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‘I just juggle’: Work and Family Balance in Australian Organisations

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Abstract

The workforce share of women has increased but they still carry the predominate share of unpaid work in the home. What conditions and workplace support do women workers require to facilitate the integration of work and family responsibilities? To what extent does an organisation’s equal employment opportunity (EEO) program and workplace bargaining address the integration of work and family care issues? How do women workers fill the commitment gap between work and care? This paper analyses the EEO reports and industrial agreements of six organisations and interviews a range of managers and staff. Findings suggest that having an EEO program and workplace agreement is no guarantee that work and family measures will be introduced. Heavily dependent on a business case, such measures are unevenly distributed within and across workplaces. The commitment gap is generally met through a variety of informal and ad hoc measures from the workplace and the home.

Introduction

There is a plethora of research that addresses women’s need to integrate family and community responsibilities with paid work (Bardoel, Thoreau and Ristov 2000; Campbell and Charlesworth 2003; ABS cat. no. 4135 2004) and an extensive debate on the work and family interface in Australia and how it can best be accommodated across workplaces (Pocock 2003). In 2005, the AIRC ruled that employees have a right to request family-related leave, increased simultaneous parental leave to 8 weeks at the time of birth, increased the total of parental leave to two years and allowed a return from parental leave on a part-time basis until the child reaches school age. It also extended the amount of time and the conditions under which employees can request leave as carers or in emergencies, but emphasised that all these provisions were dependent on *the effect on the workplace or the employer’s business* (AIRC Family Provisions Decision, Commissioners’ Statement, 8.8.05). The government has hailed the introduction of the *Workplaces Relations Amendment (Workchoices) Act 2005*, operative from 27 March 2006, as a way of simplifying and reducing the degree of regulation in the labour market and enhancing work-life balance: ‘WorkChoices is a new, national workplace relations system that will provide more choice and flexibility for employees in the workplace. The system will offer better ways to reward effort, increase wages and balance work and family life’ (Australian Government 2004). Yet this legislation has rendered even the minimal provisions of the AIRC decision largely irrelevant, with the Australian Fair Pay and Conditions Standard considerably paring back allowable conditions in industrial instruments (Waring et al 2006).

In Australia, one popular response by women in accommodating work and family commitments has been to moderate full-time attachment to the paid workforce by engaging in casual and/or part-time work, especially in the context of unevenly distributed child care

arrangements (Pocock 2003). Individuals and families confront growing time pressures from extended paid and unpaid working hours (Bittman and Rice 2002) and working adults, especially women, juggle paid and unpaid work as time spent in paid work competes with time for children, partners, elderly parents, and time for household chores and personal leisure (Glezer and Wolcott 1998). This pressure is increasing (Russell and Bowman 2000; Pocock 2002) as demands (time, energy) at home impinge on work performance, and vice versa (Glezer and Wolcott 1998). Conflicts and tensions arise since role overload or role interference occurs when there is not enough time or energy to meet the commitments of multiple roles or when the expectations and demands of the two roles conflict (Duxbury and Higgins 1994). Government assumes that part-time and flexible working hours will be in demand, 'especially from those with caring responsibilities' and will form a significant part of the paid workforce (Aust Government 2004).

The choice to work part-time, or leave the workforce for extended periods, most often made by mothers, is contingent on finding accessible, affordable child care, adequate parental leave or an acceptable way of juggling many roles, with the consequence that the choices many women make are constrained (Junor 2000). It has been suggested that more equitable sharing of family responsibilities is needed to 'make it easier for both women and men to meet their caring responsibilities as well as to enjoy the rewards of sharing', however, family-friendly policies in the workforce, most usually used by women, are more likely to entrench women's disadvantage in the work place than otherwise (HREOC 2005). Pocock (2005) argues that the society lacks a consensus between men and women and amongst women on these issues while political and industrial factors make a balance more difficult to achieve, a situation which is likely to be exacerbated rather than diminished as industrial relations reform is extended. Meanwhile, established patterns of women's and men's expectations of work and home life have so far proved intractable. How, then, in the absence of major cultural or policy change, is it possible for women and men to engage in paid work and be actively involved in family and community at the same time? The older term 'family-friendly' workplace (Strachan and Burgess, 2001) has given way to the concept of 'work-life balance', and a 'perception of satisfactorily resolving the multiple and often incompatible demands of work and family roles' (Hand and Lewis 2002).

