



Flexible labour policies as competitive advantage

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Abstract *The emergence of the Covid-19 pandemic and the constant changes in the expectations and needs of employees have accelerated the implementation of labour flexibility policies by companies. Currently, there is some uncertainty in the literature about the real benefits of adopting these policies, hence the relevance of this research, which aims to assess whether they represent a source of sustainable competitive advantage. This research used a qualitative approach involving in-depth interviews with human resource managers to analyse the impact of labour flexibility policies on a firm's competitive advantage using the VRIO framework. The study found that while employees view labour flexibility as beneficial to their work-life balance and job satisfaction, from the perspective of firms, these policies may be valuable but do not provide a distinct competitive advantage. Consequently, companies need to consider these policies when developing strategies to maintain their competitiveness and market position.*

Keywords Competitive parity · Flexible labour policies · Inimitability · Organisation · Rarity · Sustainable competitive advantage · Value · VRIO model

Introduction

Businesses play a crucial role in the economic development and growth of a country (Wozniak et al., 2019). Their main function is to produce goods and services that meet the needs of consumers, and are considered the main source of wealth. Thus, it becomes relevant that firms can develop superior performance to generate profit, with the literature identifying competitive advantage as the main driver of a firm's superior performance (Barney, 1997; Dyer & Singh, 1998; Grant, 1998; Roberts, 1999; Zander & Zander, 2005).

According to the resource-based view (RBV), it is through the development of unique resources and capabilities that a firm can gain a sustainable competitive advantage that allows it to achieve exceptional performance (Barney, 1991; Dierickx & Cool, 1989; Peteraf, 1993; Wernerfelt, 1984). Thus, the VRIO model acquires special relevance as it represents an approach based on four pillars (value, rarity, inimitability and firm) that aims to assess a firm's internal resources and capabilities and identify the most relevant ones as a source of sustainable competitive advantage and lead to superior performance (Aghazadeh, 2015; Dias et al., 2020).

Several factors are leading to constant changes and new trends in the labour market, namely socio-cultural influences (Onken-Menke et al., 2018), new technologies (Höse et al., 2023; Solke & Singh, 2018), regulatory and legal requirements (Caligiuri et al., 2020), leading to a growing concern for companies to adapt to the new changes. In this

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sense, workers' expectations are also changing and the way they work is changing at a rapid pace (Dhal et al., 2021). In this way, and with the pandemic caused by Covid-19 acting as an accelerator of this process, flexible labour policies have increasingly become an issue and something that firms have considered (Westerman & Bonnet, 2015). Flexible working policies are an important element for organisations to attract and retain valuable employees (Allen et al., 2013). Rau and Hyland (2002) point out that these policies can be operationalised as flexible work arrangements, defined as work options that “increase the flexibility of the spatial (where work is done) and/or temporal (when work is done) boundaries of work, allowing workers to manage the competing demands of work and personal interests” (p. 112). The most common forms of flexible work arrangements include options such as part-time and job-sharing, flexible working hours, flexitime, telecommuting, compressed workweeks, alternative work schedules and annualised hours (Chung, 2020; Oluwatayo & Adetoro, 2020). These policies have also been identified as a source of talent retention, development and attraction (Dhal et al., 2021), reduced turnover intention (Almer & Kaplan, 2002; Asim & Nasim, 2022; McNall et al., 2009; Moen et al., 2011; Onken-Menke et al., 2018; Richman et al., 2008; Rožman et al., 2023), increased competitiveness (Peretz et al., 2018; Stavrou & Kilaniotis, 2009) and increased employee satisfaction and commitment to the organisation (Boell et al., 2016). Consequently, the literature states that efficient workforce management can lead to the achievement of sustainable competitive advantage (Pfeffer & Veiga, 1999).

Despite the benefits of adopting these flexibility policies, their effectiveness is far from unanimous and requires further academic analysis. Indeed, several criticisms have been raised regarding the adoption of these policies. These include abuse by some employees by overusing the flexibility granted to them, the negative impact on team dynamics due to poor communication and failure to use the most appropriate technology (Timms et al., 2015), a certain sense of unfairness on the part of employees when the flexibility offered is not identical for all (Hegtvædt et al., 2002), and the lack of support and supervision (Powell & Mainiero, 1999; Wells-Lepley et al., 2015), which is key to the effective implementation of these policies. Therefore, it is important to determine the effectiveness of these policies. Furthermore, the aforementioned previous research focuses on operational dimensions (e.g., supervision, support or talent retention), with little attention paid to the strategic implications. Against this background, the main question of this research is to analyse whether labour flexibility policies are a source of sustainable competitive advantage for firms and to explore their potential to create

competitive advantage and how firms can best exploit them.

The contributions of this study to the resource-based view and competitive advantage are related to the importance of flexible labour policies as a source of competitive advantage. This study shows that firms that are able to offer flexible working arrangements to their employees have the potential to gain a temporary competitive advantage over those that do not. This is due to the increase in employee job satisfaction, increased productivity and improved staff retention that tend to result from the adoption of flexible working policies. However, when compared to companies with similar policies, the adoption of flexible labour policies is not necessarily seen as a key driver of competitive advantage.

In terms of the structure of the document, the literature review on the topic in question is first presented to guide and ground the topic under investigation. Next, the research methodology used will be identified, based on a qualitative analysis and consequently a data analysis of the information collected. Following this analysis, the main findings will be presented, promoting a link between the results obtained and the theory previously reviewed. Finally, the main conclusions and limitations of the research will be presented.

Literature review

Main definitions and concepts

Competitive advantage can be defined as the ability of a firm to outperform its competitors in terms of profitability, market share or other relevant measures. The concept of competitive advantage is often used in the economic literature without a clear definition, leading to a situation where the meaning of competitive advantage is “taken for granted but not fully understood” (Pilinkiene et al., 2013, p. 3669). However, some authors have provided more explicit definitions of competitive advantage. For example, the competitive advantage cluster includes those definitions of environmental strategy that make more explicit the strategic attribute of environmental innovation related to the development of environmentally sustainable products as a means of achieving competitive advantage for companies (Castro et al., 2022). Another definition highlights that a company's future competitive advantage is based on the different talent pools that exist in its organisation (Calle-Durán et al., 2021). Michael Porter's work on strategy, including his book 'Competitive Advantage', has been highly influential in defining competitive advantage (Seddon, 2005). Institutional competitive advantage is also a distinct concept from pure competitive advantage and

comparative institutional advantage (Martin, 2014). In summary, competitive advantage can be defined as a firm's ability to outperform its competitors on relevant measures, and there are different definitions and perspectives on this concept in the literature.

Competitiveness can be defined as the ability of a firm, industry or country to compete effectively in the marketplace and achieve superior performance relative to its competitors (Porter, 2011). The term is often used in a multidimensional setting, encompassing various attributes, such as market share, profitability, productivity, innovation, sustainability and customer satisfaction. Competitiveness can be assessed both internally, by comparing a company's performance with optimal standards, and externally, by comparing it with the performance of competitors. The concept of competitiveness can also be applied to tourist destinations, political systems and even animal populations. While the main idea of what competitiveness means has remained the same over time, the ways to achieve it and the sources of sustainable competitiveness have changed in response to the rapidly changing business environment (Ramoniene et al., 2011).

According to Liu (2017), dynamic capability can be defined as a firm's ability to adapt and respond to changes in the business environment by continuously renewing and reconfiguring its resources and capabilities. This concept is closely related to the idea of organisational learning and is seen as a key driver of sustainable competitive advantage. Dynamic capabilities are often characterised by their ability to integrate, build and reconfigure internal and external competencies to respond to rapidly changing environments. They are also characterised by their ability to sense changes in the environment, seize opportunities and transform the organisation's resources and capabilities to create new value. Dynamic capabilities are not static but are constantly evolving and adapting to new challenges and opportunities. The concept of dynamic capability has been applied in various fields, including innovation management, distribution and energy systems, among others.

Flexible work policies can be defined as organisational policies that allow employees to have greater control over their work schedules, work location and work arrangements. These policies are designed to provide employees with greater flexibility and work-life balance, while improving organisational performance and productivity. Flexible working policies can include options such as flexitime, remote working, compressed working weeks, job sharing and part-time working. These policies are often implemented to attract and retain talent, improve employee satisfaction and engagement, and reduce absenteeism and turnover. The success of flexible working policies depends on the organisation's ability to provide adequate support and resources to employees, and to effectively manage and monitor employee performance (Bindal & Upadhyaya, 2022).

Relationship between strategy and competitive advantage

The entrepreneurial fabric is one of the main competitiveness factors of a country (Singh et al., 2023), playing a key role in its economic growth (Wozniak et al., 2019), stimulating innovation (Dias et al., 2023) and creating opportunities in the labour market (Rahman et al., 2017). In this way, and in order for businesses to be able to develop, they need to define a set of strategies (Héraud, 2021). The business strategies are important for the definition and implementation of objectives that guide the development of the company and increase the possibility of gaining competitive advantages over the competition (Alnoor et al., 2023; Latifah et al., 2020).

As the competitive advantage is the consequence of the strategic choices made by a company (Friesenbichler & Reinstaller, 2022), it can also be seen as the position that a company has to build in order to differentiate itself from the competition and, consequently, achieve superior performance (Sanchez-Henriquez & Pavez, 2021). Currently, and considering all the technological advances and the high level of competition, firms are required to constantly find ways and strategies that increase their competitiveness and enable its sustainability (Latifah et al., 2020). Competitive advantage is also defined as the main driver of superior performance of a firm (Barney, 1997; Dyer & Singh, 1998; Grant, 1998; Roberts, 1999; Zander & Zander, 2005), while superior performance can be recognised as above average financial and operational performance (Venkatraman & Ramanujam, 1986).

The resource-based view clarifies that a firm can achieve superior performance through the effective implementation of a competitive advantage developed through unique internal resources and capabilities (Dierickx & Cool, 1989; Peteraf, 1993; Wernerfelt, 1984). In this way, it is possible to identify a positive relationship between competitiveness and firm performance, given that the exploitation of a competitive advantage positively affects the possibility of achieving a superior result, and that the use of this same advantage is significantly and positively related to the performance of the firm (Newbert, 2008).

