

Section Four: Worker Struggles: Unpredictability

[Suzanne Cummings](#) is project manager for *Invested* and Regional and Community Outreach at the Federal Reserve Bank of Boston.

As the old saying goes, time is money, and increasingly, the demands on our time are pushing the boundaries between workplace expectations and our personal and family needs. A growing number of jobs these days—especially those in certain industries such as food service, retail, and some healthcare jobs—come with unpredictable schedules that make life quite challenging, particularly for lower-wage workers.

While little data is available on unpredictable schedules, the [research that has been done so far](#) shows that individuals who are negatively impacted by this unpredictability tend to be low-income workers and people of color. Many are also part-time employees, single parents, or both. The toll of unpredictable schedules on these workers is far-reaching, affecting everything from their health to their personal finances and their ability to take a second job or pursue continuing education toward their own advancement. For business owners, managers, and even clients of these workers, there are costly ripple effects as well.

We begin this first issue of *Invested's* series on employment in New England with perspectives from three local workers who are struggling with unpredictable hours on the job. We also hear from a topic expert on reasons for the suspected rise in this type of scheduling, its consequences for both supply and demand sides of the workforce, and some thoughts about possible solutions.

“Time is becoming another privilege of people with more resources.”

Naomi Gerstel is Distinguished University Professor and professor of sociology at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, and coauthor with Dan Clawson of *Unequal Time*, a book examining unpredictable schedules in the healthcare industry. This interview was conducted on August 17, 2017, and has been lightly edited.

Q: Why have unpredictable schedules become so much more common recently?

A: We don't really know how much change over time there has been because there's not any longitudinal data, but what we do know is that what in our book we call [“normal unpredictability”](#) is really pervasive, and there are a number of reasons to suspect that it's become more common. Some of it comes from an economic system in which employers who are seeking to control costs operate on thin staffing margins, and they hire a growing number of part-time workers and then call on workers at the last minute to tell them to stay longer, to come in unexpectedly, or to go home unexpectedly when there's a change in demand. Increasingly it's become very clear that one of the criteria for hiring is

saying that you're widely available to work when you apply for a job. And that means that you're agreeing to come at any time, which many workers feel they have to do even if it creates chaos and hardship for them and for their families, as so much research is showing us.

Second, some of it appears to be rooted in new technology—in part, cell phones with email and texting, which means people can be called at the last minute. What we saw in the hospitals we studied was that they initially had phones they sent home with some staff so they could call them in at any time. But eventually they didn't have to do that anymore because everyone had cell phones and the ability to send texts, and people often felt they had to answer immediately. So there's a range of technology that creates fewer boundaries between work and family and makes unpredictability more pervasive.

But what we also have to talk about—the third key source—is changes in the family. Part of the increasing prevalence of this unpredictability is that more and more families are either dual earner or single parent, and that means when unexpected demands arise either at the workplace or at home, no one is at home to handle it. So families are also operating on thin staffing margins, just like you find in the economy, and this is true now across class. It used to be that husbands could essentially outsource responsibility to their wives, but they can't do that in dual-career families. And more and more families are headed by single parents, and that also increases the impact of unpredictable events. With aging baby boomers, there are also more aging parents who need care, and that care is very often unpredictable in itself, which makes it difficult for more and more families. So we see unpredictable scheduling rooted in families, jobs, and with the new technology; it's very likely it has increased, but we don't have data on its increase.

Q: We talk a lot about flexibility as a good thing in jobs—that people have options to work more hours or work at home—but there's clearly a difference between flexibility and unpredictability. Can you talk about that difference and why some workers benefit from flexibility while for others it's difficult?

A: When we talk about flexibility, we have to talk about it as being used in two very different ways: one is employee driven and the other is employer driven. So much of the discussion for the past decade or two has been driven by an interest in family-friendly policies or what are called “work-life issues” — things like compressed work weeks, changing work start and stop times, and being able to take vacations. In those situations, flexibility is a positive thing that gives employees the leeway to deal with unexpected problems often imposed by fixed schedules.

