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Labour Adjustment in Australia and New Zealand

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One of the main aims of employers in the more competitive conditions of the 1980s and 1990s has been to gain greater flexibility in the labour adjustment process. In particular, employers have sought greater freedom to make numerical adjustments in labour hours and employment to more effectively respond to changing market circumstances. This desire for enhanced labour flexibility has invariably underpinned employer demands for labour market deregulation. The response of governments in New Zealand and Australia for more workplace flexibility has been quite distinct. New Zealand opted for the radical free market model whereas Australia elected to pursue a more moderate and cooperative approach to labour market reform. In this paper we report the results of a large cross-national survey in Australia and New Zealand which compares employers use of overtime and flexible forms of labour in response to short-run demand surges. Data from the survey are analysed according to industry sector, employment size, mode of operation and location. The main conclusion of this paper is that, despite substantial differences in the system of labour regulation, there are few major differences in the use of overtime and flexible labour between the two countries.

Introduction

One of the dominant economic themes in the 1980s and 1990s has been the need for greater labour market flexibility. There has been considerable discussion of the macroeconomic affects of labour market flexibility in terms of employment, unemployment, labour mobility and productivity (OECD, 1986; Ryan, 1992:130). Even more so, the flexibility debate has focused on the need for greater micro-level flexibility to improve the ability of employers to adapt labour utilisation to changing market circumstances (OECD, 1989). In the more turbulent, competitive environment of the 1980s and 1990s, it is argued that management needs far more discretion in the application of human resources to maintain profitability and competitive advantage (Anderson, Brosnan and Walsh, 1994: 492; Sarfati and Kobrin, 1988:1). The discourse of 'labour flexibility' has permeated the management literature to such an extent that it has become one of the most widely used terms in the human resource management lexicon (Dastmalchian and Blyton, 1998: 437).

In Australia and New Zealand, the debate about labour market flexibility has been closely entwined with employer demands for greater liberalisation and deregulation of the labour market (Burgess and Macdonald, 1990; Harbridge and Rea, 1992). The case for labour market deregulation has been most strongly advocated by the Business Council of Australia and the New Zealand Business Roundtable in New Zealand (BCA, 1989; NZBR, 1987). A key employer aim, in Australasia and overseas, has been the removal of institutional and regulatory constraints on managerial decision-making for the utilisation of labour (Barkin, 1987:12). Greater employer freedom in the deployment and application of labour, it is contended, will improve organisations' market responsiveness and competitiveness.

The legislative response of the Australian and New Zealand governments for labour market deregulation has been quite distinct. Australia, under a Federal Labor Government, chose a more gradual and cooperative route to labour market reform. The arbitration system was retained but modified to encourage workplace bargaining. In contrast, New Zealand, under a conservative Government, opted for the free market model. In 1991, the arbitration system was abolished and replaced with a system of voluntary individual and collective contracts (Bray and Haworth, 1993).

In this paper we examine how Australian and New Zealand employers in 1995, operating in two quite different industrial relations systems, utilised flexible forms of labour and overtime as a means of adjusting to short-term additional demand. These two countries represent useful cases for comparison as both have a common colonial history and share many social and economic characteristics. As such, it is interesting to ask whether Australian employers, operating under the modified arbitral system in 1995, had a vastly different pattern of labour-use compared to their counterparts in the deregulated New Zealand industrial relations system. We seek to ask this question in the remaining sections of this paper.

In the first section of this paper, we locate our concern with the labour adjustment process within the broader flexibility debate. In the second section we show the findings of a large-scale survey conducted in the two countries in 1995. This survey comprised a total sample of 10 400 workplaces, 5200 in each country, with a response rate of 33 per cent in Australia and 39 per cent in New Zealand. Data from the survey are analysed according to industry sector, employment size, mode of operation, and location. The third and concluding section of the paper draws the main threads of the argument together. The main conclusion of this paper is that there are few major differences in the use of overtime and flexible labour between Australia and New Zealand.