VRIO Model

According to the resource-based view (RBV), it is the characteristics of internal resources that make firms unique, and these should be assessed using the VRIO model. Thus, in order to develop successful strategies, it is necessary to have significant knowledge about the firm's internal resources and capabilities (Barney, 1991; Duncan et al., 1998). The VRIO model (Table 1) is a tool based on four dimensions (value, rarity, inimitability and firm) whose



Table 1 VRIO model

Valuable?	Rare?	Expensive to imitate?	Exploited by the Firm?	
No	–	–	–	Competitive disadvantage
Yes	No	–	–	Competitive parity
Yes	Yes	No	–	Temporary competitive advantage
Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Unused competitive advantage
Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Sustainable competitive advantage

Source: Adapted from Barney (2002)

main objective is to carry out an internal analysis of firms (Barney, 1991; Grant, 1991; Wernerfelt, 1984) and to transform the most relevant resources into sustainable advantages (Barney & Wright, 1998). If the resources and capabilities meet the requirements of VRIO, they can be considered as sustainable competitive advantages and lead to superior firm performance (Aghazadeh, 2015).

In this view, it is essential that resources are heterogeneous and immobile (Almarri & Gardiner, 2014; Barrutia & Echebarria, 2015; Mitra et al., 2018) and that the firm has the capacity to hold them (Almarri & Gardiner, 2014; Barrutia & Echebarria, 2015). Resources should be used to formulate and implement strategies (Amit & Schoemaker, 1993; Barney, 1991; Peteraf, 1993; Teece et al. 1997) and should be considered as a source of competitive advantage (Barney, 1991). They play a key role in the competitiveness of firms (Wang & Ahmed, 2007) and contribute to superior performance when they are considered valuable, rare and difficult to imitate (Bird, 2008; Newbert, 2008). In addition, the firm must be sufficiently capable of exploiting these resources (Barney & Wright, 1998; Sheehan & Foss, 2017; Talaja, 2012).

Nevertheless, one of the shortcomings identified in this model is related to the fact that it is not adaptive and does not consider unexpected changes that may occur in turbulent economic environments and lead to strategic changes (Lin et al., 2012). In this sense, the concept of dynamic capability gains strength, which is based on adjusting resources to adapt to changing environments (Teece et al., 1997; Zahra et al., 2006). With this and although this model helps to identify which resources can contribute to the achievement of a competitive advantage, most of them are mobile and accessible to many competitors, given the globalisation and the existing technological evolution (Parey & Waldinger, 2011). Therefore, some firms need to identify the key resources and reconfigure them over time to achieve a sustainable competitive advantage (Fiol, 2001). However, it is important to note that, despite the criticisms that have been made of the RBV view, it is argued that none of the points raised compromises the

contribution that this reflection has brought to strategic thinking (Acedo et al., 2006; Armstrong & Shimizu, 2007; Newbert, 2007).

Value

Resources alone do not provide competitive advantage (Dassler, 2016; Peteraf, 1993; Poernomo et al., 2013). To become more competitive, firms need to develop and exploit their internal resources to create value (Barney, 1996; Newbert, 2008). It is important for each firm to be able to assess which resources are more valuable and suitable to develop a strategy efficiently. A valuable resource allows firms to take advantage of market opportunities and/or neutralise potential threats (Barney, 1996).

Rarity

A resource is scarce if it is owned or obtainable by only one or a few firms (Barney, 1996). Resource scarcity is positively related to the achievement of competitive advantage (Newbert, 2008). It is possible for a firm to gain a competitive advantage from a valuable resource if the number of firms possessing it is significantly smaller than the number of firms required to create perfect competition in the industry.

Inimitability

To gain competitive advantage, resources must be valuable, rare and difficult to imitate (Dierickx & Cool, 1989). This characteristic is verified when a resource is expensive for competitors to imitate (Barney, 1996). The greater the inimitability of a resource, the better the performance of the firm.

Resources can provide an advantage for a period of time until competitors manage to develop similar strategies. Thus, a firm's ability to protect a resource and keep it inimitable becomes extremely important (Baron & Kenny, 1986).

Organisation

The strategies used by firms should consider resources that create value for the firm, are rare among competitors, and are difficult for competitors to imitate (Barney, 1991; Sheehan & Foss, 2017). However, these resources alone are inefficient, and the firm needs to be well organised (Barney & Wright, 1998) and have capabilities to capitalise and exploit these assets appropriately (Barney, 1997; Peteraf, 1993). In this way, firms come closer to improving their performance by creating sustainable competitive advantage (Barney, 1997; Peteraf, 1993).

Relationship between the VRIO model and competitive advantage

Firm performance is related to the ability of firms to possess unique resources and capabilities that provide competitive advantages in the face of competition (Chong et al., 2009). Firms that have a greater ability to develop competitive advantages can achieve superior performance (Peteraf & Barney, 2003; Zou et al., 2003). Therefore, it is necessary that they take advantage of the resources that have greater capacity (Barney, 1991; Newbert, 2008). Therefore, following the resource-based view, the application of the VRIO model facilitates the identification and creation of sustainable competitive advantage (Helfat & Martin, 2014; Teece, 2007).

A firm that wants to be successful in the market needs to create a competitive advantage over its competitors, which depends on the firm's internal resources and capabilities that are rare, valuable and expensive to imitate (Barney, 1995). In other words, the firm should focus on the resources and capabilities that it controls and that underpin superior and consistent performance (Peteraf & Barney, 2003). In addition, several firms in a given industry can gain competitive advantage by representing the economic value created by the firm, the difference between the benefits perceived by the buyer and the corresponding costs (Peteraf & Barney, 2003).

Flexible working time policies as a source of competitive advantage

The needs and expectations of employees are changing with new trends. Nowadays, with technological innovations and constant changes, it is more complicated to manage workplaces efficiently. The way work is performed is changing at a rapid pace (Dhal et al., 2021). In an ever-changing world, adaptability has become a necessity for organisations and flexibility should now be seen as a mandatory characteristic of an organisation (Solke & Singh, 2018). Due to the increasing demand for skilled

employees, firms have started to pay attention to their preferences and expectations (Beechler & Woodward, 2009; Ronda et al., 2018).

The introduction of new technologies enables the globalisation of the workforce, enabling an environment that meets the needs and ambitions of both employees and employers at an affordable cost. This globalisation perspective allows people to interact with each other in a short period of time without the need to travel (Dhal et al., 2021). Thus, flexible work policies, which can be defined as self-management practices that allow employees to control how they manage and influence their resources in terms of time, energy and attention, have become increasingly important (Allen et al., 2013). Today, work can be done anywhere, anytime. There is no longer a need for employees to commute to another place to work. Work can now be moved to workers rather than workers moving to work. An internet connection allows workers to connect to each other and to the information they need (Dhal et al., 2021). This digital transformation process has been gaining momentum for quite some time (Westerman & Bonnet, 2015), but the recent pandemic caused by Covid-19 accelerated it, forcing firms to adopt highly technological operating models and completely changing the way they work. Companies were forced to adapt their operations. This pandemic caused many problems, firms were forced to close, but it also acted as an incubator for those who had the necessary resources and the opportunity to adapt (Kudyba et al., 2020).

Linked to this is a change in society, particularly in the expectations, career aspirations and living standards of younger workers (Dhal et al., 2021). As a result, there have been several changes in the way companies work and the employment policies they implement. There is now a greater focus on creating an appropriate working environment to provide the desired conditions to attract a highly motivated and skilled workforce. Employees are increasingly looking for a job that provides them with more than just income and allows them to maintain a work-life balance, giving greater importance to family, personal growth and lifestyle (Dhal et al., 2021). Therefore, it is crucial for companies to create and offer flexibility policies and work benefits to their employees in order to retain and develop their talent (Dhal et al., 2021) and increase their competitiveness (Peretz et al., 2018; Stavrou & Kilaniotis, 2009).

Recently, several flexible working policies have been implemented in different organisations to help employees manage their work, family and social responsibilities (Onken-Menke et al., 2018). These flexibility policies have been identified as a factor in reducing employee turnover intentions (Almer & Kaplan, 2002; McNall et al., 2009; Moen et al., 2011; Onken-Menke et al., 2018; Richman et al., 2008). Flexibility policies have benefits for both employees and employers. They are designed to facilitate



behaviours and create positive attitudes towards work to improve work-life balance and increase employee well-being (Ko et al., 2013). There is a strong correlation between flexibility policies and employee satisfaction and commitment (Boell et al., 2016). They are currently one of the main drivers of employee motivation (Deloitte, 2018; Hays, 2020) and are associated with increased employee engagement, improved performance and productivity (Aziz-Ur-Rehman & Siddiqui, 2019). The provision of such measures leads employees to believe that the organisation is investing in their well-being, ultimately developing a stronger connection and commitment to the organisation and increasing their motivation (Richman et al., 2008). As a result, the positive impact and competitive advantage that employee engagement has on firm performance is recognised by firms (Kahn & Heaphy, 2014).

Nevertheless, there is a noticeable difference between the availability and actual use of these policies (Blair-Loy et al., 2011; Skinner & Pocock, 2014; Tipping et al., 2012). This difference can be explained by lack of knowledge about the available policies (Skinner & Pocock, 2014), incompatibility between the available policies and employees' needs (de Menezes & Kelliher, 2011; Prottas et al., 2007), lack of support and supervision (McDonald & Cathcart, 2015) and fear of negative career consequences (Blair-Loy & Wharton, 2002). On the other hand, the availability of these policies provides employees with a sense of control (Kossek et al., 2006), while their effective use provides a sense of autonomy (Allen et al., 2013). Nevertheless, availability alone increases the attractiveness of the firm (Batt & Valcour, 2003; Grover & Crooker, 1995).

One of the aspects that has become more important is work-life balance (Lyons & Kuron, 2014). For example, employees who receive support in managing their work and personal lives are more committed and loyal to their organisations (Choo et al., 2016), which leads to more positive employee perceptions of the work environment (Kelliher & Anderson, 2008). Companies that offer these practices to their employees rank high on the list of candidates and provide a reason for the most talented to stay with the company (Gallup, Inc., 2017). Another reason is related to the time spent by employees travelling (Chen & Fulmer, 2017), which is considered a factor of stress and absenteeism due to the time wasted in transit (Van Ommeren and Gutierrez-i-Puigarnau, 2011).

The use of flexibility policies promotes more positive attitudes and behaviour among employees, improving their performance and attendance (Pierce & Newstrom, 1983). It can also have a positive impact on their health and lifestyle (Artazcoz et al., 2005). In addition, there are other benefits that can be associated with the practice of flexibility

policies, including: increased creativity, innovation, teamwork and sense of responsibility (Barnes & Jones, 2020; Owczarek, 2018).

The combination of more than one flexibility policy tends to have a greater impact and be more effective than the adoption of only one measure (Thompson et al., 2015). Conversely, some criticisms of the adoption of these policies included the misuse by some employees of the flexibility offered to them, resulting in a decrease in their performance. Another point identified was that these policies can have a negative impact on team dynamics, especially when communication is ineffective, mostly due to the use of inappropriate technological methods (Timms et al., 2015). Finally, the perception of a lack of fairness in the application of these policies has been identified as leading to some hostility and a sense of unfairness among employees (Hegvedt et al., 2002). This is due to the fact that some employees may benefit from greater flexibility compared to others.

