

***Processes of Marginalisation***  
***An Analysis of New Forms of Exclusion On the***  
***Danish Labour Market***

***Pernille Hohnen***

***The Open Labour Market***  
***Working Paper 11:2001***



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# ***When Work Is Like a Gift***

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## ***The Study***

This article focuses on personal experiences of employment on special terms, particularly in the so-called *flex jobs*, which is a kind of subsidized jobs, that has been created as part of the “active” line in recent Danish social policy. These jobs are furthermore promoted through the Danish governmental programme concerning corporate social responsibility. This programme aims at integrating and retaining persons with a reduced working capacity on the labour market. However, the research on which the article is based indicates that flex job employees view their social and legal position as “betwixt and between” the field of social security and the labour market. The ambivalences around flex jobs are theorized in terms of cultural exchange theory, and the author argues that the social construction of flex jobs, not only economically but also socially and culturally, may be characterized as a kind of “gift”. This has consequences not only economically, but also socially for the possibilities of participating in “the labour market”.

**Descriptors:** active social policy, corporate social responsibility, social practice, subsidized work, morality



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# ***1. Introduction***

In 1994 the Danish Ministry of Social Affairs launched a campaign with the aim of making the labour market more inclusive by promoting Corporate Social Responsibility. The campaign was later supported by legislative changes in Danish social policy. One of the main aims has been to ensure labour market participation by the weakest part of the labour force, e.g. persons with social problems, persons with limited skills and persons with a reduced working capacity. An important legislative tool to secure this aim has been the establishment of a new kind of job called flex job. A flex job is a type of employment on especially “soft” conditions, e.g. with fewer working hours, or with reduced work tasks. Persons employed in flex jobs have their working capacity evaluated, and their employer is then refunded a proportion of their salary according to the reduction in working ability. In order to promote corporate social responsibility, and thus to transfer part of the financial burden of social security from the public to the private sector, the campaign includes the idea that corporate social responsibility can be estimated, at least to some extent, by the number of employees with reduced working capacity e.g. flex job employees (see for example Socialministeriet, 2000). The number of flex jobs has been steadily increasing. Since their introduction in 1998 around 9,000 such jobs have been established and the number is rapidly increasing (Danmarks Statistik, 2001). This has been interpreted (by the government as well as by many business executives) as an indication of the successful implementation of the political campaign, and as a sign that companies are indeed willing to take part in solving society’s social problems. Interviews with flex job employees, however, indicate, that although most are happy to work, almost all of them characterize their position as employees on special terms as ambiguous and difficult to come to terms with.

The main aim of the present article is to shed light on individual experiences in flex jobs and to link the feelings of ambiguity inherent in them to discourses as well as

practices of contemporary Danish social policy. An additional aim is to highlight the particular social positioning of these jobs, by analysing the data in the light of what I term cultural theories of exchange. Such a framework involves the following questions: What are the experiences in a *flex job*, and how do people deal with this specific social role? Furthermore, if one conceptualises the Danish labour market as consisting of different culturally and socially constructed forms of “work” with related expectations and social roles, then to which category do flex jobs belong? How can the specific expectations and social relations of flex jobs be understood as a part of the general principles of social and economic exchange within this category?

I begin by giving a brief account of the Danish social policy debate, which centres on ideas of corporate social responsibility and a vision of a more inclusive labour market. Here, I shall outline some general topics that this debate seems to reflect. The main empirical findings form the second part of the article and here I shall outline some of the typical experiences in flex jobs, especially those which may clarify the ambiguous social and cultural position mentioned above. The third and final part of the article contains a more theoretical discussion of these findings, together with an outline of some future perspectives for developing a more inclusive labour market.

The data on which the article is based forms part a qualitative research project about the integration of employees on special terms on the Danish labour market, conducted by the National Danish Institute of Social Research from October 1999 until December 2000. During this period, I interviewed social workers responsible for establishing flex jobs in 10 different municipalities. In addition, 15 semi-structured interviews were conducted with flex job employees (some were interviewed several times). In 5 selected workplaces, interviews with shop stewards, colleagues and leaders who worked with flex job employees, were conducted, and a limited amount of participant observation took place. The empirical findings as well as an analysis of the job-integration have been published in a Danish report (Hohnen, 2000). Although all of these data are to some extent included in the present article, the results concerning interviews with flex job employees and subsequently their narratives form the primary basis of the present analysis.