Programs that promote a work-life balance for women acknowledge the potentially conflicting demands of being a conscientious and committed parent at the same time as being a conscientious and committed employee. While there is no one definition of what constitutes a family friendly workplace or one that promotes work-life balance, there is a broad consensus, derived from previous research, of desirable policies and practices (Burgess, Sullivan and Strachan 2004, OECD 2002; Eaton 2003; Thornthwaite 2004, Burgess and Strachan 2005). At least for the foreseeable future, the central issues for women who are carers revolve around a limited agenda that would give them enough flexibility to take leave from paid work to fulfil family responsibilities without jeopardising job security or other opportunities at work. The ACTU identifies working hours, control over hours of work, and leave arrangements including parental, annual and carers leave as the three main areas to be addressed in reconciling work and family needs, assuming adequate safety nets and adequate incomes (ACTU 2004; ACTU 2005). Table 1 outlines a suggested list of provisions.

Table1: Checklist of arrangements for work-family balance

Type of arrangement	Comment
Income security	Rates of pay, having a regular & secure income
Employment security	Predictable hours, ongoing employment, able to take

	career breaks, able to undertake financial commitments
Access to care arrangements	Affordable, accessible childcare, other care (e.g.elder,)
Access to flexible leave	Standard leave entitlements, parental leave, switch between types of leave, leave in emergencies.
Flexible working time arrangements	Able to vary hours, start/finish times, flextime, job share or other innovations over the life-course.
Control over unfriendly working hours	Vary or avoid long, unpredictable, unsociable working hours or changes at short notice.
Access to training & career path	Includes access for part-time workers and career breaks
Innovative work arrangements	Study leave, home work, telecommute etc.

Source: Burgess and Strachan 2005.

The purpose of this research is to establish how the achievement of work-life balance is realised within the workplace and to what extent this is facilitated by (enterprise or industrial) bargaining or EEO programs. It should be noted that the research reported here pre-dates the 2005 industrial legislation. The focus in this paper is not on policy developments across workplaces, but rather, how individual workplaces address the tensions between work and family commitments using both formal and informal mechanisms and processes.

Methodology

Against this background, in 2004 the authors undertook a number of case studies with organisations that were obligated to submit reports to the Equal Opportunity for Women in the Workplace Agency (EOWA) and this paper reports on an analysis of six workplaces. The research uses documentary information (EEO reports and Workplace Agreements) together with structured interviews with managers and women employees to address the research questions. The researchers visited the main work site for each of the six organisations and interviewed HR managers, other managers and a selection of female staff, using a semi-structured protocol. Focus groups were conducted with 2-9 women staff in five of the organisations. A total of 60 people were interviewed individually or in focus groups, and the transcripts analysed using QSR Nudist software. Interviews took an average of 30 minutes, although there was a wide variation in duration. The participants were nominated by the HR manager in each organisation and individually agreed to be interviewed. The interviews covered a broad spectrum of issues related to the development, implementation and application of equal opportunity policies and practices. Women at the six workplaces were asked about the work they did, their working conditions, their level of contentment in their current role, and their ambitions. The interviews included discussion of work-family balance issues and programs.

The six private sector organisations were chosen on the basis that they had fulfilled the minimum requirements of reporting to the EOWA addressing key issues of recruitment, promotion, training and development, work organisation, conditions of services, harassment, pregnancy and breastfeeding. Three had exceeded this by being classified by the agency as an Employer of Choice for Women Employees (EOCFW) or by having their reporting requirements waived (see table 2). They had not necessarily made an undertaking to provide family-friendly workplaces or develop programs to promote work-family balance, and such programs are not a specific requirement of the legislation. Two had approximately equal numbers of male and female employees, three were male dominated, and one had a preponderance of women on its staff.