The main challenges that may jeopardise the use of flexible working policies are structural, given the nature of the work or the need to adhere to a particular schedule, employee concerns that there should be fairness and that they should not feel that there is unequal treatment, and supervision issues (Powell & Mainiero, 1999; Wells-Lepley et al., 2015). Management support and supervision play a key role in the successful implementation of these practices (Julien et al., 2011) and promote greater trust and job satisfaction among employees (Baker et al., 2007; Grant et al., 2013).

Finally, it is important to note that not all labour flexibility policies have the same impact on all firms, and some policies are more appropriate for some firms than others (Pitt-Catsouphes et al., 2009). If a firm offers several flexibility options, but they are not tailored to the needs of employees, they will not be effective. Thus, efficient workforce management can be a source of sustainable competitive advantage (Pfeffer & Veiga, 1999).

Flexibility in the workplace

As mentioned earlier, the pandemic caused by Covid-19 led to major changes in society, as changes in lifestyle, work and access to information led to the growth of different technologies for the benefit of companies and customers (Ikram & Sayagh, 2023; Ishak et al., 2023; Pandey & Pal, 2020). Among these technologies, there has been a great growth in remote working systems, which were not a common practice until the beginning of the pandemic.

Remote working consists of technologies that allow employees to work flexibly from a location other than their usual workplace. However, without technological innovation and adequate infrastructure, remote working is

unlikely to become part of a company's value chain (Kylili et al., 2020). These remote working systems are seen as a cause of increased productivity, reduced costs, increased satisfaction and demand diversification (Rodrigues et al., 2021) and a source of relative advantage (Alshamaila et al., 2013). Firms that can identify the benefits of these systems are more likely to adopt remote working technologies. It is also possible to find a positive relationship between teleworking and turnover intentions (Clark et al., 2017; Onken-Menke et al., 2018), as this intention is lower for employees with flexibility at the workplace level (Golden et al., 2008).

The abrupt change caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, which forced many companies to apply the home-working policy in order to increase social distance and limit the spread of the coronavirus, can be seen on the one hand as positive for the introduction of the possibility for employees to work from home and in a flexible way, and on the other hand, the obligation for families to stay at home can prolong the number of working hours and increase conflicts between work and family (Caligiuri et al., 2020). Teleworking can therefore lead to longer working days (Heijstra & Rafnsdottir, 2010). In addition, employees fear becoming isolated from the rest of the organisation when teleworking (Golden et al., 2008). On the other hand, companies have realised that this is a way for them to expand and count on a larger number of people without having to redesign or enlarge their offices.

Flexibility in working hours

One of the most common labour flexibility policies is related to time flexibility, which allows employees to set the start and end time of their work according to their individual needs (Choudhary, 2016). This control over time and the setting of one's own schedule, on the assumption that the set tasks will be completed within the set time, leads to a real reduction in company turnover (Moen et al., 2011). When employees have control over their schedule and working hours, they feel more satisfied and committed to their work (Lyness et al., 2012).

The idea of benefiting from a flexible schedule is seen as a motivating factor that can lead to greater overall well-being. However, the demand for a flexible schedule arises when there is a need to achieve a work-life balance, given the need to have more free time (Pichler, 2009). This flexibility ultimately makes an employee happier because he/she has been able to make time for his/her personal needs (Dalton & Mesch, 1990).

A flexible work schedule can also include a shorter working week (Jang et al., 2012), which is based on working more hours per day and fewer days per week (Baltes et al., 1999; Bendak, 2003). This policy allows the

company to reduce costs, improve the environment and provide employees with a better work-life balance (Peoples, 2009), and is also usually associated with higher levels of performance (Baltes et al., 1999). Employees' preference for fewer but longer working days (Bendak, 2003) is mainly justified for personal reasons, so that they can spend more days with their families and enjoy more leisure time. However, longer working hours can lead to an increase in employee stress (Bendak, 2003), although this effect is mitigated by the greater number of days off (Rosa et al., 1989).

Schedule flexibility is a tool used to reduce stress (Almer & Kaplan, 2002), increase employee retention and improve employee performance (McNall et al., 2009). In fact, stress has been identified as one of the main causes of low productivity, efficiency and job satisfaction (Schabracq & Cooper, 2000), and this policy can be beneficial in reducing it, as employees feel less stressed when they have more control over their schedules (Almer & Kaplan, 2002). This flexibility benefits employers and motivates employees (Coenen & Kok, 2014), as firms that adopt this type of policy tend to be more productive and efficient (Wolf & Beblo, 2004). The adoption of a flexible work schedule can also lead to a reduction in absenteeism (Ralston et al., 1985), the use of unpaid leave (Kim & Campagna, 1981) and turnover (Chung & Van der Horst, 2018) and, on the other hand, an increase in employee job satisfaction (Baltes et al., 1999). In this way, firms that allow their employees to have flexible working hours may have a competitive advantage in recruiting and retaining talent, as it becomes less attractive for them to leave the firm due to the increased opportunity cost of finding a similar alternative job (Davis & Kalleberg, 2006).

Flexibility in the adoption of licenses

Job flexibility includes not only variations in working hours and location, but also possible job sharing, temporary or part-time work and career breaks (unpaid leave, maternity/paternity leave) (Torrington et al., 2011).

Flexible leave can be seen as an informal policy characterised by the possibility for employees to use part of their working time to resolve unresolved issues (Allard et al., 2007). Thus, the greater attention paid to employees' personal commitments and responsibilities tends to result in lower turnover intentions (Almer & Kaplan, 2002; McNall et al., 2009; Moen et al., 2011; Onken-Menke et al., 2018). Furthermore, the implementation of flexible leave is a safe strategy as it does not encourage employees to leave the firm permanently. Another type of leave available to employees is unpaid leave, which consists of a long unpaid break from the firm without the employee losing their legal rights (Carr & Tang, 2005). This type of



leave is becoming increasingly common, with flexible working hours and telecommuting becoming more common (Leslie et al., 2012). As such, leaves are most useful when they allow workers to disconnect from work and undertake new projects and experiences (Zahorski, 1994). This opportunity can be seen as a perk that increases the attractiveness of the firm. The strong relationship between these leaves and firm attractiveness can serve as a competitive advantage for the firm, given their greater rarity (Table 2).

Outsourcing and offshoring

Outsourcing and offshoring are strategies used by companies to transfer specialised tasks or entire job functions to private contractors or organisations in another country (Foster-McGregor et al., 2013). Depending on the region, there are often significant advantages to outsourcing, including access to highly skilled labour, lower costs and potential tax incentives in certain countries (Beerepoort & Lambregts, 2015). Outsourcing and offshoring can play an important role in the development of flexible labour policies. By outsourcing certain tasks or job functions, companies can offer more flexibility to their internal employees (Drahokoupil & Fabo, 2019); for example, instead of an employee having to work long hours, they can choose to outsource certain tasks to an external contractor in a

different time zone and achieve a better work-life balance (Canham et al., 2013). In addition, companies can benefit from outsourcing or offshoring by gaining access to specialised labour that may be in short supply domestically, such as bilingual or specific technical skills. Furthermore, by introducing elements of outsourcing into their flexible labour policies, companies can also become more competitive on price by increasing the cost efficiency of the labour market (Beerepoort & Lambregts, 2015; Foster-McGregor et al., 2013; Tan, 2021). Finally, in some cases, outsourcing or offshoring can even act as a substitute for hiring new staff, thereby reducing costs and creating a more agile workforce (Canham et al., 2013).

Research methodology

This research comes in the face of increasing technological innovation and the ever-changing needs and expectations of employees. The expectations they had a few years ago are not the same as those they have today, nor will they be the same as those they will have in a few years' time. Today's workers are looking for more than just a job that provides them with an income, but one that allows them to achieve a better balance between work and private life, giving greater importance to family and lifestyle. In this way, and largely as a result of the pandemic caused by

Table 2 Main topics and research lines

labour policies	labour policies	labour policies
Powell and Mainiero (1999)	The nature of certain jobs compromises the use of labour flexibility policies	Inconsistency in accepting requests for flexible working can create animosity among employees as they perceive unequal treatment
Skinner and Pocock (2014)	Lack of knowledge by employees regarding the flexible working policies available	Difference between the availability and use of labour flexibility policies
de Menezes and Kelliher (2011)	Incompatibility between the policies made available and the needs of the employees	The availability of flexible working policies are no guarantee that employees will use them
McDonald and Cathcart (2015)	Lack of support and supervision does not make effective implementation of flexibility policies possible	Employees refrain from using flexible working policies when there is a lack of support from management teams
Blair-Loy and Wharton (2002)	Fear of negative repercussions on career by adopting flexible working policies	The perception associated with the stigma of flexible working discourages employees from using flexible working policies
Timms et al. (2015)	Flexible working policies lead to increased employee engagement	Ineffective communication and the use of inefficient technological methods have a negative effect on team dynamics
Pitt-Catsoupes et al. (2009)	Flexible working arrangements adapted to employees' needs allow for greater employee involvement and a better balance between work and family	Flexibility policies do not have the same effect on all firms, with some policies better suited to some firms than others

Source: Authors

Covid-19, labour flexibility policies have increasingly been taken into account by companies.

Nevertheless, a consolidated literature review on the subject has not been able to reach a rigorous conclusion on the benefits obtained by companies in applying these policies. Many authors defend the benefits of these policies for both companies and employees, such as increased productivity and competitiveness, increased satisfaction, commitment, involvement and well-being, reduced turnover, increased performance and, consequently, the development of competitive advantage. Nevertheless, the literature identifies some gaps that may jeopardise the achievement of competitive advantage by companies in adopting these policies, such as the nature of the work that may jeopardise their application, the fact that the expected effects are not the same for all companies, the possibility of incompatibility between the policies offered and the needs of employees, the abuse of the flexibility offered to them by some employees, leading to a reduction in their performance, and the lack of support and supervision that prevents their effective application. In this way, and in view of some inconsistencies in the literature reviewed, the relevance of this research arises, with the aim of assessing whether labour flexibility policies are a source of competitive advantage. Four main research questions have therefore been defined, the main objective of which is to assess whether labour flexibility policies are a source of sustainable competitive advantage for firms (Table 3).

In order to achieve the previously defined research objectives, a qualitative analysis based on interviews was carried out. Qualitative analysis was chosen as the research strategy because in-depth interviews can provide detailed insights into whether flexible labour policies create a competitive advantage. This information can be further contextualised within organisational and societal contexts, helping to uncover the complexities and trade-offs that may be associated with such policies. By gathering participants' perspectives, this approach offers unique insights into the impact of these policies on job satisfaction, productivity and overall competitiveness, framed by the VRIO analysis.