Labour Flexibility and Labour Adjustment

In many ways, the recent flexibility debate has subsumed an older and complementary literature concerned with the labour adjustment process at the micro level (Blackburn and Mann, 1979; Blandy and Richardson, 1982; Mackay et al., 1971; Thomas and Deaton, 1977). This earlier literature, in part, was concerned to explore and explain how the pricing and allocation of labour actually took place in response to variations in the product and labour market. As Doeringer and Piore (1979) showed in their classic study, employers can employ a vast range of different mechanisms to balance the demand for and deployment and pricing of labour at the firm level.

Undoubtedly, some of the subtlety of this earlier literature has been lost in the recent flexibility debate. Nevertheless, the more recent flexibility literature does seek to address the same phenomenon: the labour adjustment process. Various typologies of labour flexibility have been advanced (Meulders and Wilkin, 1987; Sarfati and Kobrin, 1988). Perhaps one of the most straightforward typologies is the one developed by Rimmer and Zappala (1988). They contended that there are five main types of labour flexibility. First is external numerical flexibility which concerns the ability of firms to adjust the level of labour inputs by hiring new labour. This would include categories of labour usually associated with non-standard forms of employment such as casual, temporary, contract and agency labour. Second is internal numerical flexibility which is similar to the first type of flexibility but does not result in the hiring of additional workers. Rather, employers use

more flexible overtime, shift rosters and other working-time arrangements. Third, functional flexibility concerns the capacity of employers to move labour to different functions or tasks. The pursuit of functional flexibility was one of the main aims of the award restructuring program in Australia. Fourth, wage flexibility is where pay rates are more closely aligned with product and labour market conditions. Finally, Rimmer and Zappala suggest that the fifth type of flexibility is procedural flexibility which provides the machinery for consultation and negotiation over the above cited types of flexibility.

In this paper we focused only on the first two types of flexibility outlined above; that is, internal and external numerical flexibility. More specifically, we were only concerned with the use of overtime (internal) and short-term and agency labour (external). In the survey, we asked employers whether, in response to additional short-term demand for labour, they used either overtime, directly hired workers on a short-term basis or used agency labour. Employers could nominate more than one response. In this way, we sought to establish employers' relative preference for internal as opposed to external forms of numerical adjustment. We also asked respondents three other questions to gain further information on whether overtime was being used regularly or just on a short-term basis. Employers were asked to nominate if they were using regular paid overtime, what per centage of the workforce regularly worked overtime each week, and the average hours of paid overtime employees were working each week.

The choice of countries was of major significance to this study. Australia and New Zealand share a common cultural tradition and heritage as British colonies. Their economies developed along similar lines and they also shared a common pattern of craft, occupational and industry unionism inherited from the UK (Brosnan and Burgess, 1993: 61). Until recently, both countries also had a conciliation and arbitration system which regulated the employment relationship, codified as awards. The industrial relations similarities changed dramatically in 1991 when New Zealand abandoned its arbitration system. The process of deregulating many sectors of the New Zealand economy had already commenced under the New Zealand Labour Government elected in 1984 (Bray, and Haworth, 1993: 7). But it wasn't until the election of the conservative National Party in 1990 that decisive action was taken to deregulate the industrial relations system, at the behest of the business community. The *Employment Contracts Act 1991* replaced the arbitral system of awards and collective agreements with a system of individual and collective contracts. Under the new system, the role of trade unions was also substantially reduced. Australia, in contrast, retained its collectivist arbitration system until 1996. Over the course of the Federal Labor Party administration from 1983 to 1996, the industrial relations system was gradually decentralised to promote collective bargaining and cooperative workplace reform. By 1995, the Australian system encouraged enterprise bargaining while still retaining a key role for the commission to ensure that the outcomes of bargaining did not adversely affect employees. Additionally, a comprehensive system of safety net awards was also retained to ensure those without the labour market power to secure enterprise agreements were not overly disadvantaged (Mitchell and Wilson, 1993: 49, 52).

