# Making a Difference for Hourly Employees[1]

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# Making a Difference for Hourly Employees

## INTRODUCTION

Workers in low-level, hourly jobs have less access to work-life supports, on average, than workers in higher-level, managerial and professional positions. This is true of supports provided by employers (Glass and Estes 1997; Golden 2001; 2005; Lambert and Waxman 2005; Swanberg, Catsouphes and Drescher-Burke 2005) as well as through public policy (Acs, Phillips, and McKenzie 2001; Lambert 1993; Lambert and Haley-Lock 2004) because access to both often depends on characteristics of workers' employment. For example, many employers condition eligibility for employee benefits, such as health insurance and paid time off, on seniority, job status, and the number of hours worked – all qualities on which hourly workers come up short. Similarly, workers' eligibility for supports defined in U.S. public policies, such as Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), Unemployment Insurance (UI), and the Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA), is also conditioned on hours worked and/or job tenure, leaving many hourly workers outside the public's safety net during times they may most need protection. Thus, a serious mismatch exists not only between today's workplaces and workforce (Bianchi, Casper, and King 2005) but also between today's workplaces and public policies.

A growing group of researchers and practitioners has become interested in increasing access to existing supports, both those defined in employer and public policy (e.g., Bond 2003; Booth, Crouter, and Shanahan 1999; Dodson, Manuel, and Bravo 2002; Families and Work Institute 1999; Lambert 1999; Lambert and Henly 2007; Perry-Jenkins 2005; Swanberg 2005). In addition, and of primary focus in this chapter,

workplace interventions are being developed that are targeted specifically at supporting employees in hourly jobs (e.g., Kim, Lopez, and Bond 2003; Litchfield, Swanberg, and Sigworth 2003; Swanberg et al. 2005). In order for any of these efforts to make a meaningful difference in the lives of employees and their families, they must reflect the practices found on the front-lines of today's firms. Just as the traditional male-breadwinner model no longer fits the realities facing many of America's families (cf. Gornick and Meyers 2003), the traditional model of "standard" employment no longer fits the realities facing many of America's workers (cf. Bernhardt and Marcotte 2000; Presser 2003).

I begin this paper with a discussion of the importance of understanding how hourly jobs fit into firms' current business and labor strategies if workplace interventions are to achieve intended effects. I then highlight some of the features of hourly jobs that hold implications for the design of intervention research intended to improve the well-being of hourly employees and their families. I provide an example of an ongoing workplace experiment that evaluates the effects of an intervention targeted at improving scheduling practices on sales associates' well-being, performance, and access to public benefits. This experiment is used as a platform to discuss both the challenges and merits of incorporating features of hourly jobs and firms' front-line labor practices into intervention research.

## Understanding the Place of Hourly Jobs in Firms' Labor Strategies

The field of human resource management is replete with language bestowing the virtues of recruiting and retaining "talent," a term rarely used to refer to employees in hourly jobs. Instead, many firms view labor in hourly jobs as a cost to be contained,

rather than an asset in which to invest. Many of today's hourly jobs are designed to keep labor costs flexible in order to reduce, if not minimize, labor costs (Appelbaum, Bernhardt, and Murnane 2003; Hacker 2006; Harrison 1997; Moss, Salzman, and Tilly 2005).

Minimizing labor costs is often accomplished through practices that allow employers to keep a tight link between labor costs and variations in consumer demand for service and products (Lambert, under review). Across industries, managers are held accountable for maintaining a particular ratio of labor costs to productivity. In retail, for example, front-line managers must staff within a particular number of hours derived from projected and ongoing sales or traffic. Such accountability requirements place enormous pressures on managers to reduce labor costs when sales are less than anticipated. In many stores, when sales go down, workers go home.

Pressures to contain labor costs can affect all workers (Hacker 2006). Cost containment pressures play out differently, however, for workers paid by the hour versus those paid with a salary (Lambert and Haley-Lock 2004). Salaried workers are more likely than hourly workers to come with fixed costs (benefits, salary). Thus, for salaried workers, labor costs are contained by keeping staffing levels (people on the payroll) low and requiring over-work during peak times. For hourly workers, labor costs are contained by matching work hours to variations in consumer demand. Staffing levels are often kept high to allow for absenteeism and turnover, which means that some hourly workers may get few hours during slow periods (Lambert, under review; Schlosser 2001).

Although employers may complain about high turnover and absenteeism in low-level, hourly jobs, the practices they use to keep labor costs flexible ensure these

outcomes (Appelbaum, Bailey, Berg, and Kalleberg 2000; Baron and Bielby 1980; Jacobs 1994; Lambert and Waxman 2005; Osterman 1999; Pfeffer and Baron 1988). While maintaining high turnover is a conscious strategy used by some employers to restrict labor costs (especially fixed costs such as benefits), other employers view high turnover as problematic (Hacker 2006; Lambert, under review; Tilly 1997). Regardless of whether intended or not, the high turnover and absenteeism caused by efforts to closely match labor costs to consumer demand mean that researchers and practitioners often work with a moving target when designing and evaluating interventions to support hourly workers, complicating both the design of the intervention and its evaluation, as discussed below.