Fisher et al. (2020) suggested that applying a VRIO model using interviews and qualitative analysis could be valuable for several reasons. First, the VRIO model is a useful tool for identifying resources, capabilities and work policies that can serve as a key source of competitive advantage. By conducting interviews and qualitative analysis, researchers can gather in-depth data which can then be evaluated using the VRIO model to determine their potential for competitive advantage. Secondly, the VRIO model can help managers analyse a company's resources and make strategic decisions (Knott, 2015). By using interviews and qualitative analysis to gather data on a firm's resources, capabilities or policies, managers can then

use the VRIO model to better evaluate their decisions and strategy development. Finally, the VRIO model can be adapted to different industries and contexts (Castro & Giraldi, 2018). By using interviews and qualitative analysis to collect data on a specific industry or context, researchers can adapt the VRIO model to the needs of that industry or context and provide valuable insights into potential sources of competitive advantage. Overall, applying a VRIO model using interviews and qualitative analysis can provide valuable insights into a company's and help managers make informed strategic decisions, however it's important to consider the limitation of the asymmetric experience of the respondents which can affect the research conclusions. On the one hand, the interviews were targeted at HR managers from different companies. On the other hand, the choice of employees who manage people on a daily basis is due to the fact that they have more experience in managing the different needs and expectations of employees. They also have a better understanding of the impact that these policies can have on the dynamics and performance of the team and, consequently, on the performance of the company. In this way, respondents will have a better idea of the added value that flexible working policies can bring to the organisation and how they should or should not be considered in the organisation's strategy.

Twenty interviews were conducted, a number considered sufficient to validate the sample for a qualitative study (Creswell, 1998; Morse, 2000). These interviews lasted on average between 15 and 20 min and were conducted via Zoom, after the interviewees had given their consent to be recorded. In terms of structure, the interviews consisted of three parts and a total of 7 questions. The first part consisted of a short introduction that served to contextualise the interviewees about the relevance of the study and to present some concepts that were fundamental for a better understanding of the interview. The second part consisted of three descriptive questions related to profession, number of careers and professional experience, with the aim of characterising the sample and ensuring its relevance to the study. The third and final part consisted of the focus of the interview, with a total of 4 interpretative questions, each relating to one of the VRIO requirements, in order to obtain each interviewee's opinion on whether labour flexibility policies are a source of competitive advantage for companies. For these last four questions, respondents were asked to answer in a binary manner (yes or no) and then to provide a brief explanation to support their answers. Finally, once the interviews were completed and the relevance of all the interviews was ensured, they were transcribed from video to text using Word online and centralised in a single document to facilitate the processing of the information (Table 4).



Table 3 Research questions and objectives

Key research question	Do labour flexibility policies represent a source of sustainable competitive advantage for firms?	
Research lines (Authors, Year)	Research question	Research objective
Increased competitiveness as a consequence of the implementation of labour flexibility policies (Peretz et al., 2018)	RQ1: Do you consider that flexible working policies create value for your firm?	RO1: To assess whether labour flexibility policies create value for firms
Improved performance and productivity as a result of adopting flexible working policies (Aziz-Ur-Rehman & Siddiqui, 2019)		
The nature of certain jobs compromises the use of flexible working policies (Powell & Mainiero, 1999)	RQ2: Do you think that labour flexibility policies are rare?	RO2: To assess whether labour flexibility policies are rare, i.e., owned or capable of being acquired by only one or a few firms
Incompatibility between the policies made available and the needs of employees (de Menezes & Kelliher, 2011)	RQ3: Do you consider that labour flexibility policies are inimitable?	RO3: To assess whether labour flexibility policies are inimitable, i.e., difficult for competitors to imitate
Flexibility policies do not have the same effect on all firms, and some policies are more suitable for some firms than others (Pitt-Catsouphes et al., 2009)		
Efficient workforce management results in a sustainable competitive advantage (Pfeffer & Veiga, 1999)	RQ4: Do you think that your firm can organise itself to exploit and leverage flexible working policies?	RO4: To evaluate if a firm can organise itself in order to adequately exploit and leverage labour flexibility policies
Lack of support and supervision does not enable effective implementation of flexibility policies (McDonald & Cathcart, 2015)		

Source: Authors

Table 4 Objectives, questions and types of research questions

Research objective	Question	Type of Question
Ensure the relevance and heterogeneity of the sample	1. What is your current profession?	Descriptive question
Ensure the relevance and heterogeneity of the sample	2. In the exercise of your function, do you have the task of managing and coordinating people/teams? If yes, how many people?	Descriptive question
Ensure the relevance and heterogeneity of the sample	3. What is your professional experience?	Descriptive question
Assessing whether labour flexibility policies create value for firms	4. Do you consider that labour flexibility policies create value for your firm?	Interpretative question
Assess whether labour flexibility policies are rare, i.e. owned or capable of being acquired by only one or a few firms	5. Do you consider that labour flexibility policies are rare?	Interpretative question
Assess whether labour flexibility policies are inimitable, i.e. difficult for competitors to imitate	6. Do you consider that labour flexibility policies are inimitable?	Interpretative question
Assessing whether a firm can organise itself to adequately exploit and leverage labour flexibility policies	7. Do you think that your firm can organise itself in such a way as to exploit and leverage labour flexibility policies?	Interpretative question

Source: Authors

Data analysis

This chapter presents the qualitative analysis of the interviews conducted through data processing and the corresponding findings and comments. This analysis was carried out using KH Coder 3 software and Microsoft Office Excel.

Characterisation of the sample

This research was developed through interviews with a group of 20 professionals in a management or leadership position who had the coordination of people as one of their assigned tasks. In this case, the characterisation of the sample is extremely important in order to guarantee the quality and relevance of the information obtained. The sample considered for this study therefore focused on three main aspects: profession, coordination of people/teams and professional experience.

Profession

The respondents' professions were divided into five different categories: CFO (Chief Financial Officer), Team Leader, CEO (Chief Executive Officer), Manager and Partner. From Fig. 1. it can be seen that all the respondents are in management and decision-making positions, 35% of them are team leaders and 25% are managers.

Coordination of People/Team

With regard to the number of people that the respondents are responsible for managing in the course of their duties, Fig. 2. shows that all professionals manage at least two people on a daily basis. 60% of them even end up coordinating a team of at least 10 people and only 20% manage a team of less than 5 people (Table 5).

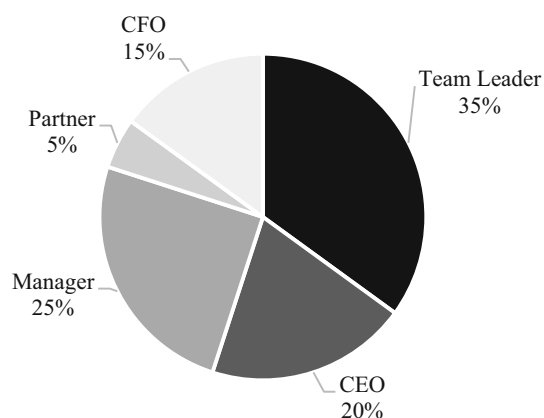


Fig. 1. Respondents' professions and categories. Source: Authors

Professional experience

Regarding the professional experience of the interviewees, Fig. 3. shows that only one of the interviewees has a career of less than 5 years, more precisely 3 years, and that most of the professionals, 60%, even have a professional career with at least 20 years of experience (Table 6).

VRIO model

Given the growing interest among companies in adopting labour flexibility policies, the benefits they can bring, and some uncertainty in the existing literature on the subject, the VRIO model was applied to a representative sample of 20 respondents to assess whether these policies represent a source of sustainable competitive advantage for them. As a result of this exercise, and as shown in Fig. 4, it can be observed that 70% of the respondents consider that this resource leads to competitive parity between companies, 25% of them consider that it leads to a temporary competitive advantage and only 5%, i.e. one respondent, considers that labour flexibility policies are a source of sustainable competitive advantage. Table 7 summarises all the answers given by the respondents. The main reasons given by the respondents for their answers to each of the pillars of the VRIO model are analysed below.

Value

Regarding the first parameter of the VRIO Model, which aims to assess whether a certain internal resource generates value for a firm, all interviewees considered that labour flexibility policies generate value for their firm (Fig. 5).

Having said that, it is relevant to analyse the main explanations given by the interviewees for this response. Therefore, first of all, using the word frequency list and the word cloud, two text mining tools, it is possible to obtain an overview of the main trends by identifying the key words that were mentioned most frequently during the interviews. In this way, it can be seen that the most frequently used words were increase, employees and time, which is quite noticeable as these are words associated with the topic in question. Next, it is also possible to highlight words such as talent, productivity, motivation and satisfaction, which are mentioned several times as a consequence or cause of why companies believe that labour flexibility policies create value for companies (Fig. 6 and 7).

In order to frame these words and analyse their relevance with a greater degree of certainty, two other text mining techniques were used, Bigram and Trigram, which made it possible to identify a more objective relationship between words and to draw more coherent conclusions.