But increasingly flexibility is a term used by employers in a way that means unpredictability from the perspective of employees. This employer-driven flexibility is tied to organizational demands, and it involves fewer rather than more social protections for workers. Employers increasingly use the term flexibility to mean that workers should be available at whatever times and in whatever ways the managers request. In our book, we talked to a union official who said to us, “It's the new management buzzword, and it's the new word for control by management.” In this context, flexibility means workers adjust to uncertain hours and last-minute changes that employers impose. Stores, hotels, nursing homes, hospitals, and restaurants hold managers responsible for meeting changing or shifting demand, so local managers slot some people on their payroll for zero hours and many to work part-time shifts.

Section 4: *Invested* – Series 1, Issue 1, 2017-2018

Flexibility, Predictability, and the Challenge of Planning the Modern Work Week

www.bostonfed.org/publications/invested.aspx

We've seen a huge rise in part-time work. Managers can fill these jobs on a moment's notice with just-in-time schedules or, as one person now calls them, from the perspective of workers, "maybe schedules." I thought that was quite a useful phrase.

Employers' hiring and firing is also increasingly tied to availability, so the fear of not being hired or being fired means workers feel desperate and willing to accept hours on short notice. So flexibility for the employer produces unpredictability for the employee.

Q: Are there particular fields of work where these unpredictable schedules are more common?

A: They're very prevalent among low-wage restaurant and retail workers, where there's a big fluctuation in consumer demand, but we see a lot of it in healthcare as well. We did an analysis of the schedules in one nursing home and found that for every two shifts that an employee worked according to a planned schedule, one shift was not according to that schedule—a third of the time. That's a lot.

Q: Are there particular groups of workers that have been most affected?

A: Across the research, including ours, it's evident that it's most common for workers of color and low-income workers, many of whom are part-time, and part-time workers are particularly likely to be women. And so, we're talking here about gender, race, and education operating together: people with low levels of education, people of color, and women are most likely to face unpredictability.

Q: One concept you present in your book is this idea of the "web of time." Can you explain what that is and how it affects workers?

A: What happens is if one worker faces unpredictability, it spreads and expands, so changes and unpredictability in one person's schedule change the plans and schedules of others—their supervisors, their coworkers, their caregivers, their partners, their spouses, their children. As someone said to me, "Schedule changes become lots of people's hassle." For example, we were hanging out observing in one nursing home, and a supervisor told a nursing assistant she needed to stay late because someone had called in sick, and that nursing assistant was afraid of losing her job if she didn't stay. Her mother was taking care of her children, and she called her mother and said, "Can you stay tonight?" And her mother was supposed to go to work, but she felt the children had to be taken care of, so she called *her* workplace and said, "I can't come in," and at that workplace they had to get another coworker to fill the job, and then the spiral continues. When we talk about unpredictability, we tend to focus on individual workers, but the numbers should include the ways it ramifies across institutions and organizations and families. That's the web of time.

Q: What kind of impacts of these unpredictable schedules are you seeing on workers' health, their families, and their finances?

A: Well, having a part-time job, which workers are hired for increasingly, often means that you also need a second job. And having a second job increases the unpredictability and makes it harder to keep both

Section 4: *Invested* – Series 1, Issue 1, 2017-2018

Flexibility, Predictability, and the Challenge of Planning the Modern Work Week

www.bostonfed.org/publications/invested.aspx

jobs, and therefore harder to keep your head above water financially. And it means that when you're sent home suddenly, especially without pay for your full shift, it's hard to survive. People have trouble making ends meet and taking care of their families, and they get stressed, and we know that stress is tied to illness, so there are lots of negative consequences. It's very worrisome.

Q: Are there ripple effects for businesses, managers, clients, or customers as well?

A: We saw managers reacting in many different ways. Some supervisors were very responsible and tried to be responsive and to create space for some of the workers whom they knew well, but they often had difficulty because of the dictates that employers put on them in order to make a profit or increase their profits. And because availability became so central and workers got unexpected calls to come in, we saw that they'd go in sick sometimes. So imagine, in a nursing home or a hospital, a nurse or a nursing assistant coming in sick and taking care of sick people. That has consequences for clients and customers and managers. So I think that some of the ill effects on workers cycle back onto organizations. There are lots of people making claims about how employers can't afford unpredictability pay, but I think the truth is we can't afford not to give it.

Q: Are there options beyond or in addition to legislation or regulation that you think would also be effective in stabilizing unpredictable schedules?