**Realities of Hourly Jobs**

In hourly jobs that serve the purpose of keeping labor costs flexible, common understandings of employment policies and statuses may not hold. Below, I summarize features of hourly jobs that hold implications for work-life research, especially intervention research. These features were gleaned primarily from a study of 88 low-level, hourly jobs in 22 Chicago-area corporations in 4 industries (retail, hospitality, transportation, and financial services) that I led between 1998 and 2004 (Lambert, under review; Lambert and Waxman 2005).[2]

**Nonstandard features are creeping into standard jobs.** In the not so distant past, jobs were divided into broad categories that captured particular qualities of employment – temporary versus regular, part-time versus full-time. Today, the lines between many established categories are being blurred by everyday practices on the

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[2] *The Study of Organizational Stratification* was funded by the Ford Foundation through a grant to Susan Lambert and Evelyn Brodkin, co-Principal Investigators.

front-lines of firms (Bernhardt and Marcotte 2000; Kalleberg, Reskin, and Hudson 2000). Most notably, in many low-level hourly jobs, job status (full-time versus part-time) is only loosely related to the number of hours workers paid by the hour work week-to-week and season-to-season. Full-time hourly jobs do not always provide full-time hours, and part-time hourly jobs may require workers to regularly work beyond part-time limits (examples in Henly and Lambert 2005; Lambert and Waxman 2005). Moreover, "regular" jobs – so-called permanent positions filled directly by the firm – may look more like temporary positions given the high annual turnover rates characteristic of many low-level jobs (Lambert and Waxman 2005). Similarly, job security can no longer be gauged by whether an employer has implemented formal lay-offs. Although only two of the Chicago-area firms studied reported formal lay-offs in the previous two years, all reported engaging in informal layoffs called "workloading" or "work load adjustments." In times of workloading, workers are kept on the pay-roll roster and thus officially have a job, but they are not given any hours, and of course no pay, for weeks or even months.

A key lesson for both work-life and policy scholars is that jobs at the lower-levels of today's firms may not correspond to their official labels (e.g., part-time/full-time) and might not be as stable as they first appear. For example, some firms are "always hiring" for certain jobs, which could indicate either that there is steady work for workers in these jobs or that high turnover results in a consistent flow of job openings. It is hard to get a handle on the exact nature of today's hourly jobs from national surveys that continue to rely on traditional employment distinctions. Surveys that ask workers in hourly jobs to report "typical hours" or that assume a full-time job provides 35 hours of employment a

week, year round, may not accurately capture the job conditions experienced by many of today's hourly workers (Lambert and Henly 2007).

Nonstandard job features complicate the design of intervention research. It takes time for a change in practice to produce a measurable impact. In jobs with high turnover and quick hiring, workers incur different lengths of exposure to the intervention. If the intervention period is too long, few of the sample of workers involved in the study at its onset may be left at its close, which certainly complicates a pre- and post-intervention research design. Information on how periods of reduced, and increased, consumer demand are handled in hourly jobs can help one design an intervention that is robust to the kinds of instability hourly workers face today. The blurry distinctions of employment in today's low-level jobs are key reasons that work-life scholars and policy researchers need to work together to consider policy and practice options that meet the needs of hourly workers who may rotate among under-, over-, and un-employment because of employer practices.

**Barriers to access: Employment status, high turnover, and benefit-waiting periods.** Research on employer-provided work-life supports provides strong evidence that policies do not always translate into practice and that workers at all levels face obstacles to accessing supports defined in employer policy (Kossek and Distleberg, this volume; Kossek, Lautsch, and Eaton 2005). Even the same obstacles, however, can play out differently for hourly workers than salaried ones.

One example is how employment status serves as a barrier to accessing supports. Part-time jobs in general are often excluded from health insurance plans and paid time off (Kalleberg 2000; Tilly 1996). This is true for hourly jobs more than salaried positions,

however. Professionals working less than full-time may not be categorized as working in a part-time job and instead, are often given a different title, such as "reduced compensation *professional*." Such distinctions enable firms to extend benefits to salaried workers while simultaneously excluding hourly workers in part-time *jobs* from benefits, including training and tuition reimbursement programs, as well as health insurance (Lambert and Waxman 2005).

Even when covered by supports as a matter of policy, hourly workers face several obstacles to achieving eligibility and access. Particularly problematic are benefit-waiting periods. Although benefits may start on the first day of employment, or soon after, for workers in salaried positions, most hourly workers become eligible after varying lengths of employment, in the Chicago study, ranging from 30 days to 1 year for personal health coverage and up to 36 months for dependent coverage. Even the definitions of benefit-waiting period can be misleading. In some firms, a 30-day benefit-waiting period does not mean that workers will be eligible for benefits 30 days from the point of hire; instead, the period can refer to 30 days of employment, which may take months for some workers to achieve. Moreover, the prorating of benefits for workers in part-time jobs can make the high cost of health insurance all the more prohibitive for those in low-income households. In the Chicago study, high turnover rates, coupled with lengthy benefit-waiting periods, meant that only a small proportion of workers in many of the low-level jobs studied qualified for health insurance provided by their firm as a matter of stated policy (Lambert and Waxman 2005).

Benefit-waiting periods can also interfere with the ability of workers in hourly jobs to access paid time off. Hourly workers eligible for paid time off may be able to

begin accruing paid time off at the point of hire but are often restricted from using it until they have worked 90 days and often six months. Again, these waiting periods may not be determined from point of hire but as a count of the number of days worked at the firm. Moreover, an increasingly common practice is for employers to implement penalty systems in which workers are given demerits when they take any "unplanned" time off, including times when workers use paid sick leave for which they are eligible (Lambert and Waxman 2005).

Work-life researchers are well aware that it is important to look beyond policy to see what supports are delivered to workers in everyday practice. This is all the more challenging in low-level, hourly jobs because different rules may apply to hourly jobs than to salaried ones – rules that are outside many a researchers' professional and personal experience. To the extent cost containment is a goal in the targeted jobs, efforts to extend existing supports to their workers may be undermined by everyday practices that mangers use to keep a tight link between labor costs and consumer demand, specifically, by high turnover, as discussed above, and by variations in work hours, as discussed next.