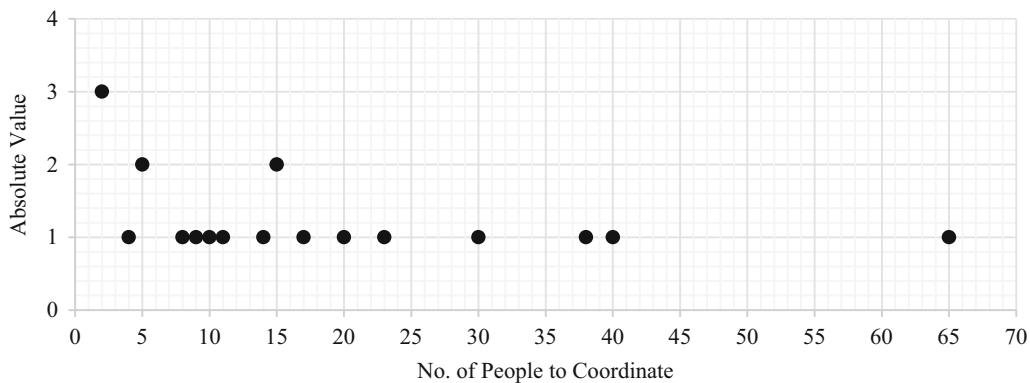


Fig. 2 Coordination of people. Source: Authors

Table 5 Coordination of people

	Absolute Value	Value Percentage
$N < 5$	4	20%
$5 \leq N < 10$	4	20%
$10 \leq N < 20$	6	30%
$N \geq 20$	6	30%

N Number of people to coordinate

Source: Authors

Table 6 Professional Experience. x—Number of years of professional experience

	Absolute Value	Value Percentage
$x < 5$	1	5%
$5 \leq x < 10$	5	25%
$10 \leq x < 20$	2	10%
$x \geq 20$	12	60%

Source: Authors

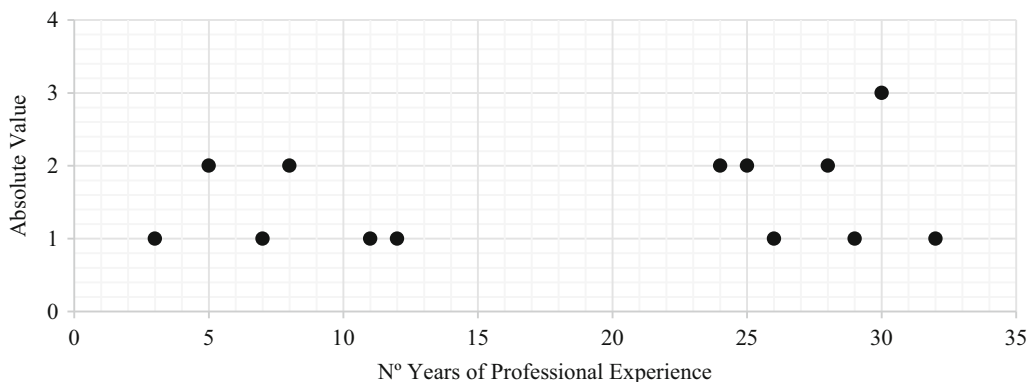


Fig. 3 Professional experience. Source: Authors

Thus, by analysing the tables below, it is possible to confirm the above idea of productivity increase as one of the main reasons given by the respondents for considering that flexibility policies generate value for the company. Linked to this point, it is also possible to verify the importance given to the increase in employee satisfaction and motivation as a consequence of the adoption of these policies, which in many cases allow for better time management by employees (personal time management). Finally, another issue highlighted by the interviewees, and which gains in importance in terms of the value that these policies generate for companies is related to the increase in the ability

of companies to retain talent (increase talent retention), which allows them to reduce turnover, reduce recruitment costs and retain qualified and experienced workers (Tables 8, 9).

Finally, analysing the relationship between the concepts reflected in the mind map shown in Fig. 8, it is possible to observe once again, in purple, the relationship between increased productivity, motivation and employee satisfaction, largely reflected in the possibility of more effective personal time management, justified in blue by the reduction of time spent travelling and, in yellow, by the possibility of having flexible working hours. In red, we can also



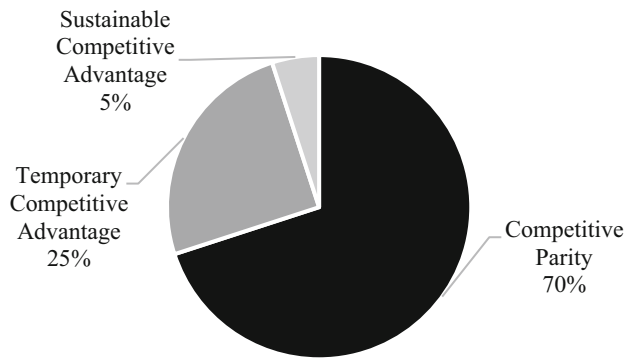


Fig. 4 VRIO model. Source: Authors

Table 7 Interviews—responses

	VRIO Model			
	Valuable?	Rare?	Inimitable?	Firm?
Interviewee 1	Yes	No	No	No
Interviewee 2	Yes	No	No	Yes
Interviewee 3	Yes	No	No	Yes
Interviewee 4	Yes	No	No	Yes
Interviewee 5	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
Interviewee 6	Yes	No	No	Yes
Interviewee 7	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
Interviewee 8	Yes	No	No	Yes
Interviewee 9	Yes	No	No	Yes
Interviewee 10	Yes	No	No	Yes
Interviewee 11	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
Interviewee 12	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
Interviewee 13	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
Interviewee 14	Yes	No	No	Yes
Interviewee 15	Yes	No	No	Yes
Interviewee 16	Yes	No	No	Yes
Interviewee 17	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Interviewee 18	Yes	No	No	No
Interviewee 19	Yes	No	No	Yes
Interviewee 20	Yes	No	No	Yes

Source: Authors

see the relationship between talent retention and the inability of companies in Portugal to offer competitive salaries compared to other countries, according to the respondents.

Rarity

When asked about the scarcity of this resource, 70% of professionals consider that labour flexibility policies are not scarce as several companies have access to this

Do you consider that flexible working policies create value for your organisation?

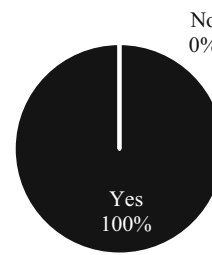


Fig. 5 VRIO model—value. Source: Authors

resource. In this way, these policies lead to competitive parity, as several companies have access to the same resource (Fig. 9).

When looking for reasons to justify the answers given by the interviewees and using the word frequency list and word cloud tools, it is possible to highlight words, such as company, measure, sector, replicate or teleworking (Figs. 10, 11).

Linked to this analysis and in order to draw more sustainable conclusions, through the analysis of Bigram and Trigram, it is possible to identify the ease of replicating these measures (replicating these measures) and the importance of the emergence of the pandemic (importance of covid) as two of the main factors identified by the interviewees that make this resource more widespread. In addition, it was also noted that it is currently a competitive factor for companies and easier to adapt in services (especially in services). Finally, it is also possible to verify that teleworking is the flexibility policy most often mentioned by professionals as being the most common in companies (teleworking) (Tables 10, 11).

Finally, by analysing the mind map, it is possible to confirm the previous analyses. In green, we observe the possibility of companies adopting these flexibility policies, as well as the widespread use of teleworking, largely justified by the emergence of the pandemic. In purple, it is also possible to justify the fact that companies replicate these policies because they consider them to be a factor of competitiveness (Fig. 12).

Inimitability

When analysing the inimitability of flexible working time policies, 95% of the professionals interviewed consider that these policies are imitated by the competition (Fig. 13).

By analysing the word frequency list and the word cloud in relation to the answers to this question, it was possible to observe that words such as firm, policies, adopt or imitate were some of the words most used by the professionals and may help to explain the main reasons they gave for



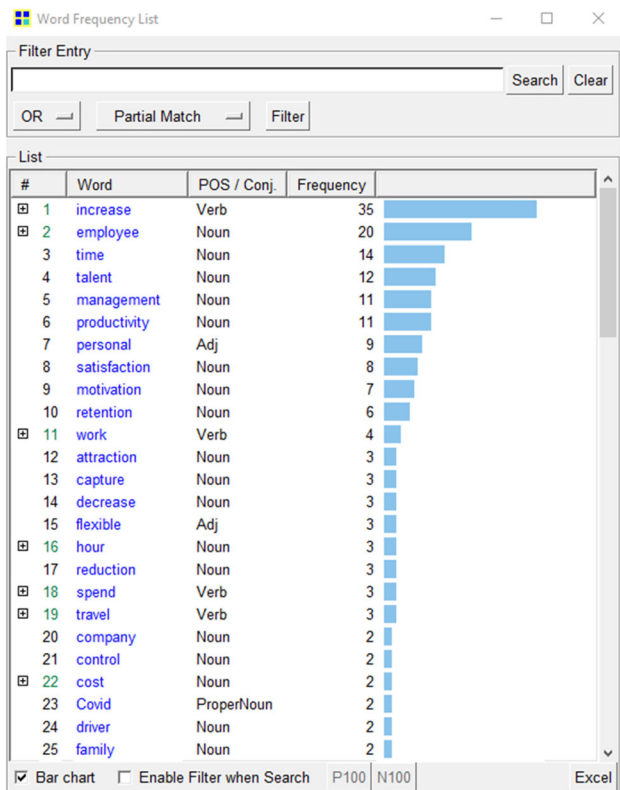


Fig. 6 Word frequency list: value. Source: KH Coder 3

believing that labour flexibility policies are imitable. The respondents believe that companies can imitate, adopt and adapt these policies to their companies, considering that they are easy to copy (Figs. 14, 15).

By analysing Bigram and Trigram, the idea of the ability of competitors to adopt and adapt these policies to their businesses becomes clearer, making this resource imitable. Furthermore, justifications have been presented, such as the fact that the adoption of these policies does not involve major investments and the contribution they can make to cost reduction (Tables 12, 13).

Finally, by analysing the mind map, it is possible to confirm the ideas presented above. Orange shows how easy it is for competitors to imitate and adopt these strategies. In

Fig. 7 Word cloud: value. Source: Tag Crowd



Table 8 Bigram: value

N-gram	Frequency
Increase productivity	10
Time management	9
Employee satisfaction	8
Personal time	7
Increase employee	7
Motivation of	6
Talent retention	6
Increase talent	5
Satisfaction increase	4
Retention yes	3

Source: Authors

Table 9 Trigram: value

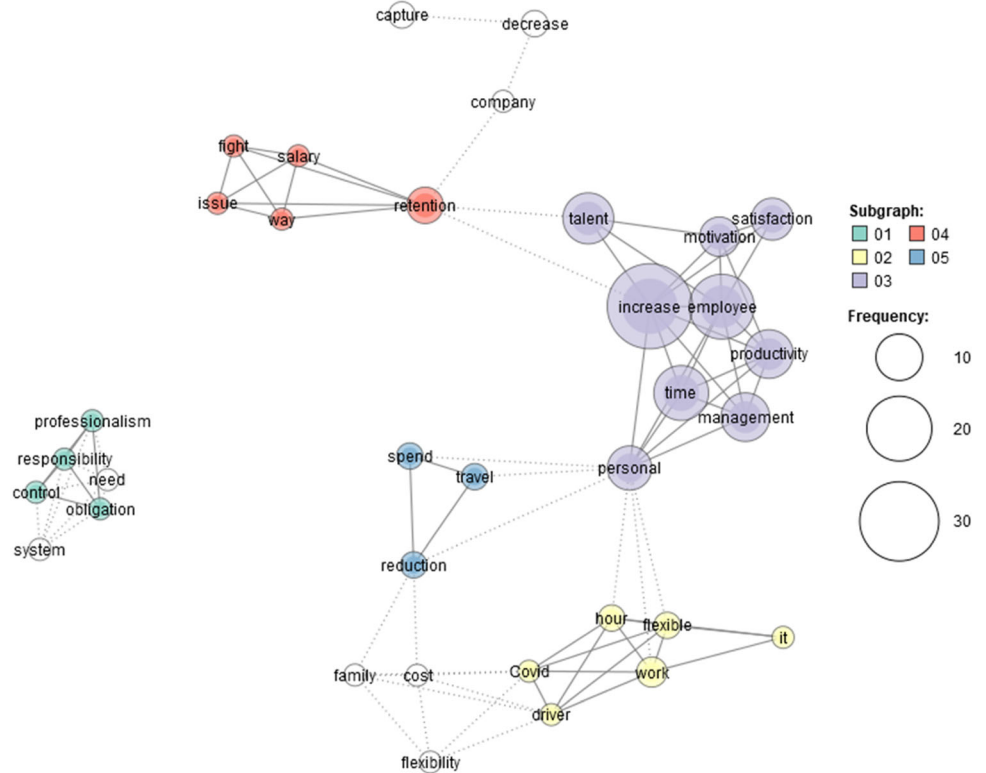
N-gram	Frequency
Personal time management	7
Motivation of employees	6
Increased employee satisfaction	6
Increased motivation of	6
Time management increased	5
Increase talent retention	5
Employee satisfaction increased	4
Employees increased productivity	3
Management increased productivity	3
Talent retention yes	3

Source: Authors

green, and taking into account that the visualisation of this map can lead to errors and associate the need for a large associated investment for the adoption of flexibility policies, it is exactly the opposite that is mentioned by the interviewees and that justifies the existing imitability of



Fig. 8 Mind map: value.
Source: KH Coder 3



Do you consider that labour flexibility policies are rare?