## ***2. Active Social Policy and Corporate Social Responsibility – The Danish Debate***

In Denmark debates concerning how to establish a more “ inclusive labour market” has increasingly gained ground in public as well as in political discourses (Socialministeriet, 1997; Holt, 1998 & 2000; Høgelund, 2000). The Danish debate on these issues has not, as in for example the US, focused on the ethical aspects of business conduct, but rather on the possibility of relieving the state of the economic burden of financing the welfare state (Holt, 2000). In order to do so, the Danish debate has highlighted the role of the enterprise as a social responsible actor in society, and disputed the existing boundaries between the state and private business. At a more abstract level, the debate may be conceptualised as a dispute concerning the general division of labour between “state” and “market” regarding social policy. In practice this has been done by securing the integration of persons on social security or other public benefits into the labour market.

Danish social policy follows two interrelated lines: Legislative changes in social policy or what is generally referred to as the active line; and a campaign aimed at encouraging private companies to engage in solving social problems, termed Corporate Social Responsibility (Rosdahl, 2000).

The active line stipulates that all unemployed persons must be activated. Activation is a “right” and an “obligation”. The activation scheme means that all person with some work capacity should be active in work, training, subsidized work etc. (ibid.). This line aims furthermore at shifting individual and enterprise attention from dealing with the so-called weak groups in terms of their disabilities to focus on working capacity (Damgaard, 2000).

The second line, corporate social responsibility, aims to strengthen the social responsibility of enterprises especially by encouraging them to include persons from the “target groups” in their workforce. It should be emphasized that this responsibility of enterprises takes place on a voluntary basis; as yet there are no legislative demands on the recruitment policies of enterprises, for example demands that a certain proportion of the workforce comes from

“target groups” (Socialministeriet, 1994 & 1997; Høgelund, 2000).

Although the Danish campaign has been launched at a national political level, local political and administrative actors as well as prominent representatives of enterprises have appropriated these concepts, especially the symbolism inherent in them, to connote a range of common sense meanings. The *a priori* normative assumption within this discourse seems to be that private companies are both willing and able to solve a part of society’s social problems, and this new role for enterprises is basically considered beneficial for the Danish welfare state. Corporate Social Responsibility (combined with the activation line) is considered necessary by business people and politicians alike in order to achieve a socially and culturally integrated society. Furthermore, the transfer of former public social obligations is viewed as being in accordance with long-term economic goals of modern companies (Socialministeriet, 1997). The discussion has subsequently focused on the implementation of the new strategy rather than on analysing its normative basis (Holt, 2000). In Danish Research about the establishment of a more inclusive labour market by the use of flex jobs, too, there is a tendency to take the normative basis of the programme for granted (see e.g. Juul, 2000; Teknologisk Institut, 2000; Hjørne, 2000).

The establishment of flex jobs, which is inherent in the Law on Active Social Policy, passed in 1997, forms an important tool in Danish social policy both regarding the promotion of the active line and in terms of developing Corporate Social Responsibility. Flex jobs are offered to people with reduced working capacity. The main idea is that work disabled people may be permanently employed and in almost any kind of job, but on special conditions e.g. with fewer working hours, or with reduced work tasks. Their salary is paid by the employer who is then refunded in part by the State. The size of this subsidy is calculated by estimating the reduction in working capacity (e.g. one third, one half or two thirds of a “normal” capacity). In principle, therefore, the employer pays only for the work that the employee is able to perform. Although not stipulated in the law, most employers also seem to offer the minimum wage. The general intention with this type of work has been to establish a type of permanent subsidized job that in many aspects resembles employment on

ordinary conditions. However, the legislation also stipulates important differences from ordinary jobs, essentially because the responsibility in terms of establishing and controlling these jobs lies with the municipality in which the employee lives, and not within the institutions of the labour market. To sum up, these jobs may be viewed partly as the responsibility of public administration and partly as a part of labour market regulations, and generally epitomize not only a changing boundary between public and private social responsibilities, but also a blurred boundary between social and labour market policy.

