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Published

2006

Conference Title

21st Century Work: High Road or Low Road? Proceedings of the 20th AIRAANZ Conference, Volume 1

Downloaded from

<http://hdl.handle.net/10072/12186>

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Planning and Practicing Flexibility: Implications for Women in 'Best Practice' Australian Organisations

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Abstract

Increasingly, flexible work practices are seen as remedies for work/life conflict, and although in theory they are gender-neutral, the reality is that women with family responsibilities comprise a large proportion of those working part-time or unconventional hours. Can flexibility created in response to business pressures also benefit employees? This paper examines the results of interviews conducted in Australian companies that can be considered ‘best practice’ organisations in terms of policies for women. It explores what these organisations mean by ‘flexibility’ and how it operates at the level of the individual workplace. The paper concludes that flexible work practices do not necessarily benefit workers but there are ways in which women, managers and organisations can find common purpose, and business and individual needs can coalesce. But our research shows that this is labour market driven and is not applied consistently across even ‘best practice’ organisations.

Flexibility in the Workplace

In Australia, the last two decades have seen the shape of the working week change from one of fixed hours, fixed rosters, overtime payments and additional payment for work outside Monday to Friday daylight hours in a highly regulated labour market, to one of extended trading hours, ‘flexible’ working arrangements, enterprise-based or individual contracts and ever decreasing regulation. Full-time workers spend longer at work than they did twenty years ago (Campbell 2002), but there are also more part-time and casual workers. Over the same period the number of women in the paid workforce has increased by 15 per cent, so that in 2003, 68 per cent of women aged 15 to 64 years were in the labour force (ABS 2005a). Women provide more than 70 per cent of part-time and casual work (Preston and Burgess 2003) with 47 per cent of women working part-time (ABS 2005b: 52). Women continue to carry the heaviest load of unpaid work in the home, family and community (Gray and Tudball 2002; Pocock 2005).

One response to these changes has been a realisation that work practices should be ‘family-friendly’ or should allow an appropriate ‘work/life balance’ (see, for example, Edwards and Wajcman 2005: 63). Burgess and Strachan (2005) have identified access to flexible leave arrangements, specifically the ability to switch between different types of leave and the ability to vary hours around family commitments, as key components of ‘family friendly’ work arrangements. In Australia, the choice of part-time or casual work for one adult in a household, most often a woman, has been the usual way in which families manage the combined responsibilities of paid work and caring for dependents (Bittman and Rice 2002). Mothers are likely to make work arrangements that are ‘family-friendly’ and allow them to manage their working lives to suit the needs of other family members, typically children (Gray and Tudball 2002) regardless of the impact this may have on their own career prospects. An organisational survey of workplace policies concluded that ‘working mums have a better opportunity to combine work and family as long as they don’t set their sights on managerial jobs’ (EOWA 2004a), and so we are led to question once more the relevance and accessibility of flexible work arrangements and their implications for women’s working lives.

This paper briefly explores the forces at the national, enterprise and individual levels which are currently promoting flexibility as a panacea for an ageing and increasingly feminised

working population, before going on to examine in some detail what is actually happening in a small number of workplaces that provide 'best practice' or at least 'good practice' in relation to equal opportunity for women. We concentrate on various forms of temporal flexibility: scheduling of full-time hours as is seen in flextime or the compressed working week; flexibility in the length of the working day or the time at which the working day starts and finishes; and flexibility in the longer term, allowing multiple entry and re-entry points over the individual's working life (Christensen 2005), all of which may include undertaking a number of different tasks. Functional flexibility (performing a wider range of tasks) and wage or reward flexibility are other aspects of a flexible workforce, which also have implications for women at work.