Table 2: Profile of the Research Organisations

Organisation	Metal Manufacture	Technology	Hospital	Leisurewear	Recreation Facility	Engineering Manufacture
industry sector	heavy manufacture	machinery, component manufacture & service	health care	design, market, wholesale, retail	tourist park	heavy & light manufacture & service
location	regional	metropolitan	metropolitan	regional	regional	regional
total employees	1007	1049	1800	704	327	334
% female employees	5	17	83	61	53	14
% female managers	17	13	65	50	32	5
full-time employees: % female	4	14	86	82	47	13
p/t or casual employees: % female	98	60	75	35	64	62 (n=3)
ownership	multi-national	multi-national	religious	US listed company	Australian + US	private, Australian
EEO reporting status	annual	annual	EOFCW	waived	EOFCW	annual

Source: EOWA online searchable database of reports.

Equal Opportunity Reports

The EOWA is the statutory agency responsible for educating and monitoring EEO programs in organisations in Australia that employ over one hundred persons. Fuelled by managing diversity discourse, it makes statements such as ‘Women + Men = business success’ (EOWA 2006). The reports to EOWA are publicly available (EOWA 2005) and the most recent documents at the time of the fieldwork were examined to identify aspects which fit in with the checklist in table 1. Work-life balance is not one of the seven key employment matters which organisations must address in preparing the report, but might be an implied outcome of good EEO practice. The legislation requires these organisations to develop a work place program by preparing a work place profile; analysing the equity issues for women; identifying priority issues; taking action to address them; and evaluating the effectiveness of these actions. The guidelines for EOWA reports fall short of suggesting benchmarks, privilege the business case in a broad context of equity or social justice. While issues around work-life balance emerged as key concerns in the interviews with HR managers, they did not emerge as strongly in the EOWA reports, presumably because of the particular questions organisations are required to answer. A range of issues were identified as priorities for action in the EOWA reports (see table 3).

Table 3: EOWA Reports: Priority Issues

Organisation	Priority Issues
Metal Manufacture	display of inappropriate material, supply networked computers for flexible work from home, supply appropriate protective equipment, women in management and non-traditional roles
Technology	lack of female representation in non-trad areas; promotion, transfer, termination; revamp EEO committee

Hospital	review selection process, succession planning, training/development, work-life balance policy, leave policy
Leisurewear	education re EEO and harassment policy
Recreation Facility	leadership training, wages and benefits equity
Engineering Manufacture	lack of women in non-traditional roles, increasing women managers, EEO/harassment training, formalising HR policies and procedures

Source: EOWA online searchable database of reports.

Workplace Agreements

Many of the women employed in the case study organisations worked according to individual contracts, although some were bound by Australian Workplace Agreements (AWAs). In the manufacturing sector workplaces, where women were employed on the plant, they were subject to the same conditions as men. The women at Engineering Manufacture and Metal Manufacture were most often found in administrative and clerical jobs or as professionals and were typically not included in the union-negotiated agreements. Therefore, the relevance of the AWA for women workers can be questioned. Similarly, at Technology, the agreement was union-negotiated and applied to workers in the electrical trades, but the majority of workers were not governed by collective arrangements. Union activity was not widespread even there. At Leisurewear only a few workers in the warehouse and retail divisions worked according to an Award rather than individual contracts. The Recreation Facility had a number of union-negotiated agreements, but the union had little part to play in negotiations because, according to the HR manager, union officials did not have the support of the workers: ‘Our union membership is relatively low and you’ll find that if you talk to a younger workforce, they don’t perceive the unions as a...for them. Our union organiser, who comes on site, his style and approach doesn’t gel with a seventeen year old.’

The *Workplace Relations Act 1996* provides for minimum conditions for carer’s leave and parental leave, and some of the agreements simply referred to this legislation. This included the Hospital, where nurses, who form a large proportion of the workforce, have a high level of union membership. Metal Manufacture offered some paid maternity leave and several organisations included some measure of flexibility, typically as an arrangement between the individual employee and her manager or supervisor, but this was not included in their industrial agreements. Most of these organisations do no more than obey the law in this regard. It seems likely that they will do the same in the new legislative environment.

