

## Work and Economic Life



**Discuss the contention that ‘flexibility’ has become a permanent feature of people’s working lives.**

*This question is one to approach with caution, given its potentially wide-ranging nature.*

There are two main methods of dealing with this. One is a simple true-false framework, using the material from the sections on ‘Taylorism and Fordism’ (from page 892) and ‘Post-Fordism’ (from page 894). This provides the backdrop, describing relatively rigid methods of production (Taylorism and Fordism) and their inherent weaknesses, along with their subsequent decline and replacement by post-Fordist practices. The text examines four elements of these recent practices: the flexible production model, teamworking, multi-skilling and other aspects of labour flexibility with regard to time and space. Some of these are also discussed in Chapter 18 and you could draw on these as well as the Enrico/Rico vignette that closes Chapter 20. It is important to realize that this question invites an empirical response and the use of examples and data on working patterns is required.

While this will produce a good essay based on the disputed degree of change in the contemporary economy, it is quite unadventurous and could end up being a little too general. A second option would be to focus less on whether flexibility is new and how it came to be, and more on the idea that flexibility affects groups of workers equally. Here the emphasis is on inequalities within flexible labour markets today. The advantage is that you have more scope to discuss the issues rather than simply run through a familiar narrative. This approach also enables you to broaden your range of material and make links to public policy debates.

For the more confident and ambitious student there are a number of options here. You could open up the normative debate about flexibility – what does it mean for employers and employees, how does it impact differentially on men and women, how are minority ethnic groups affected, and so on. There is some good material on wage differentials and the gendered division of labour (pp. 905-9), a useful Classic Studies box focusing on the unpaid activities that constitute ‘housework’ (pp. 889-90) and a related box on the 5 deadly ‘C’s for women in employment (p. 907). There is also an interesting angle to be pursued here, drawing out the tensions between homemaking and homeworking. The Doonesbury cartoon on page 910 is a useful bridge between gender inequality in the labour market and the issue of childcare.



Though gender is the primary prism through which Chapter 20 views inequality, there is also the opportunity to look at material from the previous chapters on class (11) and poverty (12) to present a more calibrated picture of ‘the working woman’. You may also find some relevant data in Chapter 13 on the global situation for women.

The overriding concern when tackling this question must be the need to unpack the concept of flexibility into its constituent elements so that you can make the most telling use of your data. This is a case where defining and explaining the key concept should be more than a simple and brief paragraph as the evidence you use needs to address the various elements of flexible working.