**Challenging scheduling practices**. A key tool managers use to maintain a tight link between labor costs and consumer demand is scheduling practices (Lambert, under review). Many low-level, hourly jobs are characterized by fluctuating hours in which both the number and timing of hours can change day-to-day, week-to-week, and season-to-season, at the discretion of management (Henly and Lambert 2005; Henly, Shaefer, and Waxman 2006). It is important to recognize that few firms guarantee a minimum number of hours to workers in part-time hourly jobs. In the Chicago study, none of the

firms guaranteed a minimum number of hours to workers in hourly jobs – full-time or part-time.

The hours worked in part-time jobs were especially variable, ranging from zero hours some weeks to hours exceeding part-time limits during other weeks. But hourly full-time jobs are not immune from hour variations. A trend in the retail sector, for example, is a new job status called "full-time flex" in which hours in full-time hourly jobs can vary, commonly between 32 and 40 hours per work, at the discretion of management. Of course, hourly workers' incomes "flex" along with their hours.

Another problematic characteristic of scheduling practices in many hourly jobs is that schedules are posted with little advance notice, in most of the settings studied, the Wednesday or Thursday before the workweek that started on Sunday. Managers also readily make last-minute changes to schedules once posted, as well as real-time changes in which workers are sent home or called in when daily demand differs from projections.

The unpredictability in work schedules resulting from fluctuations in hours and last minute posting of work schedules poses challenges for conducting workplace research. In a very practical way, it is hard to anticipate who will be on-site when observing workplaces, to schedule interviews, and to craft intervention procedures that can be systematically implemented.

The nature of scheduling practices in low-level, hourly jobs makes it especially difficult to conceive of how to extend flexibility options developed for professional and managerial workers to those in hourly jobs. Most existing flexibility options seek to "loosen up" rigid scheduling practices by, for example, offering hourly workers compressed work weeks, flexible starting and ending times, leaves of absence, and job

sharing. Rather than being rigid, however, many hourly jobs are already "loose," requiring employees to work fluctuating and unpredictable hours. Thus, different interventions may be needed to improve scheduling practices in low-level hourly jobs than in professional and managerial salaried ones.

**Stratification of hourly workforce**. The workforce in many hourly jobs is stratified by employer practices that concentrate instability onto particular groups of workers (Lambert, under review). Most often, instability is distributed on the basis of seniority and/or job status. Specifically, the workers with the least seniority are most likely to be scheduled for fluctuating hours and during evenings and weekends and to experience workloading. In the Chicago study, turnover among new hires was in many jobs 200 percent higher than that among workers with more seniority. In some settings, part-time jobs are used to absorb much of the fluctuation in consumer demand and thus, their workers are most at-risk for fluctuating income.

Stratification of workers within hourly jobs creates a significant barrier to the uniform implementation of interventions and thus, adding new supports in the context of organizational stratification may in the end fuel rather than smooth inequality in the workplace. Gathering information on the mechanisms used to distribute instability among workers in hourly jobs can be used to identify, a priori, barriers that might restrict the access of certain workers to supports defined in firm policy (Lambert and Waxman 2005). For example, learning about the role that seniority and job status play in setting schedules for hourly workers may reveal pockets of employees who will not have the opportunity to fully benefit from new work-life initiatives. History, as well as research on employment outcomes, would suggest that these pockets are most likely to be filled by

workers of color, women with young children, and those with limited educational credentials (Andersson, Holzer, and Lane 2005; Blank 1997; Carnevale and Rose 2001; Lambert 1998; Mishel, Bernstein, and Allegretto 2005).

Figuring out how to implement work-life interventions in ways that reach hourly employees on whom instability is concentrated is a key challenge for those of us interested in interventions that will make a meaningful difference in the lives of hourly workers. It is almost natural, and certainly easier, to concentrate efforts on those workers who tend to be a steady presence in the workplace, rather than taking steps to include those who are more likely to come and go. Yet, unless researchers and practitioners acknowledge and attend to stratification when developing work-life interventions, we can be assured that the working poor will continue to be "locked out" of work-life opportunities distributed through the workplace (Kossek, Huber-Yoder, Castellino, and Lerner 1997; Lambert and Kossek 2005).

**A well-intended policy with unintended consequences: An example**

Even well-intended policies may result in unanticipated negative consequences if attention is not given to the realities of today's low-level, hourly jobs. One example that has emerged from our research is how the lack of a guaranteed minimum number of hours can result in an earnings penalty when hourly workers claim control over the timing of work hours (Henly and Lambert 2005; Lambert and Henly 2007). For example, many retailers allow employees to "claim availability," which permits sales associates to declare the days and times they are available and unavailable for work. Although many employers ensure that associates will not be scheduled for work during unavailable times, they do not ensure that associates will be scheduled for work during available times.

Without a guaranteed minimum number of hours, sales associates with limited availability get fewer hours than their counterparts with greater availability. Workers in low-level, hourly jobs in all of the industries we have studied face a trade-off between working enough hours and working preferred hours. In sum, the nature of today's hourly jobs – fluctuating work hours, no guaranteed minimum number of hours, benefit-waiting periods, ambiguous job status, stratification of the workforce – can complicate and even undermine the successful implementation of work-life interventions intended to foster the well-being of hourly workers and their families.