Since the law came into effect in 1998, it has been changed twice, on both occasions in order to improve the legal position of flex job employees. This has been done by easing access to payment during unemployment; gaining the right to move to another municipality and stipulating a right to get a pre-retirement pay at the age of 60 (an option which prevails on the rest of the Danish labour market). Politically, there has been a heated discussion concerning the right of flex job employees to join the existing unemployment insurance funds (a-kasse). A political consensus concerning flex jobs as well as fundamental changes in the disability pension system, reached in December 2000, did not, however, include this right.

It follows from the above, that flex jobs may be viewed as a new category of work which integrates formerly separated social and political spaces. The very construction of these jobs therefore reflects an intention to change traditional ways of thinking about integrating persons with reduced working capacity into the labour market, yet in doing so challenges traditional social roles at the workplace and on the labour market. Not surprisingly, the establishment of flex jobs has not been entirely without problems: To some extent flex job employees occupy a position in “a grey zone” between labour market and social policy.

I shall now outline some characteristics of flex jobs and of the experiences of flex job employees.



### ***3. Flex Jobs – What Kind of Jobs?***

Although almost any kind of job, according to the rules, may be turned into a flex job, in practice, only certain types of job are considered suitable. This is not surprising if we look at the category of persons with a reduced working capacity. Though some are young with a physical illness or mental problems, most are around 40–55 years of age, unskilled or skilled workers, whose working capacity is reduced due to many years of physical labour (Hohnen, 2000). This makes it difficult, in practice, to find jobs for them, since they no can longer perform the physically demanding jobs to which they were accustomed, or for which they were trained. In practice many flex jobs are therefore unskilled, odd jobs – even if the employee is in fact skilled. For women flex jobs are often service jobs e.g. preparing lunches, making coffee, secretarial assistance or telephone receptionist work. In addition, most public workplaces, as for example kindergartens or old people's homes, employ unskilled assistants as extra helpers. For men, the typical jobs seem to be gardening, watchmen, or extra unskilled labourers at both private and public workplaces. In addition, about one fifth of the flex jobs are simply ordinary jobs, that have been changed into flex jobs, because the employee became ill, or for other reasons had difficulties fulfilling the requirements in a job under normal conditions. Disregarding this last group, many of the jobs are odd jobs, and they are not always considered very important compared to other jobs at the workplace. Yet it seems that people are more than happy to work.



## ***4. Individual Experiences in Flex Jobs***

### *“It is better to work”*

I am happy to be useful. They tell me that I have raised the standard around here.  
(Johan, 50 years old).

I live alone and I want to work. The very thought of retirement scares me. I haven't even considered applying for a disability pension. (Gerda, 52 years old).

Psychologically speaking it is better to work. If you don't work you get up late, drink coffee and nothing else happens. It ruins your family life. Work is important for your social life in general. At parties you may talk about your work and tell anecdotes – If the only thing you can talk about is the pain in your back or a woman's magazine that you've read – other people get bored. (Marianne, 42 years old).

These quotations illustrate what most of the interviewed express – that they are happy to have a job. Previous to their present flex job, many had a longer period on sick-leave or on social security benefit, which has been difficult and boring for many of them. Work in general seems to be regarded as a kind of time-structuring device as well as a precondition for social interaction and social identity. Furthermore, for some of these persons, the specific softness of the flex job has made room for a life after work as well. Generally, therefore, the social aspects of working are evaluated positively. Flex job employees are happy to be a part of a work group and they are often grateful for being used. However, when we turn to the specific role and identity connected with a flex job, the positive evaluation changes markedly.

### *Becoming “the weak”*

I hate the word flex job – it is like a stigma. Why do they have to call it that? It is the same every time politicians talk about it on the radio. We are called “the weak”- that is

offensive too. I have not told my colleagues that I am employed on special terms or that I get subsidies from the state. It is none of their business. I only told them, that I have problems with my back, and therefore can't lift anything heavy. But my boss knows of course. (Gerda, 52 years old).

It bothers me that this is the kind of job I have. It is not a job that I have fought to get... I am only here out of charity. (Karen, 52 years old).

I don't like to be called "weak". They talk about us as "the weak" all the time in the radio. Especially Karen Jespersen (former Minister of Social Affairs). But I have worked all my life! (Birgit, 56 years old).