Thus, in 1995, when our survey was conducted, Australia and New Zealand were operating under two quite different systems of industrial regulation. New Zealand operated a free market model with minimal intervention from the state and a markedly reduced role for trade unions. In Australia, in contrast, the Federal Industrial Relations Commission continued to play an active role in maintaining the award system while also monitoring the outcomes of the enterprise bargaining process. The similar collectivist approach to

industrial relations was also in operation in most of the separate State jurisdictions – with exception of Victoria and Western Australia (Teicher and Svensen, 1997). Given the significant differences between the industrial relations system in Australia and New Zealand in 1995, we sought to identify if there were any major difference in employers' use of internal and external forms of labour adjustment.

The existing research indicates many commonalities in the pattern of labour utilisation in the two countries, despite their different systems of labour regulation. Research by Brosnan and Walsh (1996) has revealed that the structure of workforce is very similar in both countries. Harbridge and Tolich (1993) found that penalty rates for overtime was still a common provision in many New Zealand agreements in 1993, although overtime penalty rates had been eliminated or reduced in some agreements. Similarly, in a review of workplace agreements in Australia, Heiler (1996) identified that alterations to overtime provisions had occurred in only a minority of agreements. We now turn to the main empirical section where we provide evidence of the propensity of employers to use external and internal forms of labour adjustment.

The Results: Short-term Labour Adjustment in Australia and New Zealand

The data in Table 1 suggests a great deal of similarity between the countries in the use of overtime, short-term workers and agency labour to accommodate additional short-run demand. A very large proportion of workplaces in New Zealand (80 per cent) and Australia (70 per cent) rely on overtime. A much lower per centage of workplaces in New Zealand (38 per cent) and Australia (33 per cent) directly hire workers on a short-term basis. The use of agency labour is comparatively low in both countries (9 per cent). New Zealand workplaces have a slightly higher usage of these adjustment mechanisms than is the case in Australia.

Table 1: Labour Adjustments to Additional Short-term Demand, Australia and New Zealand, Incidence (%)

Item	New Zealand	Australia
Overtime	80	70
Directly Hire Workers on Short-term Basis	38	33
Temporary Agency Labour	9	9
Other	5	12

These results indicate that most firms in both countries rely primarily on overtime as the main adjustment mechanism to cope with demand surges. When firms do utilise additional labour, they are much more likely to directly hire workers on a short-term basis rather than use temporary agency labour. The reluctance of firms to use agency labour often stems from the lack of control employers have over the selection and quality of agency staff (Allan, 1996; Brosnan and Thornthwaite, 1995).

Further similarities in the use of overtime in both countries can be viewed in Table 2. While overtime is used in most workplaces, only a minority of firms in New Zealand (25 per cent) and Australia (21 per cent) use overtime on a regular basis. In those workplaces using regular overtime, a significant proportion of staff are affected: 47 per cent in New Zealand and 39 per cent in Australia. Employees working overtime normally undertake a

relatively large amount of overtime per week: approximately 2 hours overtime per day (based on a 5 day work week).

Table 2: Overtime, Australia and New Zealand, Incidence (%)

Item	New Zealand	Australia
Regular Paid Overtime	25	21
% of Workforce Regularly Working Overtime Each Week	47	39
Average Hours of Paid Overtime Each Week	9.3	8.1

Industry

The breakdown of data by industry in Tables 3 and 4 again shows a reasonable degree of similarity between countries. In the secondary and tertiary sectors, the pattern shown above is repeated: overtime is the most popular item, following by short-term workers and then agency labour. The primary sector, in contrast, has a much higher usage of short-term workers, particularly in New Zealand. The high usage of short-term workers is no doubt due to the seasonal nature of primary production.