In the face of increasing globalisation, an ageing population and falling birth rates, the OECD Director for Employment, Labour and Social Affairs maintains that 'ensuring...labour markets are dynamic and that people of working-age have opportunities and incentives to work is more important than ever' (Martin 2005: 13). Nationally, the Australian government supports women's increased workforce attachment: The 2004 national budget promised that 'Mums will be assisted as they come out of the workforce to have children and they will be assisted as they get back into the workforce ...we are re-vamping the whole work and family area and helping Mums who are trying to juggle work and family.' (Costello and Riley 2004). The Minister for Workplace Participation states that 'the only way to remain internationally competitive, guarantee more jobs, high wages for workers and better living standards is through greater flexibility and higher productivity in the workplace. That's why the Government is committed to reforming the industrial relations system' (Dutton 2005). According to the government's own discussion paper, *Australia's Demographic Challenges* (Australian Government 2004) capacity and productivity can be enhanced by offering better incentives to workers, and this includes 'supporting more flexible work options'. Despite a worrying lack of detail, the discussion paper predicts a strong demand for part-time and flexible working hours, 'especially for those with caring responsibilities'. The lack of flexible work practices have been specifically identified as a barrier to women's participation and progression at work (Affirmative Action Agency 1998). Nevertheless, cultural and institutional change is slow and the reforms so far rudimentary (Pocock 2005).

Business has for the most part been prepared to embrace a measure of flexibility. Arguments that business needs more options and less regulation in the deployment and rewards of labour are widely circulated. Extended trading hours or communication across time zones put pressure on employers to contain costs while maintaining service or productivity. The business case for flexibility echoes some of these issues: recruitment and retention of employees, increased overall productivity, rapid response to changing demand, and cost reduction. But not all organisations find changing their work practices convenient or desirable (Dainty, Bagilhole and Neale 2001; Lane 2004). The inherent dangers for workers have not gone unnoticed (Dex and Smith 2002; Dickens 1999). Creagh and Brewster (1998) contend that 'the increase and spread of flexibility is driven by the economic requirements of employers and, at the furthest extreme, that this is a way of degrading and cheapening the work with concomitant reductions in the income and security of the workers involved'. In examining the national picture in Australia and its changes over the past decade, we have agreed with this contention: 'flexibility in working-time arrangements has more to do with employer cost reduction strategies than with any genuine concern for the family....the FFW [family friendly work] agenda sits uneasily beside a program of fiscal consolidation and a growing number of workers in low paid, non-standard employment arrangements' (Burgess and Strachan 1999: 304). The primacy of the business case and the role of managerial

prerogative (as opposed to regulation) in developing and implementing policies that will benefit business potentially disadvantages some workers (Charlesworth et al. 2002; Burgess and Strachan 2005). In maximising productivity and recruiting and retaining the most valuable members of the workforce, flexible work arrangements may bypass the most vulnerable.

Flexible work options have not been shown to be equally available or accessible to all employees, even within one organisation. Managers, administrators and professional employees may have wider choice about the hours they work or the way in which they integrate work and non-work commitments than less skilled or lower status workers. Using AWIRS 1995 data, Gray and Tudball (2002) identified 'control over start and finish times' as one criterion for 'family-friendly' workplaces and found differential access to this work arrangement among employees within organisations (see Whitehouse and Zetlin 1999). Occupation was an important determinant, with professionals, managers and administrators, along with employees who had received organisation-provided training or had long tenure, having more control over this aspect of flexibility. Trade union members, part-time employees and plant and machinery operators were among those least able to choose starting and finishing times (Gray and Tudball, 2002). However, the Equal Opportunity for Women in the Workplace Agency (EOWA) reported that managers were somewhat less likely to work flexible hours, work part-time, job share or use family carers' leave than other staff. This might suggest that advancement is more easily available to those who eschew these incentives (EOWA 2004b).