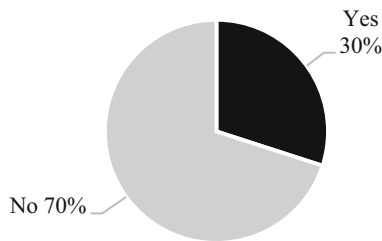


Fig. 9 VRIO model—rarity. Source: Authors

this resource, the fact that the investment associated with the implementation of these measures is reduced, allowing there to be a greater number of companies with this capacity (Fig. 16). Finally, in purple, it is also possible to highlight the idea that labour flexibility policies are seen as a driver for cost reduction.

Organisation

Analysing the last pillar of the VRIO model, which examines the ability of a company to be sufficiently well organised to be able to use and exploit a given resource, it was possible to observe that 85% of the total sample, although they do not consider labour flexibility policies to

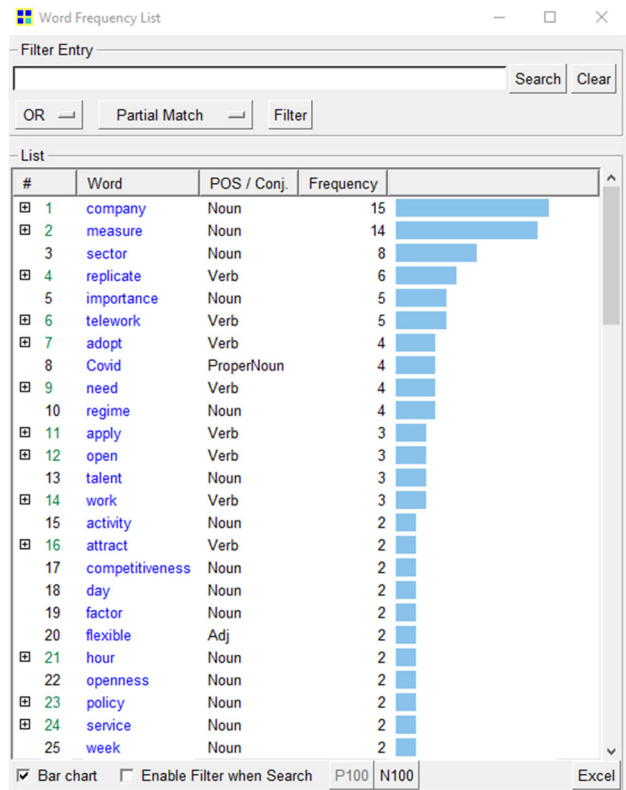


Fig. 10 Word frequency list: rarity. Source: KH Coder 3



Fig. 11 Word Cloud: rarity.
Source: Tag Crowd

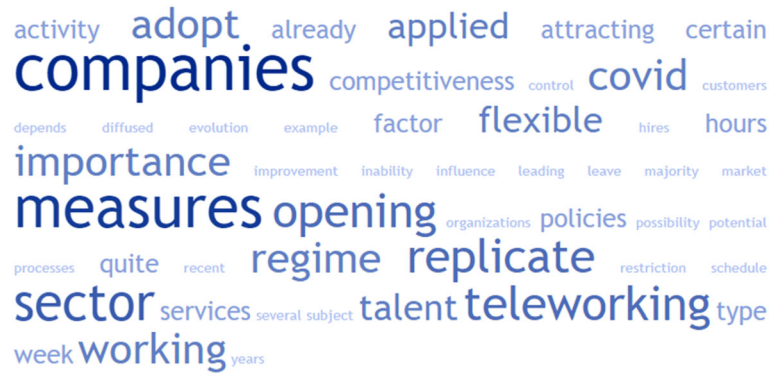


Table 10 Bigram: Rarity

N-gram	Frequency
These measures	8
Replicate these	5
Importance of	5
To replicate	5
Firms to	5
Other firms	4
Teleworking regime	4
The sector	4
Of covid	4
Competitiveness factor	2

Source: Authors

Table 11 Trigram: rarity

N-gram	Frequency
Replicate these measures	5
To replicate these	5
Other firms to	4
Importance of covid	4
For other firms	4
Firms to replicate	4
Opening for other	3
Flexible working hours	2
Especially in services	2
Competitiveness factor for	2

Source: Authors

be rare and inimitable, consider that their company has the ability to make the best use of them (Fig. 17).

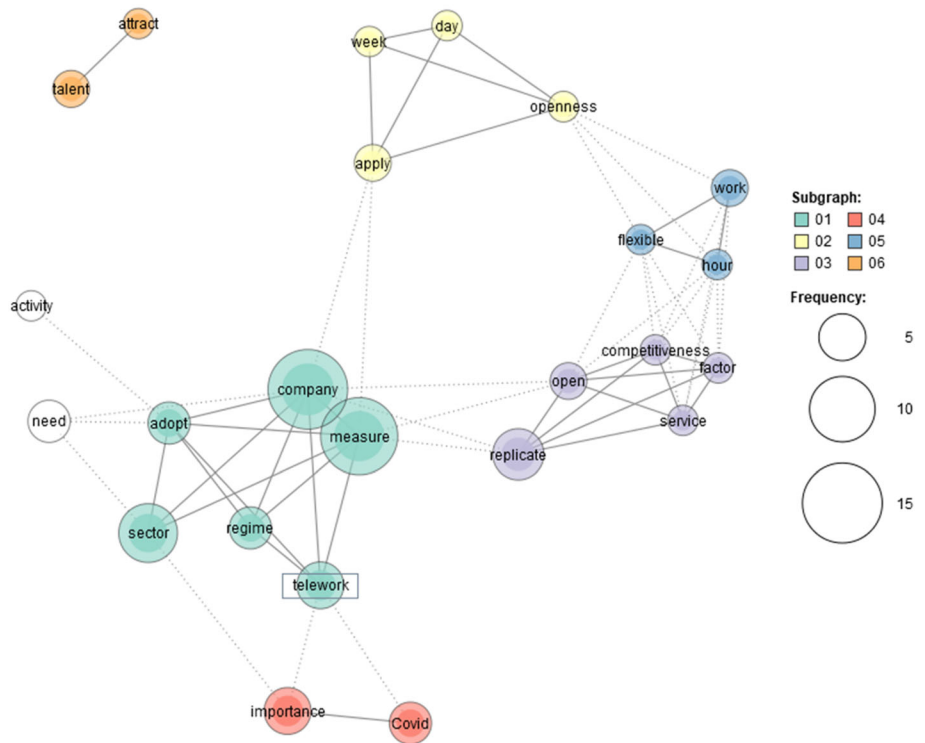
In order to identify the main reasons given by the interviewees to justify why they consider that their companies have the capacity to organise and improve labour flexibility policies, by analysing the word frequency list

and the word cloud, it is possible to highlight words such as company, need, customer, improvement and competitiveness as some of the most frequently used words during the interviews (Figs. 18, 19). At present, companies have a continuous improvement perspective and believe that these measures contribute to increasing their competitiveness. In addition, companies are trying to meet the needs of their employees and customers, to bring cultures closer together and to facilitate work between the different parties.

In this way, the analysis of Bigram and Tigram complements the justifications presented above. The professionals interviewed consider that there is room for improvement, as labour flexibility policies are a new issue to be taken into account in companies' strategies. These policies are seen as a factor of competitiveness and the companies consider that this should be one of their current priorities and should be taken into account in the continuous improvement process that the companies want to engage in (Tables 14, 15).

Finally, by analysing the mind map, it is possible to observe, in green, the companies' focus on continuous improvement, inserting flexibility policies in this perspective. In red, it is also possible to confirm the idea already presented above regarding the importance given by the companies to the adoption of these policies, since they are fundamental for their competitiveness. Thus, after recognising the importance of the adoption of flexibility policies and the existing capacity and space for companies to grow in this sense, the main measures for which they consider there is greater scope for progress were also identified, among which greater flexibility in working hours (Fig. 20), the reduction of the number of working hours and the adoption of a shorter working week were identified as the policy with greater potential and which can lead to greater differentiation in relation to the competition. Conversely, it was noted that the main challenge for companies in adopting some of the labour flexibility policies is to be able to implement control systems that allow them to effectively measure the work of their employees.

Fig. 12 Mind map: rarity.
Source: KH Coder 3



Do you consider that labour flexibility policies are inimitable?

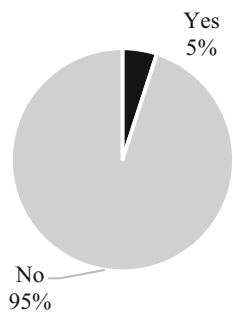


Fig. 13 VRIO model—Inimitability. Source: Authors

Results and discussion

Having collected all the necessary data and carried out the corresponding qualitative analysis, the main objective of this chapter is to identify the main findings in relation to the research questions developed and to present their main contributions to the study. Therefore, the answers to the 4 research questions concerning the application of the VRIO model are presented first.

