainties, and decision boundaries are connected.

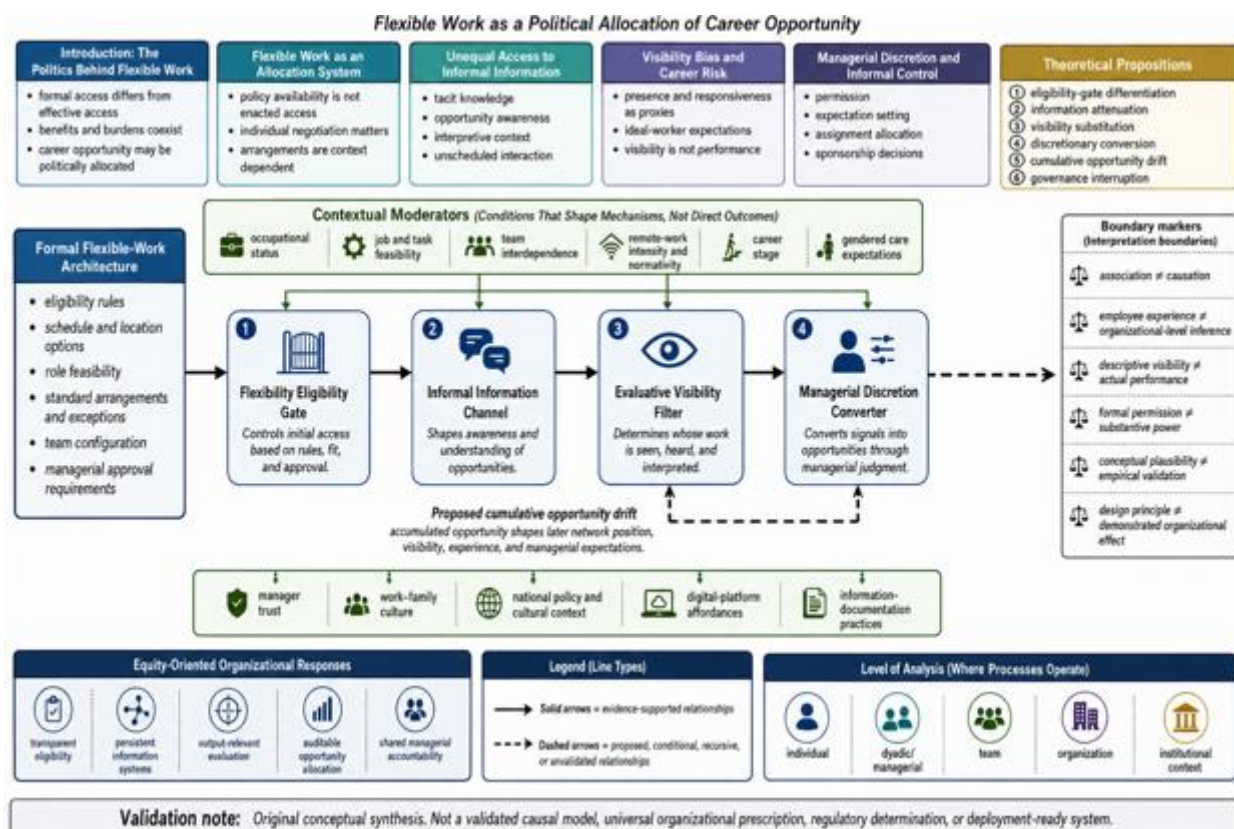


Figure 1. Politics-of-Flexibility Theory

Organizational allocations can connect workplace advantage to wider patterns of inequality, although market and institutional forces also matter [23]. The theory does not claim that flexible work independently produces societal inequality. It proposes a narrower sequence: formal flexibility passes through an eligibility gate, an informal information channel, an evaluative visibility filter, and a managerial discretion converter before contributing to a career-opportunity portfolio. Remote work also creates physical, material, social, and symbolic forms of distance that should not be collapsed into a single binary condition [24].

The proposed theory treats opportunity as a relationally produced organizational resource shaped by inequality-reproducing practices, enacted merit, and status-power relations [5, 21, 22]. Solid relationships in the theory are grounded in reported associations or established conceptual distinctions. Dashed relationships identify proposed conversions, conditional pathways, or feedback processes. The central feedback process, cumulative opportunity drift, suggests that earlier differences in assignments, relationships, and recognition may influence later experience, visibility, and managerial expectations. This process is plausible but unvalidated; it may disappear after prior performance, employee preferences, role feasibility, or team structure are controlled.