It follows that one workplace or organisation can offer different conditions for different employees (Burgess, Henderson and Strachan 2005). In a deregulated labour market, access to flexible work arrangements is not equally available within organisations, much less between them. Some employees may be loath to make use of, for example, flexible leave arrangements, even when they are part of a formal workplace policy because they are perceived to have negative career effects, or because the workplace culture discourages their use. (Pocock, Prosser and Bridge 2004: ch 3; Eaton 2003). Constraints of the workplace such as occupational health and safety requirements or production schedules are undoubtedly factors which are not easily overcome. Where, as is often the case, supervisors are able to use their discretion in allowing flexible arrangements, these may operate at an informal level (Bailyn 1993; Eaton 2003), and even within work settings, formal and informal policies may be applied inconsistently (Batt and Valcour 2003).

Where flexible work arrangements are available, are there gender differences in the way they are used? According to Albion (2004), men associate work/life balance with flexibility of hours and conditions that allow them some time off without loss of pay, while women choose to work reduced hours or to take various kinds of leave to accommodate family responsibilities. Whitehouse and Frino (2003) looked at gender-related pay inequality by comparing a large sample of collective enterprise agreements, and found that flexibility in working conditions is not the same for female and male dominated industries. The extension of ordinary working hours to include weekends is more often found in female dominated industries such as health services and retail trade, as are alternative overtime arrangements like time-in-lieu or averaging of hours rather than penalty rates. Such arrangements tend to be associated with agreements that provide lower wage increases, and thus agreements tend to reinforce a gender gap in earning power in at least some female dominated industries. They conclude that worker flexibility is not generally rewarded by higher pay (Whitehouse and Frino 2003). On the contrary, such workers may be sacrificing financial rewards as well as

security of employment, predictability of working hours, opportunities for training and advancement among other benefits for a measure of flexibility (Bailyn 1993; Eaton 2003).

While previous research has associated casualisation with erosion of labour market standards, including low levels of training, poor access to career opportunities and long-term occupational stability (Burgess and Campbell 1998; Pocock, Prosser and Bridge 2004), other researchers believe that it is 'extremely misleading to characterise non-standard jobs as sub-standard jobs' (Wooden and Warren 2003: 26). Flexible working arrangements, irrespective of the means by which they are planned and practiced, may have different and contested outcomes for women employees. In Australia, equal opportunity for women is often associated with the availability of part-time or flextime work (Burgess and Strachan 2005). Yet there is ample evidence from UK studies that flexible work arrangements have rarely satisfied the double demands of work and family and that employers change only 'if they have to' (Hyman and Summers 2004). It is apparent that there are many elements involved in finding a happy coalescence between the needs of businesses and their employees (Batt and Valcour 2003) and that men's and women's perceptions of these elements are sometimes at odds (Dainty, Bagilhole and Neale 2003; Hyman and Summers 2004; Batt and Valcour 2003).

Research Question

Creagh and Brewster (1998) ask, 'are there examples of cases where the business drivers have been handled in such a way that the employees' needs and values have been accommodated in a positive manner?' We want to know to what extent flexible working arrangements are part of the policy and/or practice of Australian private sector organisations. Secondly, we ask whether these practices promote positive outcomes for women in terms of equal opportunity. Is the goal 'that all employees have equal access to the opportunities that are available at work' (EOWA 2005) supported or sacrificed by temporal flexibility? Thirdly, we wondered how policies are determined and justified. In simple terms, did flexible work practices or policies reflect a philosophy, a planned strategy or were they merely a tactical response to legislative, business and labour market forces? The answer to this last question is crucial in a labour market where commercial pressure is likely to increase and where a deregulated, ageing labour force is trying to achieve a balance between the responsibilities of paid and unpaid work. The implications for women workers in a small sample of organisations are considered.