To several of the employees, the term flex job as well as the manner in which it was being used by employers and politicians to show their social responsibility towards the "weak" of society was experienced as *humiliating* and *offensive*. By "naming" a job as a flex job and using it to evaluate the social obligation of employers, one simultaneously underlines the benevolence inherent in the job and thus situates a flex job as an object of social policy rather than an instrument in an economic transaction. This makes it difficult for flex job employees to have their work evaluated as a contribution at the workplace. Although a great deal of effort has been made politically to focus on peoples capacities instead of their incapacities, the classifying of these employees as "weak" makes it hard for them to legitimise a position as such. This may not only have consequences for their self-esteem, but may also (as the first quotation indicates) put them in an awkward position in relation to their colleagues.

#### *Outside the sphere of legal rights*

I am employed at the mercy of my boss. If I am discontent about anything I don't say so, because I don't have any rights. (Bent, 59 years old).

Nobody told me that I would be excluded from the unemployment insurance fund (a-kasse). I found out by accident, after I had already accepted the flex job. I had to sign some papers at the trade union and then they told me I was out. Then a week passed and



suddenly I realized that I could no longer expect to get an early pension pre-retirement pay either! (Jacob, 45 years old).

Nobody could give me a clear explanation of the rules. That has been the worst. Everything was unclear: I wasn't sure of my salary, of my position at the work place, not sure about the future. (Johanna, 42 years old).

We are rejected! Legally, we can make no claims, If I get fired I get a form of unemployment benefit for three months, and it is not even my union that pays. We can get no holiday – no rights to a straightforward unemployment benefit. (Frede, 50 years old).

Many of the persons employed in a flex job experience this as a loss of rights. Due to their specific subsidized employment, they are no longer qualified to receive unemployment benefit, many are not entitled to pre-retirement pay, and although the law on flex jobs in the case of unemployment stipulates the right to a different kind of publicly administered benefit, this is still considered a problem for many of the persons concerned. Many persons employed in flex jobs have contributed to the institutional framework provisions for 20-40 years and they feel cheated and very insecure about losing their membership, together with the economic and social security that goes along with it.<sup>i</sup> Furthermore, the administrative shift from unemployment benefit to “social security” is experienced not only in administrative terms, but also socially. It is experienced as substitution of the legal right to an unemployment benefit which one has paid for (as a legally insured member of the labour market) with a position as a social client, not entitled to getting what you have paid for, but to a payment, that may be associated with social security. Viewed in this light, the difficulty in coming to terms with their new position may not only be interpreted as an individual loss of face – but sociologically reflects that we are dealing with a *new social category* - persons, who are socially marginalized compared to the position they used to occupy. Because of this shift, many experience their present employment as an *exclusion* from, rather than an *integration* into, the labour market.

The flex job employees quoted above seem to experience a position of having no rights and they subsequently have a feeling of acting in a legal vacuum with no clear regulations. The fact that they are exposed to a legally more insecure position in a situation where they feel a need for the rights which they believed they had paid for, is experienced as a *moral breach* on the part of the politicians and more generally the state. Several of the employees have felt so frustrated about this, that they have written to the Minister of Social Affairs in order to complain about what they consider a fundamentally unjust rejection of their rights.<sup>ii</sup>

The transfer from a legal position as an ordinary employee to being employed on special conditions is not only considered as producing economic and social insecurity. It seems also to result in a more general experience of insecurity. As the above statements suggest, it is not only the loss of certain rights which is at stake here, but also as a more generally felt insecurity about the future.

#### *Normalizing strategies*

As mentioned above, any kind of flex job involves some kind of reduction, either of working hours or work tasks, compared to a similar ordinary job. The relatively open definition of leniency in the legislation, however, allows room for adjustment and negotiation.

Interestingly, it seems that this possibility of negotiation is seldom used in order to work less – and rather often in order to work more than what is required according to the contract.

According to the contract, I can leave at twelve o'clock, but when we are busy it is difficult to leave. (Cecilie, 30 years old).

My colleagues have suggested that I take it more easily – they think I work too much. I refused, because that would make me feel bad, I prefer that they should feel bad. (Johan, 55 years old).

At the moment I've worked 45 hours overtime. My boss wants me to bring it down – but I usually work many hours. (Kennet, 40 years old).

Today it was my day off, but I went there anyway, because I had promised to deliver some goods....My boss is happy, but there is a lot of jealousy among my colleagues. (Frede, 50 years old).