Interviews

Human Resource Managers

The human resource manager or the manager responsible for EEO was interviewed at each organisation. All were aware that workers are also family members and several of the HR managers were themselves doing ‘double shifts’ as parents of young children. They referred to a range of formal policies and informal practices which they perceived as assisting women to integrate work and family. One constant was an awareness of child care as a central issue for many women. At Technology, the demands of long and sometimes unsocial hours was accepted as making work-life balance difficult but was part of the job role and not always a negative: ‘Most people who are doing assignments and things this is what they want to do. It is part of their role, and the focus is so Asia Pacific, it is just an expectation like, I’ve got to travel to Shanghai next week, because I’m doing this, it is just part of it’ (HR manager, Technology). Tension between work and family, especially in terms of time management, was well recognised and resulted in absenteeism or contributed to high staff turnover: ‘Definitely it effects workplace attendance, because if people’s childcare falls through, something has got

to happen. I have had discussions with CEO about what can we do to help employees with the childcare situation' (HR manager, Engineering Manufacture). This HR manager at Engineering Manufacture compared their organisation with others: 'we are not perceived to be family friendly. That is the thing that keeps coming back. We don't have the flexibility that is offered in other industries.'

'Work-life balance' may be one aspect of an underlying value system or professional obligation which supports equity and fairness and HR professionals, at least in some organisations (Recreation Facility, Hospital, Engineering Manufacture), saw themselves as agents for organisational change. They regarded flexible arrangements, extended leave, 'work-life balance' as important in recruiting and maintaining a productive work force, and often related this to a contented one, where adequate flexibility is available to all. These arrangements were driven by, and dependent on, labour market demands and hence are fragile policies and practices that are subject to change in a different economic climate.

The HR managers saw themselves as providing the best solutions to work/family conflict that they could arrange within the demands of the business. This was particularly the case if the organisation faced a tight labour market: 'There is quite a bit of flexibility in our work environment. We bend over backwards to accommodate people's rostering needs' (HR manager, Hospital); 'the working conditions are fairly flexible to suit the different needs of different people and particularly because a lot of our casuals were females, too' (HR Coordinator, Recreation Facility). Informal practices such as swapping shifts, filling in for other workers or making up time lost, were acknowledged along with formal policies set out in conditions of employment or industrial instruments:

Reception is job shared, three ways. And that works well for me, on two fronts. They are all mums. They run their own show and my only criteria is - they actually report to me - is that so long as I've got someone there. So, they have their own and each others home number, so if the child is sick they coordinate amongst themselves to make certain someone is there (HR manager, Leisurewear Facility).

At Engineering Manufacture there was limited flexibility over start and finish times:

Most of the admin staff work 8.30 to 5.00. If an employee goes to their manager and says can I change my hours to be 9.00 to 5.30 to fit in with school or whatever, if that is acceptable to the manager, then that can done. There's not flexibility in that we don't have flexitime' (HR manager, Engineering Manufacture);

In some instances the flexibility had become incorporated into formal policies:

Things like being able to leave early on certain days, and grouping up your hours, having time in lieu and they are all in that [new] contract which we haven't had in others' (HR manager, Technology).

Union Representatives

The researchers interviewed two trade union representatives, one at Metals Manufacture and one at Hospital. Both were male union delegates for their workplace. At Metals Manufacture, the union representative spoke of the changes that had been made to accommodate women in the production process which made the job easier and safer for all employees. However, he pointed out that few women wanted to engage in non-traditional occupations which were inherently hot, dirty and arduous. He saw equal opportunity policies as a way of intercepting nepotism and cronyism. When asked specifically about workplace negotiations in relation to child care he stated that

it was dropped mainly because, number one, we're supposed to be asking or fighting or negotiating for everybody, anybody in the AWU. Not everyone has the problem with childcare. So, we didn't think it was a priority. Our priority was to make sure the majority got their wishes and their pay rises (Union Delegate, Metals Manufacture).