Examining 'Best Practice' Organisations

Six private sector organisations at diverse locations in eastern Australia, and in different industries, were chosen for detailed analysis of their equal employment opportunity (EEO) policies and practices. Organisations were selected on the basis of having a EOWA report which showed that equal opportunity for women was taken seriously (including, but not exclusively, organisations which were accorded the accolade Employer of Choice for Women EOCFW or had been waived from reporting) and were willing to participate in the research project. One was a locally owned unlisted company, the others were part of larger national or multi-national organisations. Industrial agreements and published reports to EOWA were examined. At each organisation, the Human Resource (HR) manager, or the individual within Human Resources responsible for equity and/or diversity was approached and accepted responsibility for recruiting interviewees. HR managers at each company were asked about their EEO policies; a trade union representative was interviewed at highly unionised sites; a number of employees across a range of occupations at each workplace were interviewed to find out about the experience of women as workers within these organisations. Each confidential interview lasted an average of 25 minutes and was semi-structured, with

participants encouraged to respond to specific questions about their understanding of equal opportunity and gender at work as well as having the chance to talk about their working lives in general terms. Altogether, 61 individuals were interviewed individually or in groups. The interviews were later transcribed and coded using QSR NUD*IST software.

To what extent is flexibility part of policy and practice?

Each organisation's HR department and female staff had slightly different ways of defining 'flexibility'. Three of the organisations were active in seeking employees with potential for advancement or enhanced roles (promotion or functional flexibility), and encouraging them to undertake further training. All offered or had recently offered training, promotion or specialist roles within the organisation to at least some staff, including part-time employees (with one exception), and we considered these to be instances of functional flexibility.

As for temporal flexibility, a mix of casual, full-time and permanent part-time work, with transition between these working arrangements to accommodate changing personal circumstances was the norm for most of this small sample of organisations. But Electric Co regarded conceding to a request from an employee to permanently alter his starting and finishing times to accommodate child care responsibilities as offering sufficient flexibility, while another allowed employees to take time off and 'make it up' in a way that operated on trust and depended on employees managing their own tasks and deadlines. Some women at Smelter Co, where they were in the minority and concentrated in clerical and administrative jobs, had worked part-time while caring for very small children, had then undertaken special projects on a part-time basis or with individually negotiated start and finish times and later returned to full time work. At the hospital a wide range of work systems were in place, and at Amusement Park Co workers were engaged in a variety of capacities, sometimes simultaneously.

There were more part-time workers in those companies where female employees equalled or exceeded male employees (see Table 1). The Hospital offered nurses a wide range of starting and finishing times, lengths of shifts and days worked, and other health professionals like radiographers and physiotherapists had a combination of formal provisions and informal arrangements which accommodated work and personal obligations, such as 'swapping' shifts or some hours with another worker or determining leave arrangements within the work unit. Casual and part-time employees at the Amusement Park were able to 'multi-hire,' meaning that they could undertake several discrete jobs at the workplace, putting together a full-time or part-time job (for instance as a ticket seller in the mornings and attraction operative in the afternoons). In each case, arrangements were contingent on business demands.

Among part-time and casual employees, a variety of formal leave arrangements were in place. This included 'banking of hours' (Amusement Park and Hospital) allowing employees to keep some pay in reserve and access it during periods when they were not working. Some workers were also able to take reduced annual leave, but at double the usual rate, or alternatively, double the leave but at half pay. However, at the Amusement Park workers were expected to be available for work at weekends and during school vacation periods. The same workplace allowed employees to take extended unpaid leave, for instance to take part in a movie, or, in one instance, to travel. This recognised the need to respond to employees with unusual talent or key roles.

Only one organisation (Electric Co) required women to return to full-time work at the expiration of their (12 months, mandatory, unpaid) maternity leave. Elsewhere, employers

seemed prepared to negotiate return to work from maternity leave on an individual basis, and all those interviewed (permanent and casual employees) who had accessed this facility were satisfied with the arrangements they had made. Carers' and sick leave most often came from the same pool of leave, meaning that a worker who took sick leave on their own behalf had less paid time available to care for a sick child. A few employees regarded this as an unreasonable burden, but most accepted it.

Table 1: Workplace Profiles, Sample organisations

Organisation	Electric Co	Smelter Co	Computer Co	Clothing Co	Amusement Park Co	Hospital Co
Industry	Manufacture, service	Manufacture	Manufacture, service	Design, distribute	Tourism	Private surgical
Employees	335	1005	1055	325	700	2500
Part-time	3	10	40	27	200	940
Casual	7	5	17	120	375	670
Women	14%	5%	16%	53%	61%	83%
Women managers	1	15%	13%	50%	50%	67%
Flexible hours	no	some	some	yes	yes	yes

Source: EOWA, reports, accessed July 2005. Note: some numbers have been rounded.