As the quotations above indicate flex job employees, in spite of the fact that they need jobs that are specifically “light”, not only work more than they are supposed to, several of them even go to work on their holidays. There may be several reasons for this. Firstly, it is simply difficult not to follow the pace and demands of the surrounding workplace. If everybody else is busy and working overtime it appears as a breach of solidarity to leave early, just as it would seem wrong to take an extra break when your colleagues haven't even had time to eat their lunch. Secondly, I suggest that employees in flex jobs feel insecure about their position in the workplace, e.g. whether they have been employed because of their qualifications or in order to strengthen the social image of the company. Although it seems that in practice most flex job employees are in fact employed on the basis of their qualifications, this is not always made explicit either to the flex job employee or to his or her colleagues. This makes it difficult to establish a clear social role at the work place. The point is that the social role of a flex job employee seems to oscillate between being a “burden” to colleagues and employer and a “valuable” part of the work force. Flex job employees react to this ambiguous position by socially attempting to pass as ordinary employees and thereby to be evaluated as a resource.

Finally, continuous membership in a trade union could be termed another “normalizing” strategy. It seemed that many of the flex job employees maintained their membership in spite of the fact that they did not imagine that they would benefit from this. But they had other reasons:

You cannot be here without being a member of a union – not to be a member would be regarded as tantamount to being a member of one of the Christian unions<sup>iii</sup> – There would be trouble... (Jacob, 45 years old).

Membership of a trade union was therefore upheld because of the political and social orientation that non-membership would indicate, even though flex job employees were not sure to what extent the trade unions could actually represent them. In many workplaces not to be a member of a trade union would conflict with the notion of solidarity and comradeship.

## ***5. Conflicting Interests and Social and Symbolic Struggles***

In several cases of establishing flex jobs there have been conflicts between the employer, the trade union and the local authorities. In some cases the representative of the municipality concerned has written to the Ministry of Social Affairs in order to settle the dispute. Conflicts usually concern the calculation of payment for the employee in question.<sup>iv</sup> In most cases, the trade unions find the minimum wage quite unacceptable, since most flex job employees have many years of working experience. One flex job employee explained that the trade union almost got her fired, because they demanded a higher wage than that the employer was ready to accept: “They wanted to help, but they almost got me fired. I finally had to tell them that I wanted to accept the conditions as they were” (Gerda, 52 years old).

I suggest that disputes about the level of wages indicate different interpretations concerning the basic principles on which the economic calculation ought to rest. Should it be calculated on the basis of existing principles of estimating experience and qualifications in accordance with the general agreement of the trade unions, or should it be comparable to disability benefits and therefore positioned as part of the social policy sphere? This particular dispute about wages epitomizes a more general struggle about the categorization and positioning of these jobs as part of the labour market or as social policy.

The same kind of dispute is also found at workplace level. Quite surprisingly, colleagues and employers explained that their actual experiences with flex job employees had differed markedly from their expectations. Most of them had, despite generally positive attitudes towards the idea of employing a person with reduced working capacity, feared that this would increase their own workload. They had in other words imagined flex job employment as a “burden”. To their surprise, they had been forced to adjust their view, and in most cases the employee on special conditions turned out to be regarded “a benefit”, contributing much more to the workplace, than what had been expected. The same view seemed to prevail

among at least some of the employers. One of them found his (several) flex job employees to be *more effective* as well as more committed and flexible (e.g. agreed to working irregular hours) than the employees on ordinary terms. He commented: “We have no problems with the ones on special terms – we can almost demand anything and still they say thank you”. For colleagues and employers alike, this change has in some cases made it more difficult to estimate the social role and position of the flex job employee, and has subsequently resulted in discussions about wage levels and work tasks and limits to the number of employees on special terms.

I hold that these disputes can partly be related to the dual structure of the flex job as such, and partly to contradictions in Danish social policy. The structural ambiguity originates in the political construction of a flex job. Such jobs consist of two parts: a working capacity, on the basis of which one is supposed to work, and a reduction in working capacity according to which one is supposed to be “sheltered” in terms of fewer working hours or specifically light work tasks. The political vision behind the active social policy line has been to emphasize resources rather than disability and thus to position these kind of jobs within the social and legal framework of the labour market. Yet the other policy line, the political discourse of Corporate Social Responsibility appeals to the social responsibility of employers and colleagues by picturing flex job employees as “a burden” that has to be carried, rather than as an asset. This image of the flex job employee has had a tremendous impact on the social construction of these employees on the labour market as well as in society.