The four mechanisms are analytically distinct. An employee may pass the eligibility gate yet lose information access; receive adequate information yet face a weakly diagnostic visibility filter; or remain visible while managerial conversion limits sponsorship. Conversely, strong documentation or distributed leadership may interrupt one mechanism without changing the others. Treating the mechanisms separately permits evidence to disconfirm one pathway without requiring rejection of the entire theory and avoids attributing every flexible-work difference to a single hidden political process.

Table 2 organizes the evidence, constructs, relationships, uncertainties, and boundary conditions required for proposed mechanisms, relationships, and organizational consequences in flexible work as a political allocation of career opportunity.

Table 2. Proposed mechanisms, relationships, and organizational consequences in Flexible Work as a Political Allocation of Career Opportunity.

Mechanism or relationship	Antecedent	Mediator or process	Moderator	Expected consequence	Rival explanation	Validation requirement
Eligibility-gate differentiation	Formal policy and approval need	Legitimacy and bargaining	Status; role feasibility	Unequal effective access	Employee preference or job necessity	Matched eligibility and approval records
Informal-information attenuation	Spatial or temporal separation	Reduced tacit and relational exposure	Team design; documentation	Unequal opportunity awareness	Task or crisis disruption	Longitudinal network-content analysis
Visibility substitution	Reduced copresence	Reliance on presence or digital traces	Normativity; career stage	Visibility–performance decoupling	Genuine coordination requirements	Performance-controlled audit studies
Discretionary conversion	Managerial latitude	Assignment, feedback, and sponsorship decisions	Trust; culture	Differentiated opportunity portfolios	Prior performance or readiness	Multisource longitudinal decision data
Team opportunity asymmetry	Mixed work locations	Coordination and relational concentration	Interdependence; dispersion	Unequal developmental access	Team composition	Multilevel team comparisons
Cumulative opportunity drift, proposed	Repeated small allocation differences	Accumulated experience and network position	Mobility systems	Divergent later opportunity	Stable individual differences	Sequence and fixed-effects designs
Governance interruption, proposed	Transparent and accountable practices	Reduced informal dependence	Institutional context	More comparable access	General management quality	Staggered field interventions
Countervailing benefit pathway	Geographic or schedule flexibility	Autonomy and constraint reduction	Work design	Retention or productivity benefits	Worker selection	Replication across occupations

Table 2 presents expected consequences rather than demonstrated effects. The proposed mechanisms may operate simultaneously, offset one another, or fail under transparent opportunity systems. The theory is therefore a testable organizing account, not an assertion that flexible work follows one inevitable trajectory.

Theoretical propositions

Politics-of-Flexibility Theory is multilevel because opportunity can be altered by employee use, manager interpretation, team configuration, organizational systems, and national institutions. Virtual-team leadership research similarly indicates that dispersed work requires attention to individual, dyadic, team, and organizational processes [25]. A perception reported by an employee cannot by itself establish a managerial motive, and an organizational policy cannot establish how every team enacts it.

Proposition 1: Eligibility-gate differentiation. Greater dependence on discretionary or individually negotiated approval will be associated with greater variation in effective flexibility access across occupational status, role feasibility, and manager–employee relationships.

Proposition 2: Information attenuation. Greater spatial or temporal separation will be associated with reduced access to informal career-relevant information when intentional bridging, communication quality, and persistent documentation are insufficient.

These propositions may be rejected where eligibility is automatic or consequential information is fully accessible. Testing should distinguish nominal entitlement, requests, approvals, continued use, and the perceived legitimacy of use rather than treating policy availability as a complete exposure measure.

Work design provides an important moderator and rival explanation. Remote-work effectiveness depends on demands and resources such as autonomy, social support, workload, monitoring, and self-discipline rather than location alone [26].

Proposition 3: Visibility substitution. As physical copresence declines, evaluators will rely more heavily on alternative visibility signals; when those signals are weakly diagnostic, visibility–performance decoupling will increase.

The proposition should fail where outputs are observable, roles require legitimate availability, or evaluators have high-quality performance information.

Proposition 4: Discretionary conversion. Manager trust, support, and evaluative approach will condition whether flexibility is converted into continued developmental opportunity or restricted to schedule accommodation.