A: I think federal and state regulations are key, but there is also something we call "participatory scheduling." This is a type of scheduling in which workers gain some control over the schedules, and a lot of managers, businesses, and workers like this idea. Workers can organize their own schedules and swap shifts with one another. So, for example, in the healthcare world we studied, a permanent change in a worker's schedule required a manager's approval, but to deal with last-minute unpredictable events—a sick child, or a sick parent, or even going to see your kid in a school play—coworkers swapped shifts with one another. It works well, and at least some have found that it reduces turnover, absenteeism, and what some people now call "presenteeism," which is reporting to work when you're sick. So participatory scheduling is good all around, I think.

Q: In the workplaces where you've seen participatory scheduling, who usually decides to do that? Did the businesses decide to do it, or did someone suggest it to them?

A: Often, it's workers that have suggested it to their employers. Sometimes employers see that workers do it informally, and they say, "This works," and then they set it up officially. And sometimes it operates informally, so that workers just do it with one another and managers allow that.

Q: There are a lot of new apps and other technology options out there for scheduling, and some of them give workers more control. Do you have any thoughts on that and whether tools like those might help?

A: It depends on the way it's used. Sometimes it's used to give workers more predictable lives, and in some places it's used to take away their control and impose more unpredictable schedules. So the technology itself is not the issue. And this is what people have argued about every kind of technology:

Section 4: *Invested* – Series 1, Issue 1, 2017-2018

Flexibility, Predictability, and the Challenge of Planning the Modern Work Week

www.bostonfed.org/publications/invested.aspx

it's how that technology is used and the social context in which it's used. The technologies that were developed precisely to give employers more control are problematic, because they introduce more unpredictability for workers. Imagine an employer looking at the program and telling an employee with two kids, "You're coming in in an hour." And that happens a lot. But sometimes workers get to collaborate with employers on the use of the technology in their workplace, and that can be useful. But I don't think technology itself can be understood without understanding the context and the ways in which it's used.

Q: What else do you think is important for people to understand about unpredictable schedules and their impacts?

A: Well, the issue is much more visible than it was a decade ago, and part of that is because unpredictability has likely grown, but another part of it is that families have changed and they can't deal with unpredictability the way they used to. It's important to emphasize that it's not just how much unpredictability workers experience, but also how much control they have over that unpredictability. Whites and those with higher incomes and levels of education experience unpredictability, but they have more control over it. They can adjust their lives in ways that make it possible not to face chaos and all the negative outcomes that unpredictability creates for low-wage workers. And this is really important to understand, because in some cases unpredictable schedules can be deadly for low-wage workers and their families—literally, sometimes children die. So I think it's really important that control over time has become a policy issue in ways that it wasn't before. Time is becoming another privilege of people with more resources.

"It's very difficult because the hours will get you. One minute you're there with the kids all the time, telling them what they need to know, and the next minute it's hard to be there to help them with homework or tuck them into bed."

Barbara Fisher works as a server at a fast-food establishment in Massachusetts. The following interview was conducted on August 11, 2017, and has been lightly edited.

Previous jobs: fast food industry jobs

Current job shift/hours: part-time, highly variable

Schedule at current job received: at the end of each week for the following week

Schedule format/accessibility at current job: by phone, through a manager

Q: When you get your schedule or your schedule changes, what's typical? Do you get last-minute notice? How much time do you have to plan your schedule?

A: Well, I *don't* have time, actually, to plan my schedule. When I was hired, they asked me my availability and I put it down, but they don't go by it at all. So when they do my schedule, I have to check the next

Section 4: *Invested* – Series 1, Issue 1, 2017-2018

Flexibility, Predictability, and the Challenge of Planning the Modern Work Week

www.bostonfed.org/publications/invested.aspx

time I go in to work a shift to see what time I will be working the next day. I don't have notice at all. It's day to day.

Q: Do you get called in at the last minute sometimes? Do they ever tell you to go home because there's not enough work?

A: Definitely. They do that a lot, actually. I just got a new job where I'm working overnights, and they need a lot of help on that shift, so lately they've been calling me to come in. In the past, I've worked the same type of jobs—they get slow at a certain time, and I'm not there for more than three or four hours when they'll tell me to go home, but only after I'm finished doing my work duties.

Q: So it really changes up a lot.

A: Yeah, definitely.