## ***6. The Gift of Work – New Principles of Exchange***

### *Economy as spheres of exchange*

Within theories of economic anthropology, the term “economy” is defined in very broad terms as referring to principles and practices of exchange. In their introduction to “Money and the Morality of Exchange”, Bloch, M. and Parry, J. (1989) suggest that all societies can be characterized by at least two spheres of exchange. The one is a short-term exchange sphere dominated by individual acquisition and the other a long-term sphere where exchange is directed towards the collective reproduction of society.

...all (these) systems make – indeed have to make – some ideological space within which individual acquisition is a legitimate and even laudable goal; but (that) such activities are consigned to a separate sphere which is ideologically articulated with, and subordinated to, a sphere of activity concerned with the cycle of long-term reproduction. (Bloch and Parry, 1989: 26).

Empirically, the two spheres may appear separated or interconnected. Furthermore, the long-term cycle is always “positively associated with central aspects of morality,” while the short-term order is amoral, since it is only concerned with individual purposes “which are considered largely irrelevant to the long-term order”(ibid.). In addition, long-term order involves forms of exchange that produces *enduring* social relationships, often in terms of a delayed obligation to repay or return, what was given, while the short-term (commercial) exchange (in principle) is characterized by a termination of the social relationships as soon as the exchange is finished. Although contemporary Western economies are in many ways dominated by an ideology of neo-classicist economic rationality, other exchange principles are clearly at work as well, although these may be difficult to depict. In modern capitalism, the long-term exchange sphere may consist of tax payment, charity or generally informal circulation of de-commodified items, mainly in the form of gifts. It should furthermore be emphasized that the distinction between the two is an analytical distinction, as they

coexist and are often empirically inseparable. Yet non-commercial moralities are often important both for the practical functioning of commercial exchange, and for principles governing it (Vestergaard, 1992).

We may term the two most basic spheres of exchange: gift giving and commercial exchange. They involve different exchange principles, different social relations between the transactors, and are often differently evaluated and organized within a moral hierarchy (I. Kopytoff, 1996). The commercial exchange is characterized by being amoral, by taking place between two independent actors, and by in principle determining their relationship, once the transaction is concluded. Gift giving however, is morally invested, it takes place between two or more interdependent actors, and the transaction establishes a durable social relationship of mutual obligation between the giver and the receiver of the gift. (Mauss, 1969 (1954). In the words of M. Godelier:

The act of giving seems to create simultaneously a twofold relationship between giver and receiver. A relationship of solidarity because the giver shares what he has, or what he is, with the receiver, and a relationship of superiority because the one who receives the gift and accepts it places himself in the debt of the one who has given it, thereby becoming his “dependent”, at least for as long as he has not “given back” what he was given. (Godelier, 1999: 12).

#### *Exchange principles of work*

The social and symbolic meanings of work in contemporary Western society tend to oscillate between it being an individual's obligation towards society on the one hand, and a right to be able to earn a living on the other (Etzioni 1995), Wadel (1997). Work may furthermore be associated with a range of moral values, and various categories of work may be positioned in different exchange spheres according to different transactional principles and moralities. Work may be a commodity or it may as, in the case of voluntary work, gain status as a kind of gift. However, paid work may generally be dominated by the ideology and amorality of commercial exchange, though other moralities and social relations are clearly at work as well.

The establishment of a more inclusive labour market involves, as the case of flex jobs shows,



a re-negotiation of the social roles and cultural meanings of work. More specifically this seems to include changes in the commercial exchange value of work as well as in social identity and as a means of social inclusion. In all of the empirical examples given above, flex job employees are either directly or indirectly positioned differently from employees in other jobs. The way these jobs are socially constructed positions them socially in a sphere, which is dominated by *obligations* and *favours*, rather than by the rights prevailing in the surrounding labour market – and which to some extent serve as its boundary. The concepts of solidarity and superiority, as well as what Mauss (1969) (1954) termed the obligation not only to repay the gift but also *to receive it*, are all at work in the social construction of the flex job. The experience of gratitude and the role of “the weak” signal that these employees are not employed because of their qualifications but “out of charity”, as one of them expresses it. This indicates that we are dealing with social relations of gift exchange, rather those inherent in a commercial transaction. The status of these jobs as “gifts” is further underlined by the experiences of exclusion from labour market regulations and rights, and of being positioned in an unclear social zone dominated by “favours” and “duties”. Finally, the rather surprising tendency to work more than one is supposed to, although employed in a particular soft job, suggests that flex job employees are attempting “to return the gift”. This indicates, in turn, that we are dealing with a specific set of social relations, which are remarkably similar to the ones outlined in connection with gift-exchange.