#	Word	POS / Conj.	Frequency
1	company	Noun	16
2	policy	Noun	12
3	imitate	Verb	11
4	adopt	Verb	6
5	big	Adj	5
6	investment	Noun	5
7	need	Noun	5
8	practice	Noun	5
9	capacity	Noun	4
10	measure	Noun	4
11	need	Verb	4
12	adjust	Verb	3
13	associate	Verb	3
14	cost	Noun	3
15	employee	Noun	3
16	industry	Noun	3
17	market	Noun	3
18	activity	Noun	2
19	adapt	Verb	2
20	balance	Noun	2
21	easily	Adv	2
22	Easy	ProperNoun	2
23	implement	Verb	2
24	limitation	Noun	2
25	only	Adv	2

Fig. 14 Word frequency list: inimitability. Source: KH Coder 3



Fig. 15 Word cloud: inimitability. Source: Tag Crowd



Table 12 Bigram: inimitability

N-gram	Frequency
To imitate	6
These policies	5
Big investment	4
All firms	3
Adopted by	3

Source: Authors

Table 13 Trigram: inimitability

N-gram	Frequency
Big investment associated	3
Not a big	3
By other firms	2
Adjusted to the	2
The capacity to	2

Source: Authors

RQ1: Do you consider that flexible working policies create value for your firm?

In terms of the value created by flexible work policies, all the experts considered that these policies created value for their firms. Aziz-Ur-Rehman and Siddiqui (2019) considered that the adoption of work flexibility policies by firms led to improved performance and increased productivity, and increased productivity was one of the main reasons cited in the interviews to justify the added value generated by these policies. Also in this follow-up, professionals reported that the adoption of these policies resulted in increased employee satisfaction and motivation, reflecting the ideas put forward by Boell et al. (2016). It was also found that another of the benefits valued by employees, and which ultimately led to their greater satisfaction, was related to the opportunity for them to better manage their

time, meeting the expectations of younger people who are currently seeking a better work-life balance (Dhal et al., 2021). As a result, it could be concluded that flexible working policies increase the ability of companies to attract and retain talent (Dhal et al., 2021). Therefore, and in line with the ideas put forward by Peretz et al. (2018), who believe that the implementation of flexible work policies provides an increase in competitiveness, this resource, which is qualified as valuable, should be considered by firms as it plays a key role for them to remain competitive in the market.

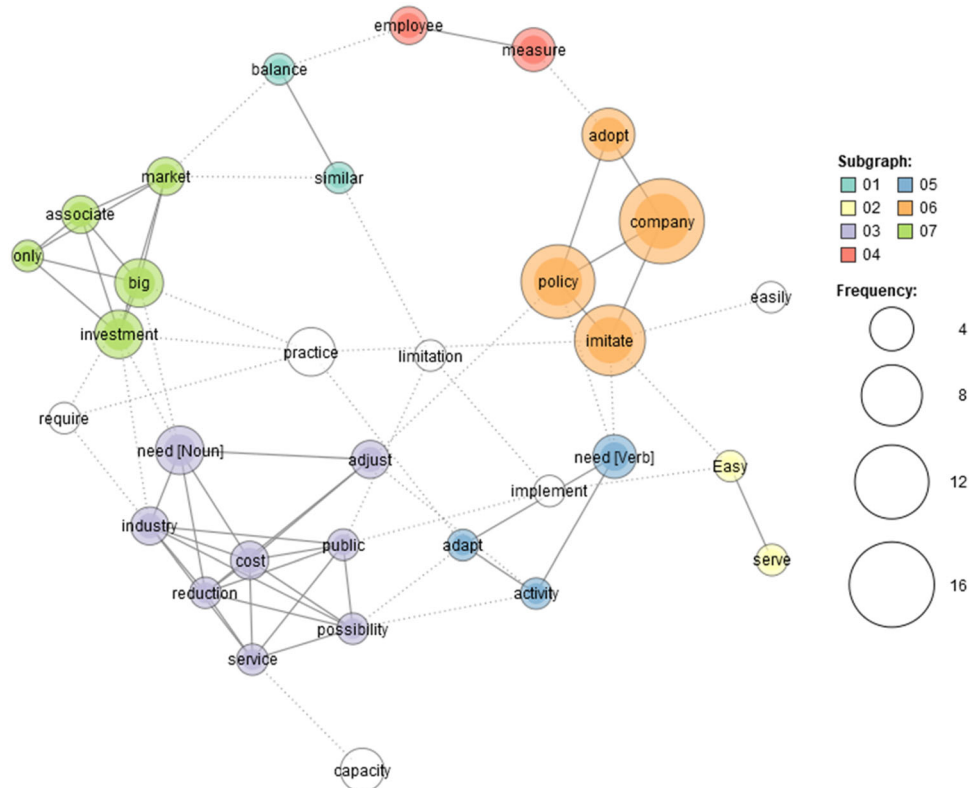
RQ2: Do you think that labour flexibility policies are rare?

When assessing whether labour flexibility policies are used by one or only a few companies in a given sector, 70% of the professionals interviewed consider that these policies are not rare, i.e. that they are a resource available to several companies. They consider that these policies are easy to adopt and that they have become more common with the emergence of the Covid-19 pandemic. At present, they even consider that the adoption of flexibility policies has become a factor of competitiveness for companies and that their non-adoption may affect their position or maintenance in the market. On the other hand, as already pointed out by Powell and Mainiero (1999), who stated that the use of labour flexibility policies may depend on the nature of certain jobs, it was also pointed out by the interviewees that these policies are easier to adopt and therefore more common in the services sector. Finally, it was also highlighted that teleworking policies are the most common among the different companies.

RQ3: Do you consider that labour flexibility policies are inimitable?

With regard to the intended assessment of whether labour flexibility policies are inimitable, i.e. difficult for competitors to imitate, 95% consider that they are not inimitable. The experts believe that these policies can be easily

Fig. 16 Mind map: inimitability. Source: KH Coder 3



Do you think that your organisation can organise itself to exploit and leverage flexible working policies?

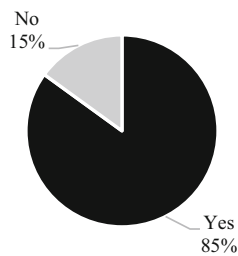


Fig. 17 VRIO model—firm. Source: Authors

copied by any company and that companies are able to adopt them and adapt them to their needs. This idea contradicts one of the points raised by de Menezes and Kelliher (2011), who stated that there is an incompatibility between the policies provided and the needs of employees. The interviewees reported the possibility of adapting the flexibility policies to the needs of the firm and its employees, so that there is no incompatibility between what is provided by the firm and its real needs. Finally, they also mentioned that the fact that the implementation of these policies does not involve large investments and that their adoption allows for cost reductions (Rodrigues et al., 2021), makes companies more attentive and willing to imitate the competition.

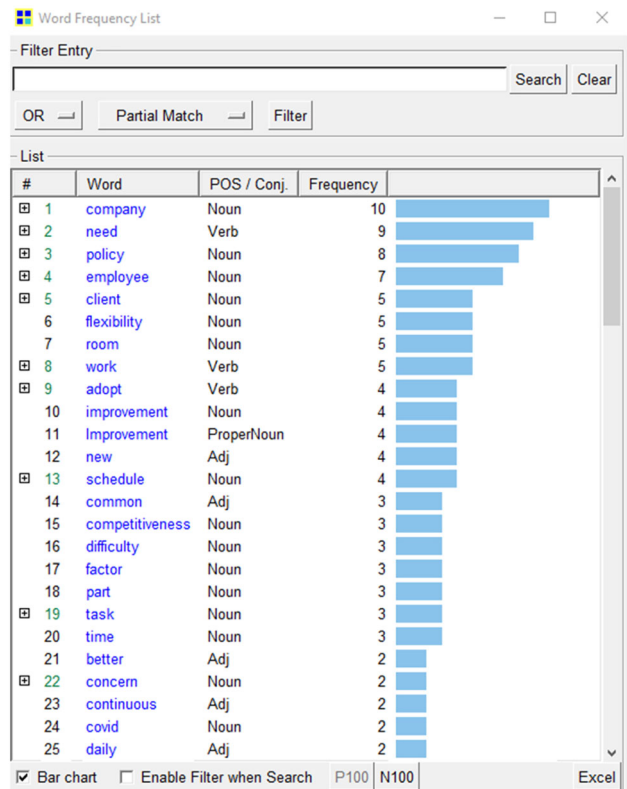


Fig. 18 Word frequency list: firm. Source: KH Coder 3



Fig. 19 Word cloud: firm. Source: Tag Crowd

Table 14 Bigram: firm

N-gram	Frequency
There is	6
Room for	5
These policies	3
Competitiveness factor	3
Continuous improvement	2

Source: Authors

Table 15 Trigram: firm

N-gram	Frequency
There is room	3
Focus on new	2
Room for evolution	2
Room for improvement	2
Yes improvement process	2

Source: Authors

RQ4: Do you think that your firm can organise itself to exploit and leverage flexible working policies?

The final research objective was to assess whether companies had the capacity to organise themselves in order to adequately use and benefit from labour flexibility policies. In this sense, 85% of the respondents considered that their company had the necessary capacity to organise itself in order to make the best use of this resource. They consider that there is room for development with regard to flexibility and the adoption of flexibility policies, as this is still a new

issue. They also consider that it is a factor of competitiveness and that it should be one of the priorities of the companies, having noticed that pilot projects have been developed in this sense. Finally, and conversely, it was also identified that the main challenge for firms is to create control systems that allow them to effectively measure and monitor their employees' work when adopting flexibility policies, an idea advocated by McDonald and Cathcart (2015), who stated that the lack of support and supervision makes their effective implementation impossible.

Therefore, after analysing the four pillars of the VRIO model individually and applying the model in a universal way to labour flexibility policies, thus answering the main question of this research, labour flexibility policies do not represent a source of sustainable competitive advantage for companies, but lead them to be on a competitive par with their competitors, since this resource was considered valuable by most professionals, but not rare, as shown in Table 16. Thus, the use of this resource does not create a competitive advantage, but the inability to do so can put a firm at a competitive disadvantage, making it essential for firms to adopt these policies in order to at least maintain their position in the market.

In this sense, and having presented and justified the value generated by labour flexibility policies and the ability of firms to organise themselves, it becomes important for them to be able to combat the non-rarity and imitability associated with this resource.

Regarding the scarcity of labour flexibility policies, some policies are more common and easier to adopt than others. For example, teleworking is one of the most common policies among enterprises, as it does not require major internal restructuring and financial effort. Policies such as the shorter working week are less common, as they require internal restructuring, and firms are less flexible in adopting this type of policy, either because of the margins involved, the type of work and functions, or even the number of existing employees. It is therefore necessary for companies to be proactive in implementing flexibility policies that are less common in the industry and to call for innovation and the creation of new policies that can add value for the company and its employees. However, even if firms have the capacity to develop rare flexibility policies, if they do not have the capacity to make them inimitable, firms will only gain a temporary competitive advantage. According to Dierickx and Cool (1989), a firm's resources can be inimitable for three reasons: unique historical conditions, causal ambiguity and social complexity.