## TAKING FIRM-LEVEL LABOR STRATEGIES AND PRACTICES INTO ACCOUNT:

## *THE SCHEDULING INTERVENTION STUDY*

*The Scheduling Intervention Study* is a cluster-randomized experiment that assesses the effects of greater schedule predictability and improved communication on workers' performance, daily family practices, health, and well-being.[3] Table 1 provides an overview of the study, which includes random assignment of stores to experimental and control conditions, extensive use of organizational documentation, and pre- and post-intervention surveys of managers and sales associates. In designing *The Scheduling Intervention Study*, we have tried to attend to the complicated nature of low-level jobs, the risk they pose to workers' earnings and well-being, and the business strategies found in the retail sector. Below, I discuss how information on key labor practices was used to inform the design of both the intervention protocol and the evaluation procedures.

### Developing the Intervention: The Role of Labor Strategies and Practices

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[3] Susan Lambert and Julia R. Henly are co-Principal Investigators and equal partners on all aspects of *The Scheduling Intervention Study*. The study is supported with grants from the Ford Foundation, the Russell Sage Foundation, and the Annie. E. Casey Foundation.

The intervention evaluated in *The Scheduling Intervention Study* is intended to balance managers' goals – to tightly link staffing levels in the stores to variations in consumer demand – with employees' goals – to work enough hours at preferred times. The intervention protocol is based on interviews with store employees at multiple levels and on-site observations of store practices conducted over a two-year period. The full research protocol was refined based on feedback from store managers who piloted both the intervention and data collection methods for an additional nine-month period and on our analyses of pilot data.

**Targets considered for intervention**

We targeted scheduling practices for improvement and evaluation for several reasons. Employer scheduling practices are a well-documented source of employment instability that can impede worker performance and worker and family health and well-being (Crouter and McHale 2005; Henly and Lambert 2005; Hsueh and Yoshikawa 2007; Presser 2003). Yet, causal connections are unclear, as they are in much of the research on relationships among work, family, health, and well-being (Casper, Bianchi, and King 2005). Moreover, the policy literature currently gives much more attention to improving hourly wages than the distribution of hours, although income in hourly jobs is obviously a function of not only hourly wages but also hours worked, as is eligibility for many public benefits. Thus, targeting scheduling practices for rigorous evaluation holds the possibility of contributing new knowledge to the work-life field as well as informing public policy debates.

As explained more fully in the next section, *The Scheduling Intervention Study* focuses on improving scheduling predictability (advance notice) and communication

between sales associates and store managers regarding the scheduling process. Several other aspects of scheduling in hourly jobs might have been targeted for improvement, including fluctuating hours, lack of control over timing of hours, nonstandard timing (weekends and evenings), and last minute changes to work schedules.

Ample literature is available on two of these potential targets: work during nonstandard times and the lack of control over work hours. The former literature tends to focus on workers in hourly (nonexempt) jobs and the latter on workers in salaried (exempt) positions. Among salaried workers, such as managers and professionals, issues of work hours are primarily framed in terms of flexibility in the timing of work hours, that is, how much control workers have over when they work (e.g., Kossek et al. 2005; Moen, Kelly, and Chermack, this volume). Among hourly workers, timing of work hours is more often framed in terms of the perils of working during “nonstandard” times (Hsueh and Yoshikawa 2007; Presser 2003). Harriet Presser estimates that “two-fifths of all employed Americans work mostly at nonstandard times,” operationalized in her research as “working in the evening, at night, on a rotating shift, or during the weekend” at least half of the time (Presser 2003, p.1).

Research indicates that not only do employees often have little control over their schedule when working in jobs that incorporate nonstandard timing, many – though not all – would prefer a more standard arrangement. In their study of industry restructuring in electronics manufacturing, food service, financial services, and retail sales, Moss, Salzman, and Tilly (2005) found “little employee-driven flexibility and much employer-driven flexibility” in entry-level jobs (p.131). They report that workers in service industries are especially likely to have variations in work hours imposed on them by

employers. Notably, the majority of low-skilled unmarried mothers who work nonstandard schedules do so because their employer requires it (Presser and Cox 1997; Tausig and Fenwick 2001).

In the case of *The Scheduling Intervention Study*, reducing work during nonstandard times did not seem like a promising target for the intervention, given the general labor strategies found in today's retail sector. The retail sector is now a 24/7 operation. In the firm involved in the experiment, stores are open evenings and weekends, which requires that at least some employees be available for work during these times. It would be hard to make the case to reduce store hours during evenings and weekends since these are the times when sales peak.

Moen et al. (this volume) summarize well the numerous merits of developing interventions that increase workers' control over the time and timing of their work hours. However, given that our prior research suggested that exerting control may place hourly workers at risk of reduced earnings, making schedule control the primary target of the intervention seemed risky and even raised ethical issues for us. In the firm that is participating in the intervention, only store managers are paid by salary and fully 70 percent of hourly workers in the stores hold part-time positions in which there is no guaranteed minimum number of hours. Scheduled hours vary greatly in part-time positions, ranging from as few as 4 hours per week to as many as 30. Hours for full-time assistant managers and sales associates also vary, in most stores between 32 and 40 hours per week, depending on corporate policies and individual store practices.

We examined in more depth whether the risk to earnings is a real one in this setting through in-person interviews and structured telephone interviews with store

managers in several regions of the U.S. (N=115).[4] The data substantiate our worry that an intervention that asks workers to put restrictions on their availability for work may have negative repercussions for their earnings. Fully 82 percent of the store managers surveyed either agreed or strongly agreed with the statement "I give more hours to sales associates who have greater availability," and 89 percent disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement "I give more hours to sales associates who seem to really need the money."