Q: When they need you last minute, does your manager give you a reason or do they just expect you to show up?

A: Well, they'll just say, "Can you come in, because someone called out and I don't have anyone to replace them. And you're one of my best workers, so can you come in?" And they expect me to drop everything and run to work.

Q: What happens when you can't do that?

A: They'll say, "You'll have a five-day suspension" or "You'll get written up if you can't make it." I recently had a manager say that to me. So, for me, I'm thinking, well, I'm going to take that chance, because I'm a mama too, so my kids come first.

Q: So if it happens a number of times in a row that they call you in last minute and you can't make it, are you in danger of losing your job?

A: Yes, indeed, because I would get written up, and a certain amount of those write-ups would cause me to lose my job.

Q: Do you get any kind of compensation or is there any incentive offered to you to work extra shifts at the last minute?

A: No, I don't get extra pay for covering a shift at the last minute—but I do get extra duties to take care of.

Q: How does your work schedule impact your ability to just do your job or impact your productivity at work?

Section 4: *Invested* – Series 1, Issue 1, 2017-2018

Flexibility, Predictability, and the Challenge of Planning the Modern Work Week

www.bostonfed.org/publications/invested.aspx

A: Well, it impacts it because of the fact that I'm on a time schedule, you know? If I have chores or duties to do at work after my shift, they give me a limited time to do that because they don't want me to go over hours. Or if I leave early or something because they tell me it's slow, I still have to take care of other people's responsibilities. So it impacts me because of the short amount of time I have to take care of a lot of work in my job.

Q: How does it impact your financial management: your ability to pay your bills, or plan for anything, or save?

A: Well, it affects it because I don't know what my next week's hours are going to be, because they change so much. So I can't base paying my bills off of the past week; I have to actually wait to see what the hours the next week will be. And in terms of my saving money, it's hard, because I have to use what I earn to pay for transportation, you know? So I'm trying to save and trying to take care of my home life, and I can't do both. The hours are not there and the schedule is all over the place.

Q: How does it impact your health and well-being?

A: It impacts it a lot because I have kids. I have kids who go to public school. They need uniforms and other things for school, and one week I can afford it and the next week I can't afford it. And I have to make sure that they eat, so I take on double hours at work just to make ends meet. It's very stressful—you have no idea. Sometimes I take on two jobs to try to make my total hours equal out to the full week I had the week before, and it still won't equal out to that. So it's very tough.

Q: So do you sometimes take on temporary jobs or other jobs to fill in the hours from time to time?

A: Yes, I fill out other applications and I go to other jobs in the same industry. Anything to get extra money to support my kids and to make it a better future for them.

Q: If you had to guess, how many hours per day do you think you work? I know it's up in the air a lot, but does it average out to more than an eight-hour day most weeks?

A: No. It's probably six hours a day, if even that; five, maybe.

Q: And if you could get more hours, would you want to work more hours?

A: Of course.

Q: What do you think would be most helpful to you to stabilize your schedule?

A: I would say providing a transportation benefit, first off, because that would help employees to get there on time; you wouldn't have to worry about employees being late and their pay being lower because of that. Also, it would help if they could provide childcare. If you need me to come in for an eight-hour shift at any time, any day, I mean, at least offer childcare that works. Also, improving

Section 4: *Invested* – Series 1, Issue 1, 2017-2018

Flexibility, Predictability, and the Challenge of Planning the Modern Work Week

www.bostonfed.org/publications/invested.aspx

communication, because employees need to be able to contact each other. If you're going to be late, let us know, and if you're not going to come in, let me know—I'll come in early. I definitely think those three are the main important things right now.

Q: When they make these schedule changes or someone else can't come in, do you know your other coworkers and do you communicate with each other? How do you usually do the scheduling to cover for someone who can't come in?

A: Well, we will call the manager. We'll communicate through a manager, but sometimes the managers don't answer. So it's kind of hard because if they wanted or needed me to come in, I miss that chance because I didn't know the shift was available.

Q: So, basically, they set your schedule day to day?

A: Week to week—so maybe one week it's a set 20 hours for the week, and then the next week it could be 40 hours, if they need more people because some people called out. You know what I mean? It's different week to week; it changes, and I'm not able to know ahead of time for that week how many hours I'll have until I go to work the next day. They don't call you to say, well, you're working this amount of hours this week.