With regard to the creation of unique historical conditions, Barney (1995) argues that the main way in which the historical context can ensure the inimitability of a resource

Fig. 20 Mind map: firm.
Source: KH Coder 3

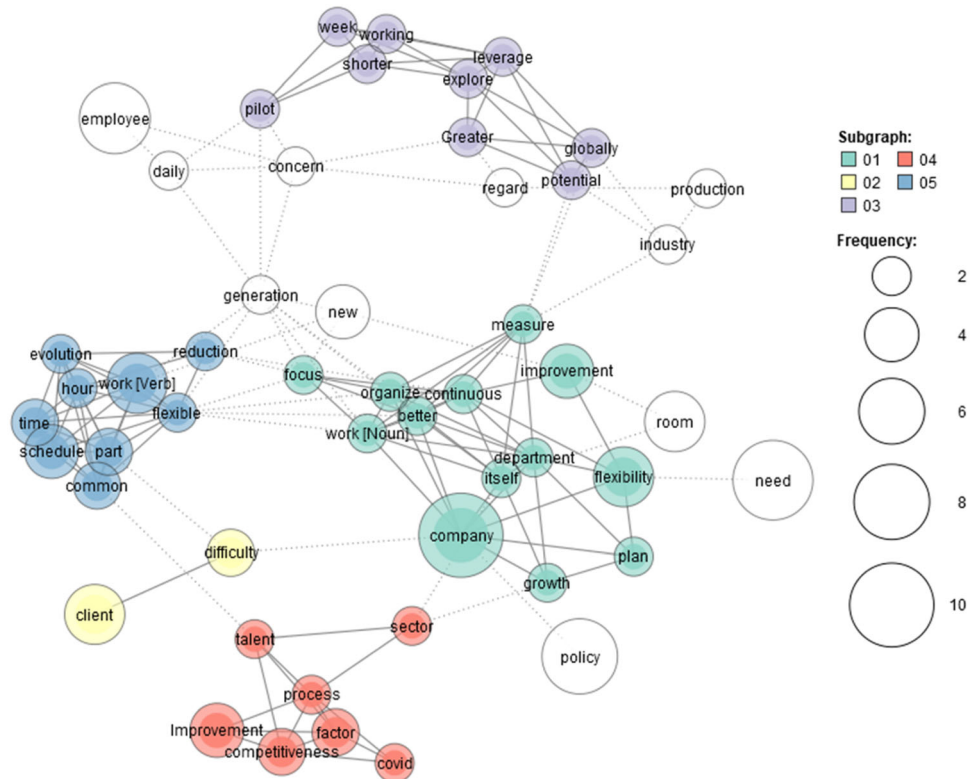


Table 16 VRIO Model: Results

Valuable?	Rare?	Hard to imitate?	Exploited by the Firm?		Results (%)
No	–	–	–	Competitive Disadvantage	0
Yes	No	–	–	Competitive Parity	70
Yes	Yes	No	–	Temporary Competitive Advantage	25
Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Unusual Competitive Advantage	0
Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Sustainable Competitive Advantage	5

Source: Adapted from Barney (2002)

is related to pioneering, that is, when a firm is the first to develop, recognise or exploit an opportunity, because although other firms may develop the same resource later, the pioneering firm makes this challenge more complex for its competitors (Mishina et al., 2012). At the level of social complexity, this is achieved when it consists of complex social phenomena, such as interpersonal relationships or a firm’s culture, which can be identified by competitors but are usually difficult to copy because all the elements that make up the firm are unique (Andersém et al., 2016).

Finally, social ambiguity becomes a barrier to imitation and contributes to the inimitability of a resource, as competitors are unable to identify the factors that contribute to the development of a competitive advantage. Competitors may even possess the resource, but may not understand how it works, or only partially (King & Zeithaml, 2001).

Thus, management teams have an important role to play in ensuring the inimitability of labour flexibility policies, on the one hand by developing innovative and pioneering policies in the market, and on the other hand by keeping the



Table 17 Main theoretical and practical contributions

Authors (Year)	Main Topics	Theoretical/Practical Contribution
Peretz et al. (2018)	Increased competitiveness as a consequence of the implementation of labour flexibility policies	Resource considered as valuable, representing a competitiveness factor
Aziz-Ur-Rehman and Siddiqui (2019)	Improved performance and productivity as a result of the adoption of flexible working policies	Increase in productivity generated by the implementation of labour flexibility policies
Boell et al. (2016)	Flexible working policies increase job satisfaction and commitment	Increased employee satisfaction and motivation through the adoption of flexible working policies
Dhal et al. (2021)	Seeking a better balance between personal and professional life	The application of flexible working policies allows employees to manage their time more effectively
Dhal et al. (2021)	Flexible working policies promote increased talent retention and development	Flexible labour market policies increase firms' ability to attract and retain talent
Powell and Mainiero (1999)	The nature of certain jobs compromises the use of labour flexibility policies	Flexible working policies are easy to adopt and are more common in services
de Menezes and Kelliher (2011)	Incompatibility between the policies made available and the needs of the employees	Possibility of adjusting labour flexibility policies to the needs of firms and employees
Rodrigues et al. (2021)	The adoption of labour flexibility policies allows for cost reduction	The adoption of flexible working policies enables cost reductions
McDonald and Cathcart (2015)	Lack of support and supervision does not make effective implementation of flexibility policies possible	Difficulty in measuring and monitoring employees' work when adopting flexible working policies

Source: Authors

Table 18 Future line of research and perspectives

VRIO	Future line of research	Perspectives
Value	How can firms effectively manage and maintain the value generated by labour flexibility policies to ensure long-term benefits in terms of employee satisfaction and productivity?	This research question examines the strategies and practices that firms can implement to sustain and optimize the value derived from flexible working policies, ensuring continued benefits for both employees and the organization
Rare	How can firms enhance the rarity of their labour flexibility policies to achieve a sustainable competitive advantage?	This research question focuses on exploring strategies and approaches that can help firms differentiate their flexibility policies from competitors, making them harder to imitate and increasing their rarity
Inimitable	What are the potential barriers and challenges in measuring and controlling employees' work within the context of labour flexibility policies?	This question aims to delve into the specific difficulties and obstacles faced by managers in effectively measuring and monitoring employee performance and work outcomes in a flexible work environment
Organization	What are the innovative approaches and new types of flexibility policies that can further differentiate firms and increase their competitive advantage?	This question explores the possibilities for novel flexibility policies that go beyond the current practices, aiming to identify emerging trends and innovative approaches that can set firms apart from competitors and create new sources of competitive advantage

know-how used to create them in-house so that it does not spread to other companies in the long term. Therefore, the more innovative and complex flexibility policies are developed, the more likely they are to provide a sustainable competitive advantage (Table 17).

Conclusion

Labour flexibility policies have been shown to be valuable in improving employee satisfaction, productivity and talent retention. Although they are not uncommon and can be easily replicated, their adoption remains essential for firms to remain competitive and avoid falling behind their

competitors. The findings suggest that companies should not overlook the implementation of these policies because of their role in achieving competitive parity.

The value of flexible working policies lies in their ability to meet the needs and expectations of younger generations, allowing employees to effectively balance their personal and professional lives. This contributes to increased motivation and productivity. In addition, these policies help companies to attract and retain talent, reducing the challenges associated with high staff turnover and recruitment costs. However, it has been observed that the prevalence of flexibility policies has increased, largely driven by the pandemic, making their adoption more common among enterprises.

Although labour flexibility policies are not rare or difficult to imitate, companies believe they have the capacity to exploit this resource due to its relative novelty. They see opportunities for growth and recognise the importance of measuring and controlling employees' work as a challenge in adopting these policies. It is therefore crucial for managers to address the issues of rarity and inimitability associated with these policies in order to achieve sustainable competitive advantage.

Future research should explore innovative approaches to maintaining the rarity and inimitability of labour flexibility policies. This could include developing new policies that differentiate firms from their competitors and make replication difficult through pioneering, social complexity or causal ambiguity. It is essential to encourage innovation, development and the creation of distinctive flexibility policies that allow firms to differentiate themselves and make it difficult for competitors to copy and exploit these policies. In this way, firms can secure a sustainable competitive advantage in the dynamic business environment. We therefore propose these new directions for future research following the VRIO framework (Table 18):

Future research should focus on conducting longitudinal studies to assess the long-term effects of labour flexibility policies on employee satisfaction, productivity and firm performance. In addition, cross-industry analyses should be conducted to compare the adoption and impact of these policies across different sectors and to identify industry-specific factors that influence their effectiveness. It is also important to explore workers' perspectives to gain insights into their needs, challenges and preferences regarding flexibility policies. Technological advances should be explored to understand how digital tools, remote collaboration platforms and artificial intelligence can facilitate and enhance the implementation of flexible working arrangements. In addition, the role of organisational culture and leadership styles in the successful adoption and use of flexibility policies should be explored in order to develop effective implementation strategies. By addressing these

research directions, scholars can advance the understanding of labour flexibility policies and contribute to the development of best practices in this area.

Limitations

During the research carried out, and despite the conclusions obtained, some limitations were identified.

Firstly, the interviews were only conducted with professionals in managerial positions and coordinating a team, leaving the opinion of the rest of the employees to be ascertained, and thus not reflecting the impact of the implementation of flexibility policies on all professionals. In addition, only 20 professionals were interviewed, which may not be enough to extrapolate the opinion of the population. In terms of data analysis, the results obtained using the KH Coder tool were not as consistent as expected and there were some difficulties in finding relationships between the justifications given by the respondents.

Finally, the last limitation identified is the lack of specificity in the analysis. During the interviews conducted, several professionals identified different opinions regarding different labour flexibility policies, suggesting that applying the VRIO model to each policy could lead to different results. In the same perspective, the differences that may exist in the implementation of these policies according to the sector of activity were also reported. In this way, these may be some of the points to be studied in the future, trying to effectively evaluate the impact that these variables may have on the advantage that labour flexibility policies offer to companies.

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Data availability The data that support the findings of this research are available on request to the corresponding author.

Declarations

Conflict of interest The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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Key Questions

1. What are the specific benefits of labour flexibility policies for employee satisfaction, productivity, and talent retention?
2. How do flexible working policies affect employee morale, motivation, and engagement?
3. How do they impact productivity, absenteeism, and turnover rates?
4. What are the challenges associated with implementing labour flexibility policies?
5. How can businesses maintain the rarity and inimitability of their labour flexibility policies?
6. What are the implications of labour flexibility policies for the future of work?

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