A similar comment was made at Engineering Manufacture, where the HR Manager (no union delegate was interviewed) acknowledged that the focus in negotiations was on pay increases.

It might be expected that nurses at the Hospital, with its competitive labour market and predominantly female profile, would push for family-friendly policies. However, there, too, the union was chiefly concerned with issues of pay and the delegate (male, childless) regarded child care, flexible working arrangements and other 'family-friendly' policies as peripheral issues. Perhaps this simply reflects the fact that managers 'bend over backwards' to accommodate employee preferences in order to recruit and retain hard-to-get workers. However we were told by the HR manager

I was really surprised that in the nursing agreement there was no request for extended leave or any changes in the maternity leave provisions. I really anticipated that and in some ways I hoped for it: I put it in my annual report. So nothing. I suspect that next time round, with the work and family test case and with industry movements in general, I suspect next time round there will be more issues that will be discussed (HR manager, Hospital).

These interviews reveal that work/family issues are not high on the union agenda. It could be that these organisations are already providing a range of flexible options that meet most workers' needs, through either formal policies or informal arrangements that are sanctioned by the culture of the organisation. The latter, in particular, relies on the individual manager and leads to increased variability of practice across the organisation. Yet research in other workplaces has shown, issues related to a particular group of workers (parents /women) are lost in the process of bargaining and prioritising of claims (Houston 1996).

Women Employees

Did women at all levels of the organisations want the things outlined in table 1 Generally, the women interviewed did not question their dual roles as paid employee and key family members (see Pocock 2005). They regarded both roles as important.

Income and employment security

In these organisations, the women interviewed were generally comfortable with the degree of security they had. The two organisations that relied on casual labour to meet seasonal or regular shortfall also offered some job and income security. The Hospital faces a continual shortage of skilled personnel in clinical and service areas (food service, laundry) and women, especially nurses, know that work is easily available elsewhere. Consequently, some prefer to work limited hours as part-timers and then add extra shifts as casuals (casual workers are paid at a higher rate to compensate for fewer benefits):

You can work part time, do fewer night duties and then pick up other shifts when they suit you and that gives all the employees a lot of flexibility and a lot of people will do that. They will commit to two or three shifts and then pick up extras when and as they choose (registered nurse, Hospital).

At Recreation Facility, a system of 'banking hours' allows casual workers to receive some payment during weeks when they are not working. One employee liked the higher rate of pay as a casual and the banking of hours:

I have just had 10 days off, because I have had my parents up from Victoria, so I had banked 29 hours, so I could take those hours and I haven't lost any pay, which has worked well for me (casual worker, single mother, Recreation facility).

Seasonal (summer and vacation time) work, was generally low skill and low status work and usually carried out by students or others seeking such employment. The HR representatives in Recreation Facility and Leisurewear applauded this type of arrangement as enabling them to fill seasonal gaps in employee numbers and to re-employ trained people, some of whom they regarded as potential full-time employees. In these organisations, casual workers did not feel marginalised or disadvantaged. We postulate that they are nevertheless subject to fluctuations in demand, whether seasonal or due to other factors.

Access to care arrangements

For women, child care issues were a frequently discussed aspect of maintaining their dual roles and a source of stress. Managers were aware of the strain placed on mothers in securing and maintaining child care places and five organisations had at least considered the need to provide child care on site or help mothers to locate care. None had done so. At Hospital a new program to assist employees to find appropriate child care being trialled.

Informal arrangements with neighbours, friends and relatives providing much of the care, seemed the most common solution for mothers. A mother of three who works part-time explained how she managed:

One at school, one at kindy two days a week and the baby at home. My husband does shift work so we do the shifts in the night tag team. We've decided while they are little ... to just do it. It would be nice not to have to do that but it's too hard to get them into nice childcare. There's not a lot of nice childcare around. I'm probably very fussy, but to be able to do that for a few years and just juggle it. (physiotherapist, part-time, Hospital).