Proposition 5: Cumulative opportunity drift. Repeated differences in information, assignments, recognition, and sponsorship will compound into divergent opportunity portfolios, conditional on career stage, team normativity, task interdependence, and mobility systems.

Both propositions require temporal data; cross-sectional associations cannot distinguish accumulation from stable differences in ability, preference, or prior standing.

Remote-work consequences are multidimensional and context dependent, and well-being findings cannot substitute for career evidence [27].

Proposition 6: Governance interruption. Transparent eligibility, outcome-relevant evaluation, persistent information systems, auditable opportunity allocation, and shared managerial accountability will weaken dependence on informal conversion mechanisms.

This is a proposed, partly normative proposition. It may fail if documentation increases surveillance, formalization entrenches biased criteria, or managers circumvent procedures. All six propositions remain falsifiable and do not establish universal direction, magnitude, or managerial readiness.

Testing should also distinguish opportunity availability from opportunity take-up. Employees may decline travel, leadership, or developmental assignments for legitimate reasons, while managers may anticipate such preferences without asking. Research should therefore measure offers, refusals, eligibility, and allocation decisions separately. This distinction prevents a lower observed participation rate from being interpreted automatically as exclusion and allows reciprocal employee–organization adaptation to be examined without collapsing agency into managerial control.

Equity-Oriented Organizational Responses

Equity-oriented responses should target the conversion processes rather than assume that equal policy wording creates equal opportunity. Evidence from an employer work–family program shows that workers within the same nominally eligible group can differ in program activation and labor-market attachment because relevant networks differ [28]. Although that setting is not identical to flexible work, it supports a transferable warning: access on paper may remain ineffective when employees lack relational pathways to use a program safely or successfully.

Organizational culture also operates within institutional contexts. Cross-national evidence indicates that family-supportive culture, work–family balance satisfaction, and turnover intentions are related in ways conditioned by government effectiveness [29]. This does not establish a universal institutional mechanism. It suggests that organizations should test whether a practice that legitimizes flexibility in one setting produces comparable expectations, trust, or employee protection elsewhere.

Supervisor behavior should therefore be embedded in organizational infrastructure rather than treated as a stand-alone interpersonal solution. Family-supportive supervisor behavior and organizational culture jointly relate to engagement and performance [30]. These outcomes are not evidence of career equality, but the study supports combining manager capability with system-level reinforcement. Effective responses should combine program architecture, supportive organizational culture, and supervisor behavior rather than rely on nominal policy availability alone [28-30].

The theory yields bounded design principles: publish eligibility and exception criteria; design flexibility at team level; document consequential decisions and opportunity information; structure access to developmental assignments and sponsorship; evaluate role-relevant outputs rather than raw presence; review distributions of assignments, feedback, recognition, and advancement consideration; and provide challenge pathways for contested decisions. These principles may reduce dependence on informal access, but they can also create bureaucracy, surveillance, or strategic compliance. They are hypotheses for organizational design, not validated interventions. Evaluation should examine whether reforms change opportunity distributions while preserving legitimate coordination, privacy, autonomy, and performance differentiation.

Conclusion

Flexible work becomes politically consequential not simply because employees work at different times or places, but because organizations decide who may use flexibility, what information reaches them, which signals count as merit, and how managers convert those signals into opportunity. Politics-of-Flexibility Theory integrates these processes through four proposed mechanisms: an eligibility gate, an informal information channel, an evaluative visibility filter, and a managerial discretion converter. Their proposed outcome is a career-opportunity portfolio rather than a predetermined career penalty.

The theory preserves important counterexamples. Flexibility can improve retention, reduce geographic constraints, support autonomy, and coexist with strong performance. Managerial discretion can enable accommodation, and visibility can be legitimately relevant to coordination. Political allocation arises only when access or interpretation depends disproportionately on status, relationships, weakly diagnostic signals, or unaccountable judgement.

The framework remains conceptually plausible rather than empirically validated. Its mechanisms may vary across occupations, teams, career stages, technologies, cultures, and institutional settings. Longitudinal and multilevel research must distinguish organizational conversion from self-selection, job feasibility, prior performance, and employee preference. The article's principal contribution is therefore a testable language for examining when flexible work redistributes career opportunity, when it does not, and which organizational arrangements might interrupt inequitable conversion without assuming universal effects or implementation readiness.

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