Q: Have you told them, I have kids and I need to arrange for their care, so if you need me to come in can you give me some kind of heads-up?

A: Yes—oh yes, I have said that *plenty* of times. I mean, yeah, they'll agree with me right then and there, but then when that day comes that I can't come in because of the kids, the manager says, "Well, I need you." And at the end of the day, it doesn't matter what your kids need. The managers need me to be there to work for them, and if I can't, then it's, "Oh well, you get a write-up." At the end of the day, it doesn't matter to them.

Q: If you could do any job, what would it be? What would you want to do, if you had a lot of options?

A: If I had a lot of options, I would have my own business. Because I know that with the ways different businesses run, a lot of people are in difficult work situations, and I could improve that for people who worked for me, you know? And I feel like a business is something that grows, and it just brings light to people. Just knowing that they're working somewhere where they are taken care of and they don't have to worry about getting fired if they can't come in or worry that their hours are going up and down.

Q: Is there anything else that you wished people knew about what it's like to work on this kind of schedule?

A: Yes, that it's very, very, very hard, especially if you're a mom and you're trying to raise your kids right for the future. It's very difficult because the hours will get you. One minute you're there with the kids all

Section 4: *Invested* – Series 1, Issue 1, 2017-2018

Flexibility, Predictability, and the Challenge of Planning the Modern Work Week

www.bostonfed.org/publications/invested.aspx

the time, telling them what they need to know, and the next minute it's hard to be there to help them with homework or tuck them into bed. So it's very difficult with unmanageable hours.

“When they would tell me, ‘Oh, you’re not working these days anymore, we’ll call you when we need you,’ it went from me having a set income to being in a situation where I didn’t know when I was going to be able to go into work. It was very tough.”

Brittany Marshall works as a day center aide in Connecticut. The following interview was conducted on August 14, 2017, and has been lightly edited.

Current job shift/hours: part-time, weekdays, 9:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m.

Other shifts worked at the same job in the past: 7:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m. and 11:00 p.m. to 7:00 a.m.

Schedule changes at current job received: by phone

Q: In what ways has your schedule been difficult for you?

A: In the past in this job, I worked the third shift [11:00 p.m. to 7:00 a.m.] because my oldest daughter is in first grade, so I had to make sure that I had a job and also a shift that went with me being a mom as well. It was a very strenuous job, and I was very sleepy as well. I wasn't getting enough rest, and then I would come home and take care of a two-year-old. I was losing sleep and I was always grumpy, so I wasn't able to do that night shift anymore; it just wasn't for me.

Q: When you wanted to switch your shift, could you just ask? What happened when you asked for that?

A: Well, one thing that happened to me when I asked to switch my shift was that it went by seniority—so if a position opened up and I took that position, if someone else came back who had been there longer than me and they wanted the position, they were able to bump me out of it.

Q: Oh, so it could just change like that? Did that happen?

A: All the time.

Q: And then they would put you back on your old shift?

A: Yes. If someone was out sick or somebody had a surgery, for example, I would take their position, and then if they said they were coming back, I would get bumped. All the time.

Q: How did that impact your ability to be there for your family? Was it difficult to schedule things for them around your work situation?

Section 4: *Invested* – Series 1, Issue 1, 2017-2018

Flexibility, Predictability, and the Challenge of Planning the Modern Work Week

www.bostonfed.org/publications/invested.aspx

A: It was extremely difficult—financially, for the most part, because I was depending on having a set income from the days that I worked. So when they would tell me, “Oh, you’re not working these days anymore, we’ll call you when we need you,” it went from me having a set income to being in a situation where I didn’t know when I was going to be able to go into work. It was very tough.

Q: Did it make it difficult to plan bills and things like that, as well?

A: Yes.

Q: Did it have any impact on your health or your well-being?

A: Yes. I actually have a connective tissue disease and really bad arthritis, and it was [affecting my health](#). It got to the point where I would be on my feet all night doing so much hard work, I would come home and I couldn’t even get out of bed. It was so bad. Yeah, it did affect my health a lot.

Q: Did you have insurance or benefits?

A: Not through my job. I wasn’t working full-time permanently, so they wouldn’t offer me insurance.

Q: You weren’t working full-time permanently because of how your job schedule shifted around?