As in other retail settings, the managers of the stores in this firm are held accountable for staffing within hour limits set by the corporation. The larger the staff in a store, the more people there are among whom to divvy up that week's hours. When asked to chose between two general labor strategies, 69 percent of the store managers surveyed chose the statement "I like to keep my sales associate staff on the large side so that I have several associates I can tap to work when needed," over the statement "I like to keep my sales associate staff on the small side to help ensure that workers get hours." Thus, the labor strategies expressed by the majority of managers of the stores targeted for the experiment suggest that increasing worker control over work hours as part of the intervention might have the unintended outcome of reducing at least some workers' earnings.

Given that a signature characteristic of many hourly jobs is fluctuations in the number and timing of work hours, increasing stability of hourly workers' schedules is also a possible target for intervention. As discussed before, however, a key business strategy not only in this firm but in many firms today is to keep a tight link between

[4] The survey of store managers is on-going. The findings reported here are based on completed interviews as of November, 2007 (N=115). To date, 9 managers have declined to participate.

consumer demand and labor costs. If firms will not guarantee a minimum number of hours to workers in part-time jobs, they are unlikely to guarantee a particular shift week-to-week. This is true of the firm participating in the current study. Thus, increasing the stability of workers' hours in low-level retail jobs was an unrealistic target for intervention in this case.

**The Intervention: Improving Predictability (Component 1)**

The intervention developed and evaluated in *The Scheduling Intervention Study* is designed to increase the predictability of sales associates' work schedules by posting schedules further in advance than is the usual practice. I emphasize that we did not "settle" for this goal but instead saw it as a meaningful target of intervention. A companion investigation to the study of Chicago-area employers of low-income mothers employed in retail jobs indicated that the last-minute posting of work schedules interfered with workers' ability to effectively structure and use the hours they were not at work (Henly and Lambert 2005; Henly et al. 2006). For example, the unpredictability of retail workers' schedules made it difficult to plan family meals, to adopt consistent homework and bedtime routines, and to volunteer at their children's school. Limited advance notice of work days and shifts posed complications for child care as well. Henly found that parents who work unpredictable schedules make child care arrangements at the last minute or else set up arrangements in advance, only to cancel them when work times are different from what was expected. Moreover, parents with unpredictable schedules in Henly's study relied disproportionately on relative providers and used a patchwork of arrangements to accommodate schedules. Some parents reported that problems with child care arrangements resulted in absenteeism and tardiness, limiting their ability to earn a

stable and adequate income. Thus, changing the timeframe in which schedules are posted seemed a potentially effective strategy for supporting hourly workers and their families.

**The feasibility of increasing advance notice.** Interviews with store managers provided useful information on the accountability requirements they face day-to-day and on their current scheduling practices. This information allowed us to assess whether posting schedules further in advance is feasible in the firm and if so, to determine how far in advance it might be reasonable to post schedules.

Store managers report, and corporate officials corroborate, that managers receive their staffing hours for a full month at a time (January, February, and so forth), commonly 10 to 14 days in advance of the month. Although store managers are given their staffing hours a month at a time, corporate policy is that managers need only post schedules the Tuesday before the workweek that begins on Sunday. Interview and survey data indicate that most (61 percent) managers post one schedule at a time, for the upcoming week. Some, however, post two weeks at a time (30 percent) and a small minority (<1 percent) posts schedules for a full month. The fact that some managers are already posting schedules for multiple weeks provides additional evidence that posting schedules further in advance is feasible, although not common practice, for the store managers in this firm.[5]

One component of the intervention is thus to post schedules a month at a time, which continues to enable managers to schedule within corporate guidelines while providing workers with longer advance notice than they currently receive. A store manager who completed a 9-month pilot of the intervention indicated that she will

[5] Random assignment of stores to experimental and control conditions should balance out the effects of pre-intervention posting practices on study outcomes. We can also control for pre-intervention posting practices in analyses.

continue to post schedules a month at a time because "it is more efficient for me, and my associates like to be able to plan."

**Issues of generalizability**. The fact that retailers vary in the timeframe in which they provide managers with the information they need to schedule staff raises issues of the generalizability of the intervention. Generalizability is primarily an issue when defined narrowly in terms of the exact replication of the intervention protocol. As explained above, posting schedules one month at a time fits with current management practices at the participating firm. In other firms, increasing predictability may need to be implemented differently. If managers receive their hours more than a month at time, an intervention protocol might be developed that provides workers even further advance notice. If managers are given staffing hours at the last minute, it may be impossible to deliver meaningful predictability to employees.

Intervention protocols that do not fit with everyday firm practices may not be implemented effectively, if at all. Employers are often reluctant to adopt policies that will require widespread changes to everyday practices found at the front-lines of the firm. Perhaps even more worrisome is the circumstance when an intervention protocol is adopted even when at odds with other front-line practices. For example, during our piloting of the intervention, we asked a manager to try out a different scenario in which, rather than posting schedules for a particular month, she posted schedules for four weeks at a time. This required that she post one new schedule each week (for four weeks out). Because of the timing of when managers receive their staffing hours, she had to develop some schedules before receiving word as to what her hour allocations were for those weeks. When hour reductions came down from the corporate level, she had to make

severe modifications to the posted schedules, undermining the goal of providing greater predictability of work hours.

Broadening discussions of generalizability to focus more on concepts and goals than on specific intervention procedures helps to avoid the problem of cookie-cutter solutions to complex organizational problems. Inattention to operational realities at the front-lines of firms may help explain why many work-life policies look better on paper than in practice. When defined in terms of increasing schedule predictability, the generalizability of the current intervention looks better than when defined narrowly in terms of posting schedules a month at a time.