Although the aim of the Danish active social policy is to emphasize resources instead of incapacities, the social construction of a flex job is different from an ordinary job. In many ways a person employed in a flex job is positioned as “a social client” and does not experience belonging to labour market institutions, especially the unemployment insurance funds. Part of the ambiguity of these jobs may be related to this. In addition, I suggest that the public discourse of corporate social responsibility is contrary to the idea of emphasizing resources and capacities, which is inherent in the other active social policy line. By promoting *flex job employment as an object of corporate social responsibility*, this type of job, (as well as its holder) is categorized differently from ordinary work, which is evaluated in terms of commercial exchange of labour. I suggest therefore, that inherent in the discourse of the corporate social responsibility - which preconditions the labelling of someone as “weak” in order to be evoked as a discourse of social solidarity at all – there is a tendency to

underline what one could call the “allowance” or “subsidy” dimension of the job. By evoking the discourse of “the weak”, the duality dimension of the job is diminished and thereby categorically pushed out of the commercial exchange sphere and into what we could call the exchange sphere of “redistribution” or “gift-giving”. Thus although, companies actually only pay for the work, that is being done, and often pay a lower wage than they would normally offer, their employment of a person in a flex job is nevertheless considered an act of benevolence. This may also explain why it is solely the employees and not the employers who picture themselves as receivers. One could also argue that employers in many cases also “receive” more than they pay for. Moreover, since employers get subsidy from the state, one could perhaps have expected a certain “uneasiness” parallel to that which flex job employees experience. Yet, I suggest that by linking flex jobs and corporate social responsibility in the political discourse, private companies become socially constructed as the “givers” rather than as “receivers”.

## ***7. Conclusion: Towards New Forms of Solidarity and New Forms of Exclusion***

Empirically, there is never any clear division between gift giving and commercial exchange (Vestergaard (1992)). It is therefore important to note that both principles are at work in the case of ordinary employment and employment on special conditions. Also “ordinary employment” may be characterized both as fulfilling an obligation towards society (gift-giving) and as a way to earn a living (commercial exchange). However, the data on flex jobs show that these jobs are socially constructed as a separate category dominated by the principles of gift-giving. The individual experiences with and reactions to employment in a flex job indicate, furthermore, that this categorization determines to some extent the social status of flex job employees, and their social and economic possibilities on the labour market.

I suggest that the establishment of a flex job at a workplace – or the conversion of an ordinary type of employment into an employment on special terms – changes the social structure at the workplace. It positions the flex job employee in a situation of debt to the employer, which he or she then tries to “repay” by “giving” more work, than is formally required.<sup>v</sup> This mechanism is further underlined by the fact that many flex job employees considered the relationship to their colleagues problematic and threatened by their new position. This indicates that the establishment of a flex job simultaneously alters (or threatens to alter) the former structures of group solidarity by strengthening the *vertical* social relations (between the employee on special terms and the employer). This may prevent (at least in the eyes of colleagues) the development of strong horizontal bonds of mutual solidarity. This vertical employer-employee relationship is furthermore based on emotions such as gratitude and a sense of obligation, and thus may threaten to undermine the generally more impersonal relation between work-giver and work-taker prevalent in the workplace. The practice by many flex job employees of upholding their trade union membership, although they don’t necessarily benefit from it themselves, may, viewed in this light, be seen as an attempt to symbolically restore the horizontal bonds of solidarity.

If we now consider the relationship between the two general spheres of exchange mentioned above, we may conceptualise the political development of specifically soft jobs as an expansion of non-commercial exchange, and thus as a strengthening of the morality associated with the long-term production of society. This however, is only part of what has happened.