A: Yes. So, basically, they’ll say, “Okay Britt, we’re going to give you a position and if no one takes this position at a certain point, you can have it, but if the person comes back, it’s theirs.” So I wasn’t considered permanent, and they wouldn’t give me insurance.

Q: You mentioned that these abrupt changes were based on seniority. Did they tell you about that before they gave you that shift? Did they warn you that that might happen?

A: They would water it down, like, “Oh, the person may not come back, you know, you’ll be okay, not too many people are going to want that position, don’t worry about it”—that type of thing. So that was what was going on until it was time for the other person to come back. What they would do is, even though I was already in the position, they’d have to post it. So even if, let’s say, the person who had the job before me didn’t come back, another person who had been working there maybe a month longer than me could say, “Oh, I want that position.”

Q: So staffing is based on seniority across the whole workplace?

A: The whole entire place. It happened to me about four or five times in the time that I was working there, that I got bumped.

Q: How far ahead would they tell you, when someone else would come in with greater seniority to fill the job?

A: A week or two.

Q: If you were doing any training or other activities around building your career during the time you were getting bumped from that particular role, how was that impacted by having such an unpredictable job?

A: I don't think any of that was affected at the time, because all that I was focused on was my employment and earning money, just to make sure that my kids were taken care of. So I didn't have anything else going on besides my job.

Q: What do you think is the most difficult thing about working a job that's unpredictable?

A: I think now, with my present job, it's actually more difficult because I work 40 minutes away from where I live, so there are times where I'm on my way to work and I'm just about to pull into the parking lot, and at that moment they will call me to tell me that they don't need me. This happens to me at least twice a week. So right now I'm on the hunt for another job, but that has been happening to me a lot.

Q: What happens if they call you to tell you they don't need you to come in last minute like that? Do you get compensated at all for the day?

A: If you're scheduled to work and they tell you they don't need you, they only give you two hours' pay for the day.

Q: And that's just based on how many clients come in on a given day?

A: Yes, it's based on the ratio of staff to clients. If they're overstaffed, they'll say, "We don't need you today."

Q: What do you think would be most helpful to people like yourself who work these kinds of unpredictable jobs?

A: I'd say ensuring we can work set hours, because I see a lot of this going on around now, this seniority thing. People are getting bumped a lot. Everyone that I speak to, they're just not secure in their jobs. Job security is just so unheard of now. Years ago, you never had to worry about that, but I hear so much of it nowadays. It's the security that's important, and I feel like employees need more security in their jobs.

Q: Do you want to keep working in the field you're in now?

A: Not necessarily. I am planning to go to school in the fall for radiology. I'm getting so tired of being in the situation I'm in right now, so I just want to take some steps forward if I'm going to stay in this field. I need to find something stable enough that I love to do, and that would be best fitting for my family.

Section 4: *Invested* – Series 1, Issue 1, 2017-2018

Flexibility, Predictability, and the Challenge of Planning the Modern Work Week

www.bostonfed.org/publications/invested.aspx

Q: Do you think you'll keep working while you're in school?

A: Yes, I have no choice.

Q: Do you want to keep working in the same place while you're in school?

A: Probably, but I'm also trying to get a job with a children's hospital, where my income would be higher. That way, when I'm in school I won't have to worry so much about those situations where they don't need me at work that day. Now that I'll be in school, I really need a more stable income for my family, so I'm trying to find a job that pays me a little better so that my kids and I can be more secure.

Q: And the kind of job that you will be looking for after you get your certification or degree, when you chose that field of work were you thinking about the stability of jobs in that field?

A: Yes, most definitely.

Q: Is there anything you wish people knew about what it's like to work in an unpredictable job?

A: It's not easy. It's frustrating, but God gives us the grace to get through it, so I can't even complain, you know? I get up in the morning and sometimes my boss says, "We don't need you today," and I just think, you know what? Tomorrow we'll just keep going. I'm a single mother and my kids look to me every morning to take care of them, so I just do what I have to do to make sure that they're taken care of. Moms like me, we don't get a lot of help, but we do what we have to do to take care of our children.

"You never know where you're going for a given shift, or how many hours it will be, or how long you're going to be with the client—if it's going to be a stable, ongoing position or if it's just going to be a couple days. And you've got to worry about where your next client is coming from."