The firm participating in *The Scheduled Intervention Study* was recruited through our participation in the National Retailers' Work-Life Forum, a membership group of some of the nation's largest retail firms. Members concur with our assessment that unpredictable scheduling poses a serious challenge to workers (for example, by making child care arrangements difficult) and adds to the difficulties store managers face in maintaining adequate staffing levels. Moreover, they suggest that an emphasis on increasing scheduling predictability frames the discussion of scheduling problems in a way that encourages upper-level support for intervention because it still allows employers to implement variations in work hours, does not entitle workers to hour guarantees, and does not intervene with operational decisions of the firm. As one member of the Retailers' Work-Life Forum said after a presentation we made to that group, "Now this we can do something about." What each may be able to do, however, will and should vary by the realities found on the front-lines of each firm.

Labor groups in other segments of the retail industry are beginning to focus on schedule predictability in their negotiations with employers. For example, the Puget Sound *Share the Success* initiative targeted at improving working conditions for grocery workers is emphasizing changes to the 3-day advance posting of schedules that is standard practice in many stores, pointing out how such short notice interferes with workers' ability to "plan ahead for time with their families.[6]" Moreover, given that unpredictable scheduling practices (limited advance notice and frequent last-minute changes) were a typical employer strategy for managing fluctuations in consumer demand observed in all 22 workplaces studied in Chicago, the results of the intervention hold the potential to inform practices in industries in addition to retail.

**The Intervention: Improving communication (Component 2)**

The benefits of a predictable schedule for workers may be attenuated in situations where schedules are not sufficiently responsive to accommodate nonwork-related responsibilities. Indeed, schedule predictability may turn into rigidity if workers have limited input into their work schedules or if posted schedules are not amenable to change. Without any input into scheduling decisions, workers are likely to be scheduled during hours that they cannot work, which may interfere with their ability to retain the job in the long term. Yet, restricting workers' availability may result in reduced earnings, as discussed above. These conflicting pressures led us to look closely at how managers track workers' ongoing availability for work and record workers' requests for days off and other scheduling changes.

In-person interviews with store managers occurred at their stores, allowing us to see first hand the methods by which sales associates communicate scheduling requests

[6] Visit http://www.sharethesuccess.org for details.

and preferences. In most of the stores visited, informal systems are used for sales associates to indicate scheduling requests and changes to their availability (e.g., leaving a post-it note for the manager or writing a request on a marked-up calendar posted on the wall). Several mangers told us that they are willing to accommodate associates' preferences when business allows, but that they are more likely to know when workers want days off than when they can work more hours. The structured survey of store managers in multiple regions indicates that most stores follow similar practices, that is, communication around scheduling issues tends to take place informally. Managers report that these informal systems make it difficult for them to "keep on top of requests and preferences." Thus, we saw merit in trying to improve the methods store managers already have in place to record sales associates' requests by making it more systematic and by including a place to record instances when sales associates' availability has expanded in addition to communicating requests for time off.

Improving communication between associates and managers is thus a second component of the intervention. With the input of store employees, we designed a set of forms that allow associates to update their availability, indicate preferences for hours, and request days off. Workers can indicate not only when they want time off, but also when their availability for work has increased, including their willingness to be called into work on short notice for specific days and times. The store managers in the pilot study report that these forms have made it easier for them to respond to associates' requests and to allocate hours more fairly among associates. The goal is to improve communication between managers and associates around the scheduling process while minimizing the possibility that associates will get fewer hours as a result, a possibility we will track by

comparing work hours before and after the intervention and between intervention and control stores.

In sum, information from corporate records, observations of stores, and interviews and surveys of store managers provided information useful for identifying, and hopefully reducing, the risk of unintended negative effects on associates' earnings as well as the risk to fidelity that might occur were the intervention not consistent with daily accountability requirements.

**Using Turnover Data to Inform the Intervention Period**

As Bloom (2005, p. 157) states, "Mobility is the Achilles' heel of place-based programs and of cluster randomization experiments." The entry and exit of individuals (employees) from randomized clusters (stores) undermine the ability to identify accurately the effects of an intervention, perhaps inflating estimates when effectiveness is judged on only those who stayed or underestimating effects when estimates include individuals who left before they received an adequate dose of the treatment.

Attrition of workers is especially a challenge for high turnover industries such as retail. Indeed, one reason employers may be interested in participating in a workplace intervention is to reduce turnover, and this is in fact one reason the women's apparel retailer is participating in *The Scheduling Intervention Study*. Because most of the targeted stores are located in strip malls, customers usually come purposively to the stores, rather than simply stopping by to shop as many customers do when walking through an enclosed mall. Although the merchandise and its pricing may be the main draw, relationships between customers and sales associates are also important to sales. In our in-person interviews, managers told us how some customers will ask for a particular

sales associate and even call ahead to see when she is working. Retention of sales associates is a stated goal for this firm. Nonetheless, in the stores targeted for the intervention, the annual turnover rate is similar to other retailers we have studied (79 percent turnover between August 2006 and July 2007).

While turnover poses challenges to intervention research, it is also an important store-level dependent variable in this study. Analyses will examine the extent to which turnover is lower in the stores that implement the intervention when compared to the stores that continue usual scheduling practices. Turnover remains a threat to internal validity for analyses at the individual level, however. Stores, not individuals, are randomly assigned to experimental and control conditions for obvious reasons. Thus, hypotheses related to the effects of the intervention on certain types of workers (workers with children, for example) will be primarily addressed by comparing workers' responses on pre- and post- intervention surveys. Although the study design includes post-intervention surveys of all workers in the stores at baseline even if they have terminated employment (the intent-to-treat group), comparing pre- and post-intervention responses among workers who left the job undermines the usefulness of the survey data for evaluating the effectiveness of the intervention, as well as for examining other relationships between work conditions and worker performance and well-being.