Flexible work arrangements were not equally accessible for all employees in an organisation. It depended on the nature of the job as well as seniority, but did not conform to a particular pattern. So, for instance, clerical workers and line managers at Smelter Co. and Clothing Co. had more access to such arrangements than their opposite numbers at Hospital. Co or Amusement Park Co, but less than those at Electric Co. Generally, flexibility reflected the work role and the expectations of the organisation's management and customers. Generally, managers were more able to take short breaks in the working day to attend to personal matters without loss of pay or use of sick leave or other formal leave provisions, but on the whole worked longer hours and were not paid overtime. Direct service workers, such as in health care or at the tourist attraction, had some control over the days and hours worked, but could not leave their posts easily. They had less choice about working on public holidays or during school vacation periods than at other times. At the hospital, nurses could be pressured into working overtime at short notice to meet unexpected extra demand. Some workers were able to arrange things by having another worker fill in for them and agreeing to 'repay the favour' at another time, thereby tapping in to an informal network of cooperation. Men used flexible working arrangements, but, as Albion (2004) concluded, did so differently from women.

Three of the organisations had significant union membership and involved the relevant trade union in negotiating EBAs; two had some trade union presence but the relevant HR manager thought that they had little impact; in one organisation membership of a trade union was negligible and employees at all levels of seniority made individual contracts. This also applied to the majority of women employed at one of the union-controlled sites. Professional women, those with recognised leadership skills, specialist knowledge or advanced technical training were found in almost all of the six organisations to be more often among those offered promotion or flexible work arrangements. Gender issues were not of prime importance during the EBA negotiations. For example, two organisations had discussed providing day-care for the children of employees, but lack of rank and file support had seen such proposals

abandoned at an early stage of the bargaining process. In the manufacturing companies, childcare was not seen as of central importance for the majority of employees, and hence was discounted in the early stages of enterprise bargaining.

Unsurprisingly, workers had unequal access to flexible working hours irrespective of gender; the larger employers were able and willing to offer a greater range of working arrangements and career paths (Burgess and Campbell 1998; Pocock, Prosser and Bridge 2004; Whitehouse and Frino 2003). Even where there was an ideological commitment to affirmative action, equal opportunity or fairness, as at Hospital Co, Clothing Co and Technology Co, or a corporate culture of valuing diversity as at Smelter Co or Amusement Park Co, the researchers were repeatedly told that supervisors or managers had discretion in offering varied working arrangements, depending on the organisation's needs and the employee's roles. Consistency in practice from one department to another, or indeed between individuals, was frequently lacking. For instance, one manager at Electric Co noted that 'different people have different circumstances. People who aren't clock watchers get a bit more flexibility'. At Amusement Park Co one employee noted that the supervisor 'is very good and very flexible. I know other parts of the park aren't as flexible as she is, trying to help us as much as possible (ticket seller, Amusement Park). Technology Co's HR managers acknowledged some inconsistency between departments, but Smelter Co and Hospital, although open to change, considered that flexibility had been extended to the limits of safe operation. Organisations with more women employees were more likely to tolerate or encourage flexible work patterns for women, perhaps reflecting the reality of the job market.

What is the strategy for 'flexibility' policies and practices?