At Recreation Facility, a single mother with a casual job, said that 'my biggest problem, I had to accept that when I took the job, is that school holidays is like a nightmare. You are working six days, and that is the time your children are off as well'. Like many others, she relies on a personal, informal network to strike a balance between her various responsibilities, and this may involve taking on extra duties outside work: 'But I try to work it with my friends that I might have their children the day I have off, and they have mine.' Mothers consistently reported their anxiety about the availability of good quality child care or care that suited their working hours and school holiday arrangements. The interviews suggested many of these women relied on family, friends and neighbours to provide all or some of the care. Where this was a reciprocal arrangement, the burden of unpaid work was increased because these women took on the care of other children as well as their own.

Nurse managers at the hospital were aware that women could not be expected to work overtime without making arrangements for their children, and allowed them time to find alternative care. At Recreation Facility there were some jobs (working in the café or retail sector) which were 'tailor-made' for women with school age children because they were short shifts in the middle of the day. The same organisation still expected these employees to work during weekends and school holidays. Not all managers were cognisant of child care issues and one manager told us that child care was not an issue for him, but was a private matter.

Access to flexible leave arrangements

The interviews confirmed that women prize most of all the ability to balance their paid work with other obligations to family and community. At one workplace (Engineering Manufacture) rigid hours and conditions with no access to part-time work or extended maternity leave were seen as detrimental to maintaining a workable balance between these two aspects of their lives. Elsewhere employees could return from maternity leave to part time work:

I came back two days a week when they were five months and then three days a week when they were one year. And then four days a week when they were about eighteen months, then full-time when they were two. So, I had a staggered increase, which was fabulous (mother of twins, Metals Manufacture).

Although sick leave and personal leave most often came from the same pool of leave, employees were usually satisfied with this arrangement. In the case of a family emergency, most of the women felt that they could take leave at short notice. Leisurewear employees were able to take time off for personal reasons but were expected to make up the time and meet deadlines. One manager described the situation of a mother of a three year old: 'She's full-time but if he's got green snot in his nose he's not allowed to go to day care. So, I'll let her go until she can get her father to look after him, mid-morning, or whatever, and we make that time up. We just try and be really flexible with that.'

Flexible working-time arrangements and control over hours worked

Part-time work and flexible working hours were generally available in these organisations. This, however, depended on business demands, and some roles were more amenable to flexible starting and finishing times than others. Short or irregular shifts at peak periods suited the needs of the Recreation Facility and Leisurewear, where seasonal and even daily demand varied. Where skilled workers were in short supply, casuals could fill in the gaps when other workers were on vacation or as a trial before being accepted as a full-time employee with all the associated benefits (Metals Manufacture). As a global company, Technology needed to have employees available at odd times 'because a lot of roles are communicating especially within the software centre, they are up early in the morning to speak to the US and they are up late at night to speak to UK or whatever, so the hours are not always set and they are actually quite flexible' (manager, Technology). It is apparent that the so-called flexibility is in the employer's interests even if it also suits the employee, and in fact the choice of working hours is severely constrained.

At the hospital, managers told the researchers they went to a great deal of effort to make rosters to suit individual's personal and family needs. According to two nurse managers, arranging and re-arranging rosters was a time consuming task, and they understood that this was a considerable but necessary cost to the organisation. One nurse manager responded:

Work life balance is always an issue particularly when one is doing rostering. That's something you have to take into account and it's all the more these days because nursing is at a premium, the nurses are at a premium. 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. I do that all the time.

Nurses appreciated but also expected this kind of control over their working lives:

On the ward where I work we've got a mixture of 4 hour, 6 hour, 8 hour, 12 hour shifts. Most of our night shifts are a 12 hour night. Some of them [nurses] only want to do say 4 hours a day. They want to pick the kids up in the afternoon or whatever. As far as the 12 hour shifts are concerned, I only work 13 shifts a month and work full-time, so basically work 3 days a week (nurse, Hospital).