Nur Fitzpatrick works as a home health aide in Connecticut. This interview was conducted on August 28, 2017, and has been lightly edited.

Previous jobs: insurance transcriber, prison administration, certified nursing assistant

Current job shift/hours: part-time, highly variable

Q: What is your current job, and what do you do in that job?

A: I'm a home health aide. I used to be a certified nurse's aide, but the work got a little too intense, so I took some time off and then I went back to home care. I visit elderly homes within this area of Middletown, CT. I go in the client's home, assess the situation, see what they need, and provide the

Section 4: *Invested* – Series 1, Issue 1, 2017-2018

Flexibility, Predictability, and the Challenge of Planning the Modern Work Week

www.bostonfed.org/publications/invested.aspx

care. Every patient is different. My last patient had Alzheimer's, and there are different things you can do with them to kind of bring them back to life. For my patients I usually assist with bathing, feeding, and dressing them, and then do activities with them—for example, I would do coloring with my last patient. I also read with her, and she actually started progressing very well in a six-month time period.

Q: In what ways are the hours of this job unpredictable?

A: Well, the thing is that you never know how long you're going to be with a client, and then sometimes, due to insurance or unforeseen circumstances, the client stops service. There's really no stability. The other issue is that they're always calling you to fill in for other people. That gets a little frustrating because as a single mom, I need a set schedule. However, I love the work, so I'm kind of torn sometimes.

Q: So when you're called in on short notice, do the managers give you a reason for that?

A: They'll say, "So-and-so called out; can you fill in?" Usually that's what it is: someone called out or someone didn't show up. The most common reason is someone gets into a client situation and they feel like it's too hard for them, it's too much work, so they just don't show up. So then the managers will call someone like me who's more reliable, and then either I'll end up going, or sometimes I have to say, "I'm sorry, I just can't," because of the time. For example, sometimes the shift is at night. But it depends; it can be all different times of day.

Q: So when you say short notice, what does that mean? They'll give you a week, or a day?

A: No. They call you the day of and ask, "Can you come in tonight?" And I'm already cooking dinner, and I'm thinking, "Boy, what do I do?" Because I have no one to stay with the kids if it's a short-notice situation for a night shift.

Q: When you are called in on short notice, do you get paid extra for that?

A: That's a really good question, because a few weeks after I first started working there, they said, "Oh, we'll give you a \$25.00 bonus for working the extra shift." But then, I think because I kept saying yes to extra shifts, I didn't really get bonuses anymore, and when I asked about it, they would say, "Oh, we can't do it this time." But when they're desperate for someone to cover a shift, they'll say, "Oh, we'll give you a bonus." So it's kind of not fair, and they already don't pay us enough. I believe we should be getting paid way more than we get paid for the work that we do.

Q: When you are called in on short notice, what effect does that have, once you get to work, on your ability to do your job well?

A: It depends on the client. If I've been with the client before, it's not an issue because I know the client, but if it's a new client, it can be very frustrating. For instance, I had a shift working with this lady where it was my first time there, and I didn't know where anything was. So she's telling me to get her something,

Section 4: *Invested* – Series 1, Issue 1, 2017-2018

Flexibility, Predictability, and the Challenge of Planning the Modern Work Week

www.bostonfed.org/publications/invested.aspx

and I'm trying to get it for her, and I'm looking where I think that item would be, and she just started yelling at me, "You guys don't know nothing; I don't know why they send you here." So then you have to say to the person, "Do you want me to stay or do you want me to go?" And they usually calm down after that. So it can be a little frustrating if you don't have thick skin.

Q: And what effect does your unpredictable work schedule have on your ability to pay bills and manage your budget?

A: Yeah, that's an issue. When I was doing certified nursing assistant work, I had a set schedule, so I knew what I was going to get paid at the end of the week, and so I was able to manage my budget. I like to look ahead a few weeks. But now, I'm working part-time, partially because I have a health condition, so I can't work a 40-hour week. But if I don't even get those part-time hours, I can't pay the little bit of bills that I have, which gets a little frustrating. This one client that I was with for seven months, I would go work with her Monday to Friday from 9:00 a.m. to 1:00 p.m., and then she fell and went to the hospital, so I had no work for two weeks. So that's when the company says, "Oh, we'll plug you in here, there, and everywhere." So now you're all over the place trying to make up the hours so you can pay your bills. That was definitely very frustrating for me, because I've got to pay the gas bill, the light bill, the car, the car insurance, my cell phone bill, you know. Sometimes when a client gets ill and goes in the hospital, you ask the company, "Okay, can you send me to other clients?" and they'll say, "Oh, we don't have anything in this area, but we have something an hour away." I can't do that—the gas cost alone, you know what I mean? So those are some of the other scenarios that I've had to deal with.