At first glance, an annual turnover rate of 79 percent suggests that were our intervention to last a year, only about 20 percent of the workers would be consistent throughout the intervention period. This would be the case were turnover equally distributed within the workforce. As noted earlier, however, many low-level, hourly jobs are stratified, that is, instability is often concentrated on subsets of workers who turnover

rapidly. Analyses of corporate data suggest that turnover is not equally distributed among employees in the target stores.

For over a year, we have been receiving lists of employees in all target stores so that we can see who stays and who leaves and when. These data indicate that, during a one-year period, an average of 59 percent of employees have remained the same in the targeted stores; 51 percent of the part-time sales associates are the same. As in many other workplaces, a core group of employees with longer seniority works along side another group that tends to turn over rapidly, accounting for the higher cumulative turnover rate across the year. In this firm, younger workers (under 24), those with little seniority, and those in part-time jobs are least likely to continue employment month to month. Data we are also collecting on the timing and number of hours worked will allow us to assess the hypothesis that instability is being concentrated onto these groups of workers in the form of fluctuating work hours and nonstandard timing.

The patterns of continued employment tracked monthly show that turnover occurs quickly among part-time sales associates and those younger than 24 – within the first month or two after hiring – and then tapers off. Restricting the intervention to a month or two, however, seems too short of a time to determine whether or not the intervention makes a difference, especially on workers' family routines and child care arrangements.

Our analyses suggest that a four-month intervention period balances better the risk to internal validity of inadequate exposure with the risk of attrition. A four-month intervention period shows continued employment rates between 74 and 81 percent among all store employees and between 68 and 78 percent in part-time sales associate jobs, depending on seasonal variations in staffing practices. These analyses allow us to

estimate that, with a four-month intervention period, approximately 70 percent of employees who enter the intervention will still be employed at its close, unless the intervention has the unintended effect of reducing retention. A six-month intervention period brings the rate of continued employment to around 70 percent overall and around 60 percent among part-time sales associates. We will continue to assess continued employment to determine whether it is wise to extend the intervention to a six-month period in order to increase employees' exposure to the intervention.

In sum, an advantage of conducting workplace research is the possibility of securing information from the firm to inform elements of the research design that, in many studies, are based on researchers' assumptions rather than on analyses (Lambert 2006). For *The Scheduling Intervention Study,* we analyzed corporate personnel data to track patterns in continued employment, thus providing an empirical basis for establishing the intervention period. We have also used corporate administrative data to refine our power estimates of the number of stores needed to reliably identify the effect of the intervention on turnover. Of course, it remains an empirical question whether the estimates we have developed through our analyses of corporate data are accurate, specifically, whether four to six months is adequate to establish the effects of the intervention, if any, and whether our sample size is indeed large enough to reliably estimate these effects on worker- and store-level outcomes.

## Conclusion

Researchers and practitioners face a challenging task when seeking to extend and develop interventions to support the well-being of workers in hourly jobs. Workplaces are often havens for inequality (Lambert and Haley-Lock 2004). Given the widening gap

in the well-being of those at the top and bottom of the income distribution (Hacker 2006; Heymann 2000; Lewis and Smithson 2001), figuring out how to deliver supports to those most at-risk of poverty is important work that will take the combined efforts of both the public and private sectors.

My goal in this paper has been to help prepare researchers, practitioners, and policy analysts for this work. Knowledge of firms' labor strategies and practices can provide insight into some of the more problematic features of hourly jobs that, if ignored, can undermine the effectiveness of both well-intended workplace interventions and public policies. The more aware researchers, practitioners, and policy makers are of the daily accountability pressures confronted by front-line managers, the more likely it is they will develop interventions and policies that can be effectively implemented into everyday practice. Many low-level, hourly jobs are designed to keep a tight link between variations in consumer demand and labor costs. Instability is thus structured into many hourly jobs through daily workplace practices, including fluctuating work hours, vague job status, informal lay-offs, stratification of the workforce, and benefit-waiting periods.

These workplace practices not only make it difficult for hourly workers to access supports defined in workplace policy, they also diminish the effectiveness of public policies. For example, the ability of TANF to serve anti-poverty purposes is undermined by the week-to-week, season-to-season variations in income that accompany shifting schedules and rapid job loss. Qualifying for UI requires an involuntary termination, but workers experiencing workloading are still technically employed, and it is hard to distinguish between voluntary and involuntary terminations in jobs with excessive turnover rates. Even the effectiveness of Living Wage initiatives are limited by the fact

that higher wages will not reduce poverty unless jobs provide workers with enough hours. Thus, public policies that reflect the realities of today's hourly jobs are in short supply.

Workplace interventions that can improve work-life outcomes for workers in jobs designed for cost containment are sorely needed as well. *The Scheduling Intervention Study* attempts to take into account the everyday practices retailers use to match store staffing levels to variations in customer traffic and sales. The intervention and research design are both informed by analyses indicating that turnover is concentrated among sales associates who are young and new in the stores and that asking associates to put restrictions on their availability may place their earnings at risk. Rather than targeting worker control over the timing of work hours, the intervention targets improving the predictability of workers' schedules by posting schedules further in advance and improving the communication between associates and managers regarding preferred work hours and on-going availability. These changes may seem minor to those of us in managerial and professional positions, but small changes can make a big difference in the everyday lives of working class families. Knowing how much income you are going to earn this month and when you will need child care is critical to the well-being of workers and their families. Of course, whether improving scheduling predictability and communication constitute enough of an improvement to sales associates' jobs to enhance their well-being and performance remains, at this time, an empirical question.