Recreation Facility similarly allowed a variety of working arrangements and lengths of working time, while Leisurewear allowed varying start and finish times for most employees. It was apparent that individuals made their own informal arrangements with co-workers, swapping shifts or filling in for each other and this was condoned by managers. For example, in one clinic at the Hospital radiographers were happy to 'swap' a few hours of parts of a shift to fit in with out-of-work responsibilities. At Engineering Manufacture, however, it was the lack of 'room to move' that most angered women employees: 'My daughter is getting her School Certificate on Friday and I have to take annual leave to be there' (administrative officer, Engineering Manufacture).

At most workplaces employees could switch between full-time and part-time work and vary work hours over the life course and regarded this as a necessary condition of employment:

I was on maternity leave when I was here but only for a few months. Then I did part-time for twelve months but the last few years I changed down to a four day week and shorter, doing school hours only. Then I increased it doing a project for the next twelve months, so I am back here full-time, at the moment (senior clerical worker, Metals Manufacture).

How do women workers, particularly those with dependent children, reconcile their dual commitment to fully engaged paid work, and the equally insistent claims on their lives outside that world? A shift from a traditional concept of commitment as 'a desire to remain in, and identification with the organisation' to a more proactive, innovative, mutually beneficial relationship between employer and employee has been suggested (Singh and Vinnicombe 2000: 228). Part-time workers are not necessarily less engaged to their work and do not invest less in their careers because they also committed to rearing a family (Lane 2004; Hagan and Kay 1995). In this small study it is apparent that women, including those working part-time and as casual employees, value their work. In some instances, part-time employees demonstrated their commitment in the more traditional way by working outside their paid hours. A manager at Leisurewear, speaking of his personal assistant told her that

'I don't care if you come here two days a week, I know you are going to give me between the other three days, you're going to give me a day's work. I don't care.' Even on the days she's not working I get phone calls to make sure that I get my airline tickets so that I can go overseas, or I forgot to tell you this - she's working anyway.

While several interviewees voiced the opinion that they were willing to forgo promotion for the time being in favour of spending more time and energy at the family, this did not seem to mean they were not committed to the job they were doing or would not, in the longer term, seek more training or career progression. The case studies confirm that for these women, commitment to the paid workforce is ongoing but uneven in terms of the time commitment they can give paid work at some points in their lives.

Access to training and career development

All the work places acknowledged the need for staff development. Recreation accepted that women were sometimes favoured in offering leadership training, supporting their affirmative action philosophy. In all but one organisation, women were positive about their access to training and advancement, but there were also individual differences in terms of what they wanted: 'The next step. Yes, that's my thing, I think, "oh, my gosh, I've come so far", I don't know now. I think I am quite happy on this level for the moment' (attraction supervisor, Recreation Facility). The opposite view was expressed by another employee: 'I've been doing this job for a year and it's rather a huge job and I keep thinking to myself, now, do I want any

more stress than what I've got now? But I suppose if the assistant manager's - because that is where the next step is - if the assistant manager came up...' (retail supervisor, Recreation).

Innovative work arrangements

Technology had the most sophisticated approach to work-from-home with employees equipped with notebook computers, but several others (Metals Manufacture, Leisurewear) had made arrangements for employees to telecommute at least for part of the working day or week, particularly when returning from maternity leave. Hospital had nurse managers who worked part-time or job shared, and the HR manager reported that while this had met with initial resistance, it was now acknowledged as successful. Leisurewear accepted a variety of working arrangements but meetings and deadlines were less flexible because team members had an obligation to participate together. Some jobs, for example operating theatres at the Hospital, some technical roles at Technology, Metals Manufacture and Engineering Manufacture, and direct service roles at all the workplaces are simply not amenable to working from home or at varied hours. Heavy machinery, customer service, OHS and ease of team or work group interaction are cited as explanations.

Impact of the EEO Program

Generally, women who were mothers or carers were content with their working arrangements as long as they were able, and felt permitted, to take time out occasionally to fulfil other commitments for themselves or their families. Most had negotiated a work situation with which they were comfortable; the exception was at Engineering Manufacture where women clerical and administrative workers felt disadvantaged in relation to men of similar status and men and women who worked under trade union negotiated agreements. Unlike women in the other organisations, they felt they had little or no opportunity of advancement: they were in dead-end jobs.