And then when I ask for a raise, they say, "No, we can't." So it's kind of disheartening. I'm a really good aide, so it's kind of sad that they won't recognize people who do go above and beyond their duties. And even the last client that I had, he called the office and he said, "She deserves a raise; she's gone above and beyond." I was able to help his wife get from sitting in a wheelchair all day to actually getting up on her own and walking into the bathroom, which freaked everybody out because they didn't know she could do that.

Q: Have you had a job in the past where the hours were more predictable or more stable? How would you compare those experiences to the less predictable schedule?

A: Yeah, I used to work for an insurance company. I was a transcriber, and I used to just sit at a desk and type up insurance reports all day, so that was good. I also worked in the prison system for five years prior to doing this type of work. That was really rewarding and consistent—I knew when I had to be there and when I had to leave.

It's very frustrating now. I'm 43, so to go back to school, to retrain to do something else? I just don't have the energy anymore. I have children, my health is not good, and I just don't have the energy to do the things I used to do.

Q: How many kids do you have?

I have four. The funny thing is, my son is home schooled and he graduated when he was 17, and then he actually went to Middlesex Community College and got a certificate to be a security guard. So he's about to be 18 this month, and he'll start a security job making \$25.00 an hour. So I'm thinking, well maybe I should go be a security guard!

Q: Is there anything positive to having unpredictable hours or a schedule where there's variability or flexibility?

A: I would say yes, to a degree, because I get to choose the hours I want to work, as opposed to other jobs where you have a set schedule. So if I call the healthcare agency and say, "I would like to work in the evening," they'll do their best to give me hours in the evening. If I want to work in the daytime, they'll do their best to give me hours in the daytime. So that is kind of a plus. But again, the thing is, you never know where you're going for a given shift, or how many hours it will be, or how long you're going to be with the client—if it's going to be a stable, ongoing position or if it's just going to be a couple days. And you've got to worry about where your next client is coming from.

Q: Is there anything else you want people to know about what it's like to work in a job with an unpredictable schedule?

A: Oh boy. It's hard on the family. It's hard on my children. They see me struggle, and they see me worry about how I'm going to pay the light bill or the gas bill if I don't go to work, or if I get a call saying, "Guess what, you don't have to come in today." You feel bad, because your shift may have been canceled because the client may be hurt or in the hospital, but you also have to feel bad about your kids, because you know at the end of the week, that check is not going to add up.

I think it's hardest on my son because he's 17, and he's aware that bills need to be paid now. I'm usually upbeat and happy about everything—I try not to let my kids see my suffering or worry—but my son, like I said, he's very aware, and it's one of the reasons he actually decided to go to Middlesex and get the security job. He says, "Mama, you're really tired, you're getting older, your health is not as good as it used to be. I don't want you to suffer anymore; I want to help you."

As much as I love my work, sometimes it gets frustrating, and I wish they would just pay us a little more, because we do love the work. It does get tough, just like any job you do gets tough, but a little more pay, a little more incentive would be nice. And the clients get frustrated, too—they do believe we should get paid more. I have a client whose husband has Parkinson's, and I have to do everything for him. And she said straight up to me, "You're on the front line, not the people in the office. *You* should be getting paid way more." I thanked her for her consideration. Money isn't everything when it comes to taking care of people, and I want to make that clear. But we still need to be able to take care of our responsibilities at home so we can continue to take care of other people.

Content may be reprinted if Invested is credited and the following disclaimer is used: "The views expressed are not necessarily those of the Federal Reserve Bank of Boston or the Federal Reserve System. Information about organizations, programs, and events is strictly informational and not an endorsement."

Section 4: *Invested* – Series 1, Issue 1, 2017-2018

Flexibility, Predictability, and the Challenge of Planning the Modern Work Week

www.bostonfed.org/publications/invested.aspx