The case studies made it clear that most of these employers, including the ones who have received the EOCFW award, regard temporal flexibility as a solution to immediate and mid-range workforce needs: 'To maintain your staff and to retain your staff you have to be very flexible and you have to take into account their family life – their children, if they are carers. You always do the best you can' (nurse manager, Hospital). For half of the case study group, this included a process (which was not the same for every organisation) of identifying and encouraging employees, and particularly women employees to apply for promotion or acquire new skills. That did not, however, preclude a commitment to equity or to redressing the historical inequalities of women's employment opportunities. The hospital, whose mission statement rests on its Christian values, regards diversity and tolerance as a basis for all its policies. Smelter Co has a well articulated commitment to a diversity model of employment and Amusement Park Co has an appreciation of its role as a major employer in a local community. These organisations have a value-based outlook which supports flexible work practices because they match a strategy intrinsic to their operating model, but also because these practices meet their business needs.

Implications for women employees

Overwhelmingly, HR policies in these organisations, including those which support or encourage equal opportunity for women and provide flexible working arrangements for employees, exist primarily to meet the needs of the enterprise. In each case, providing flexibility to women employees was seen in terms of recruiting, retaining and perhaps developing the best workers. At the hospital, where women are in the majority and have specialised skills that are in short supply, they are encouraged and supported to take on different roles and responsibilities, and there is an understanding among HR professionals and line managers of the need to be flexible in terms of allowing a work-life balance. Where there are close to equal numbers and equivalent skill bases, as in Amusement Park Co and Clothing

Co, the policies suggest an appreciation of the work/life balance for men and women. The male-dominated Computer Co is consciously heading in the same direction. At Electric Co women are more likely to be marginalised or sidelined into jobs which offer no opportunities for functional or temporal flexibility because its culture is one which suits a male-oriented view of linear progression (see Dainty, Bagilhole and Neale 2001).

There is disagreement over whether flexible work practices may or may not be regarded as positive by employees or have easily measurable outcomes (Dex and Smith 2002). In recent perspectives on strategic HRM 'there seems to be more interest in the position of the workers (as a competitive advantage)' (Looise, van Riemsdijk and de Lange 1998: 466) and Creagh and Brewster (1998: 492) assert that 'the reality is that the two perspectives can both sensibly be applied to many cases of flexibility.' However, the use of 'flexible' work arrangements may be to the detriment of workers, especially lower-paid workers, many of whom are women, and especially where working hours are irregular and unpredictable (HREOC 1997). 'Flexible' arrangements give less security to workers, introduce shorter shifts and many other changes that disadvantage workers (Watson 2004) and contribute to the ongoing gender pay gap in Australia, a gap which has remained steady for a decade (ABS 2005b).

Earlier research has demonstrated (for example Burgess and Strachan 2005), and these case studies have further confirmed, that women regard the 'flexible' policies and practices outlined in this paper as crucial to maintaining a work-life balance. This does not seem to have impacted on women's commitment to their work role, but does influence the way they view it. The evidence of these case studies suggests that neither functional nor temporal flexibility is equally available to employees within or between organisations even where the same legislation and regulation is in place. Workforce segregation still applies, but its effects are different in different industries, so that, for instance, nurses and some retail, clerical and administrative workers have been given more control of working hours than plant operatives or technicians. This has been in response to labour force demands. Therefore the result of these practices may or may not promote positive outcomes for women. The goal 'that all employees have equal access to the opportunities that are available at work' (EOWA 2005) exists in only some of these 'best practice' workplaces where extensive policies are promulgated by HR and understood by managers and staff. Policies and practices have developed in an *ad hoc* way in these organisations in response to business needs and labour market forces, and equity policies have been grafted on to other initiatives to suit the business. In this way they are not integral to the approach of the organisation, but react to labour market forces.

The companies we examined were happy to support an agenda of equity for women and pleased to see women advancing in their organisation. HR managers and most line managers were well aware of the need for workers, and especially women with families, to achieve an appropriate balance between their responsibilities to paid and unpaid work. Women were not denied opportunities, but they were the subject of individual rather than collective decision-making. The conclusion has to be that there is a way that women, managers and organisations can find common purpose, and that international, national, enterprise and individual needs can coalesce. But our research shows that this is still done best where HR needs for recruiting and retaining workers who are already skilled, competent or have potential for advancement are valued remains the core business case argument for flexible, family friendly or EEO objectives.

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