The position as a flex job employee seems to be most difficult for persons who formerly occupied a central place on the labour market and who legally and symbolically felt linked to it, through their workplace, their trade union and by being members of an unemployment fund. This may not surprisingly be related to the fact, that they most clearly face a loss of the rights and a breach of the security for the future that they formerly had, and which they thought they were legally and morally entitled to. I suggest however, that their criticism may also be understood as a reaction to what they consider a *breach of solidarity* on the part of their former employers and, more symbolically, society e.g. the politicians and the legal system. The fact that they thought they had paid morally, by working, as well financially by payments to their own unemployment insurance, suggest to them that the employer and society “owes” them. Instead, by removing them socially, legally and cognitively from the labour market, and positioning them as social clients, this exchange cycle is broken: They are not longer regarded as contributors, but solely as receivers. Instead of getting what could be termed a “return gift” for many years of work and payment, they are socially and morally positioned as recipients whereby their former contribution to society, which may in these terms also be viewed as a “gift”, becomes disqualified as a significant contribution. Subsequently, what they conceive should be a “return gift” from their former employers, or perhaps symbolically from society, is reinterpreted, through its institutionalisation as employment in flex job, as a gift. This fundamentally alters the social relationships, and positions the employee as being morally in debt to the employer. On top of this, employers don’t actually give any gift, since they only pay for the work being done, yet they are socially positioned as givers via the discourse of corporate social responsibility.

In a sense, one can say that the aim of constructing a more inclusive market by retaining and integrating persons with a reduced working capacity in the labour market is being fulfilled.

Yet if we look at the process of conversion involved, the result is not a restoration of the general principles of gift exchange as such, nor can we speak of a broadening of commercial exchange of labour to include moralities of gift-giving. Rather, work in the sense of commercial exchange is being substituted by some of the mechanisms inherent in gift-exchange, mainly the stress on vertical bonds of obligations and duties and of inequality. Yet, the continuous cyclic aspect of gift exchange is removed. This, in turn, freezes the social (unequal) relations, since the ones receiving "the gift" will presumably never be able to repay it. Consequently, conversion from the short-term to the long-term order is experienced as socially prestigious by employers, but as a social "deroute" by the employees in question.<sup>vi</sup>

Finally, politically, the idea of corporate social responsibility is to make (especially private) companies take on a larger part of the financing of the Danish welfare state, and thus enlarging the social space of private responsibility. Yet we may argue that in the case of flex jobs, there is also a transfer of responsibility in the opposite direction - especially in cases where the employee with a reduced working capacity has been active on the labour market for many years. For these, employment in a flex job, may be considered a transfer of social responsibility from the private employer to the Danish state - a movement quite contrary to the strengthening of corporate social responsibility, which was originally intended.



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## Notes

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<sup>i</sup> The reason why employment in a flex job is viewed as incompatible with membership in an unemployment fund, is that in order to receive unemployment benefit one has to be “ready and able to work”. By qualifying for a job on special terms one is simultaneously found unfit for an ordinary job and thus no longer “able to and ready to work”.

<sup>ii</sup> Torben Vestergaard points to a similar reaction among Danish fishermen. The introduction of quotas on fishing was being experienced as a breach of the mutual moral obligations between fishermen and state, and the fishermen subsequently did not voice their disappointment in political terms, but wrote to the Danish Queen, as is their right. (Vestergaard: 2000)

<sup>iii</sup> Christian Unions are liberal trade unions that are usually not accepted as “real” unions by traditional social democratic trade union members.

<sup>iv</sup> The law on flex jobs, which is a part of the Law covering active social policy, stipulates that wages and work conditions in a flex job must be in accordance with the collective agreement or the agreement of a similar job, although the subsidy part must not exceed the minimum wage (Lov om aktiv Socialpolitik af 10. Juni 1997).

<sup>v</sup> The same point was made by Mikk-Meyer in her analysis of the attitudes of the social relations between “clients” and professionals in an activation project. Here, newcomers, who had formerly received allowance from the state without working, would work very much and be very committed to their new “job” and this Mikk-Meyer interprets as an attempt to “repay” their debt to society. (Mikk-Meyer 1999)

<sup>vi</sup> In addition there seems to be another paradox, here. Although the idea of social responsibility (experienced as a moral obligation) is often evoked, when talking employers about employees with reduced work capacity, the main argument to hire them generally seems to have been economic. This is indicated not only by employers generally saying so, but also in the very structure of subsidized employment since the employer is in fact compensated for lower working capacity. Where exactly the social responsibility actually came in - remained highly unclear in several cases.