In the case studies, each organisation had its own EEO program, and while all were strategic in the sense that they aimed to engage and retain the best available work force while minimising the risk of adverse legal action, the application of EEO principles was pragmatic and dependent on labour market forces and the influence of HR managers on overall policy. Some organisations chose to undertake a value-based commitment to individual worth, as at the private Hospital or at Metals Manufacture. Recreation Facility emphasised a sense of participation in its local community. An understanding that employees' needs and interests change over the life cycle (Leisurewear, Hospital), or a more prosaic need to fill the vacancies and retain skilled workers in a tight labour market or particular geographic location (Hospital, Technology, Metals Manufacture) were also important. The legislation is not sufficient to guarantee women a career path or a work-life balance but reinforces the acceptance of women's place at work and the concomitant responsibilities to family and community that typically accompany it.

Conclusion

The emphasis on decentralised bargaining to resolve work-life balance issues means that any settlement is dependent upon enterprise conditions and the relative bargaining position of the parties. This is not a position that is very propitious for many working women (Strachan and Burgess 2000). Management may or may not be responsive to the need to develop appropriate policies and programs, and this may depend on the labour market or other factors in the economic cycle. Even then, organisational policies do not always translate into actual benefits (Eaton 2003). In this small sample of organisations, unions were unenthusiastic about negotiating for measures that do not apply to all members and they had other priorities. Where

women are employed in a marginal capacity as casual or low paid workers, their bargaining power and bargaining skills may be constrained (see Burgess and Strachan 2005; Plowman 2000). Additionally, the nature of some work and some workplaces limits the opportunities for innovative or flexible working arrangements.

These organisations and their employees used a range of formal and informal strategies to relieve the tensions between home and work. Most women were accepting of the practices in place in their workplace. It struck the researchers that the use of family, friends, and neighbours to fill the child care gap was seen by both the workers and their managers as a way out of difficult situations. In the same way, 'swapping shifts' or 'filling in' for a co-worker was a way in which reciprocal obligations were undertaken and resolved. Relying on informal social networks, particularly family, is a time-honoured way of sharing the burden of child care and subsistence, especially in pre-industrial societies, which has not been lost as women have forged new relationships to the wider economy. Yet making these informal arrangements involves considerable time and potential stress to workers (Morehead 2003). Most women in this study were accepting of the practices in place in their workplace. Put simply, they did not seek more than was offered. What they were offered depended on the job they did, the company they worked for, the manager of their work unit and the good will of others.

The findings from the research suggest that having an organisational EEO program and workplace agreement making is no guarantee that work and family measures will be introduced at the workplace. Supplying a conforming report to EOWA does not translate into having effective practices that support a work-life balance or that enhance women's chances of stable, family friendly employment. The EEO and workplace bargaining regime are both very dependent on the 'business case' for family friendly employment measures, one which is supported by government and its agencies (for example EOWA) but is in tension with other ideas based on arguments from equity and social justice (ACTU 2005). In turn this means that such measures are very unevenly distributed within and across workplaces (Gray and Tudball 2002), and that development and implementation is heavily dependent upon managerial prerogative.

Australian legislation contains few minimum safeguards and hence conditions offered vary widely between organisations and even within them if there is a lack of formal policies. The *Workplaces Relations Amendment (Workchoices) Act 2005* has been widely criticised for the potential to disempower low paid and marginal workers and add to the stress on families by reducing or eliminating former safeguards for workers with family responsibilities who need parental, carers or predictable annual leave, those with low pay or precarious (marginal) attachment to the workforce or irregular or unsocial hours of work (ACTU 2005). The new legislation will offer most workers fewer minimum conditions, and certainly reduce security of employment. Neither the reporting process nor organisational policy ensures that women's requirements are addressed in a coherent way. It is unlikely that increased decentralisation of bargaining will do so either.

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