Although the research summarized in this paper holds suggestions for researchers targeting hourly jobs for intervention, it does not hold all the answers. Notably, *The Scheduling Intervention Study* takes cost containment strategies as a given. A basic goal of the larger project from which the study was developed is to identify ways to improve

hourly jobs within today's business climate and practice models. In this study, we have made it a point to build on existing practices as much as possible in an effort to develop an intervention that can be implemented into everyday practice rather than one that remains as a good idea on-the-books.

Making a real difference in the lives of hourly workers will in the end require a much more ambitious intervention: improving the place of hourly jobs in firms' labor strategies and changing the strategies themselves. The literature suggests that firms with business models that base profits on cost containment are less likely to include lower-level workers in opportunity structures than those that seek profits through product differentiation, that is, higher quality services and products (Hunter 2000; Osterman 1999; Tilly 1997). For example, most of the U.S. corporations included in the report by Litchfield and colleagues (2003) on model programs for hourly employees include "differentiation" reasons, such as improved customer service, in their list of benefits of the program to the firm itself.

Caution is warranted, however, in assuming that problems with hourly jobs will be solved were all firms to adopt differentiation strategies. Today's firms pursue multiple strategies that get translated into different practices at different operational levels. The mechanisms of stratification found in today's firms often operate to exclude low-level, hourly jobs from opportunity structures even in firms committed to pursuing profit through quality-enhancement strategies (Lambert and Waxman 2005; Lambert, under review). Notably, several of the companies included in the Chicago-area study have appeared on lists of the best companies to work for in America and yet, have hourly jobs that incorporate many of the problematic features identified earlier.

Fully integrating hourly workers into the opportunity structures of today's firms will require that jobs themselves are enhanced. Currently, many low-level, hourly jobs are structured so that workers cannot add much value to the firm in which they work. For example, placing cash registers at the front of the store rather than in departments severs the link between customer service and sales; one cashier is about as good as the next and most sales occur without any service. It is no wonder that many retail jobs command little from the market. These jobs are *designed* to pay workers little.

The extent to which interventions to improve hourly jobs are effective in enhancing the well-being of workers and their families will depend on developments in the larger economy and in society. Hacker (2006) chronicles what he terms the "Great Risk Shift" in which a greater proportion of economic risk is now transferred directly to American families – and not just those headed by hourly workers – rather than pooled through insurance structures, both corporate and government. Thus, society has a larger problem to deal with if workers of all ilk are to stand a fair chance of earning a stable and adequate living. Cross-national comparisons make clear that instability is not a natural outcome of globalization, immigration, or other significant social changes but rather is determined by societal priorities and the daily decisions and practices found at the front-lines of major societal institutions, both public and private (cf. Hacker 2002 2006; Lewis and Smithson 2001; Moss et al. 2005).

In conclusion, broadening both research and public discourse to include the work-life challenges of hourly workers is essential if millions of low-income families are not to fall further behind in terms of income and well-being. Understanding how business models translate into front-line practices is essential if work-life interventions and public

policies are to make a real difference in the lives of hourly workers, their families, and communities.

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| **Table 1**<br>**Overview of *The Scheduling Intervention Study*** | |
|---|---|
| **Goal** | To assess the effects of greater schedule predictability and improved communication on hourly sales associates' work performance, daily family practices, health, and well-being. |
| **Setting** | National women's apparel retailer with stores concentrated in Midwestern and Eastern states. |
| **Sample** | The experiment is currently underway in the Chicago area (26 stores); implementation in the New York/New Jersey region (48 stores) is to follow. Stores are small (an average of ten associates) and located primarily in urban and suburban strip malls. Managers and sales associates are almost exclusively female (99%), but the workforce is diverse in terms of race, ethnicity, and age. |
| **Cluster-randomized experiment** | In each region, stores are matched on sales and then randomly assigned to intervention and control conditions. Minimum 2-month baseline period, followed by 4 to 6 month intervention period. |
| **Corporate data** | |
| - Personnel records | Corporate administrative data on employees in 159 stores (the 74 target stores and 85 additional stores selected for control purposes and possible study expansion) are used to track turnover month-to-month. |
| - Weekly work schedules and hours | We collect the weekly schedule initially posted (which tells us when employees were scheduled to work), changes made to the initial schedule, and the timing and number of hours employees actually worked during the week (from the company's payroll system). |
| - Associates' scheduling requests | Scheduling requests submitted to store managers are compared to associates' actual work hours to determine the extent to which managers incorporate requests into their scheduling practices. Comparisons of pre- and post- intervention payroll data allow us to estimate the effects of the intervention on timing as well as the number of hours associates work. |
| - Sales data | Weekly sales information per employee and store from corporate data management systems. |
| **Telephone surveys of managers and sales associates** | Telephone surveys of managers of 159 stores are being conducted pre- and post- intervention to document managers' scheduling challenges and practices. Telephone surveys will be conducted with all personnel in the stores included in the experiment (approximately 810 workers in 74 stores), both pre- and post- intervention, to gather information on work-family conflict, family practices, child care, well-being, and performance-related attitudes and behaviors. |
| **Return on Investment (ROI)** | The study is designed to track turnover and the ratio of labor costs to sales throughout baseline and intervention periods, allowing for the estimation of an ROI model at the store level. |
| **Use of public supports** | The study investigates the hypothesis that improving scheduling practices will improve workers' access to public benefits. The pre- and post-intervention worker interviews gather information on workers' eligibility for and use of specific public benefits (public assistance, food stamps, UI, state health programs, and child care subsidies). |