In both countries, overtime is most used extensively in secondary industries (New Zealand especially), most likely to allow employers to accommodate rush orders or overcome production difficulties. Overtime is also widely used in the tertiary sector to accommodate exigencies. A lower, although still substantial, per centage of primary sector workplaces are using overtime as well. The use of agency labour in Australia and New Zealand is most common in the tertiary sector. As we shall see below, this is probably due to the location of tertiary enterprise in urban areas where there is a greater concentration of agency labour-hire firms. The secondary sector, and to a lesser extent the primarily sector, also appear to have a moderately low demand for agency tradepersons, labourers and white collar workers.

Table 3: Labour Adjustments to Additional Short-term Demand by Industry, Australia and New Zealand, Incidence (%)

Item	New Zealand			Australia		
	Primary	Secondary	Tertiary	Primary	Secondary	Tertiary
Overtime	60	93	80	68	75	70
Directly Hire on Short-term basis	68	34	34	52	34	30
Temporary Agency Labour	4	8	11	3	6	10
Other	5	5	5	10	10	13

We can observe in Table 4 that in both countries the per centage of firms using regular paid overtime is considerably lower than the per centage of firms using overtime as reported in Table 3. The secondary sector is again more likely than the primary and tertiary sectors to be using overtime. In workplaces using regular overtime, a considerable proportion of employees are affected. Table 4 does indicate a number of sectoral differences in the use of regular overtime between Australia and New Zealand. New Zealand workplaces in the primary secondary sectors have a more intensive use of regular overtime, affecting a larger per centage of the workforce and involving more average hours, than is the case in the

equivalent sectors in Australia. Clearly, the use of regular overtime is a distinguishing characteristic of secondary sector employment.

Table 4: Overtime by Industry, Australia and New Zealand, Incidence

Item	New Zealand			Australia		
	Primary	Secondary	Tertiary	Primary	Secondary	Tertiary
% of Regular Paid Overtime	20	46	20	14	28	20
% of Workforce Regularly Working Overtime Each Week	56	59	39	28	45	38
Average Hours of Paid Overtime Each Week	11.6	10.4	8.3	6.0	9.2	8.1

Employment Size

There is a considerable amount of commonality between the countries in the use of overtime, in terms of workplace size. As shown in Table 5, overtime is extensively used in both countries in all size categories. Small Australian workplaces tend to have a somewhat lower, though still substantial, use of overtime (67 per cent). Again we see that short-term and agency labour is used by a lower per centage of workplaces in all size categories. In general terms, the use of flexible labour tends to increase with workplace size in both countries. Further evidence of this size effect can be see in Table 6 which shows that the use of regular overtime and the average number of overtime hours worked is positively linked to employment size. This pattern may reflect the greater capital and financial resources of larger firms which allows them to more readily expand production and hence labour use in response to additional short-term demand. As may be expected, when smaller firms do use overtime it is more likely to affect a greater proportion of the workforce.

Table 5: Labour Adjustments to Additional Short-term Demand by Employment Size, Australia and New Zealand, Incidence (percentage)

Item	New Zealand			Australia		
	Small 2-9	Medium 10-49	Large 50+	Small 2-9	Medium 10-49	Large 50+
Overtime	80	80	84	67	84	86
Directly Hire on Short-term basis	35	43	58	33	30	45
Temporary Agency Labour	6	14	41	5	23	36
Other	5	5	6	13	6	11

Table 6: Overtime by Employment Size, Australia and New Zealand, Incidence

Item	New Zealand			Australia		
	Small 2-9	Medium 10-49	Large 50+	Small 2-9	Medium 10-49	Large 50+
% of Regular Paid Overtime	19	40	61	15	43	55
% of Workforce Regularly Working Overtime Each Week	55	36	29	46	31	21
Average Hours of Paid Overtime Each Week	6.3	12.7	17.7	6.9	9.3	11.2

Location

In Tables 7 and 8 we present a breakdown of the data in terms of geographic location. As can be seen in Table 7, there is fair degree of commonality between countries but New Zealand workplaces score slightly higher on almost all items. For both countries, the main lines of difference appear to be between urban areas (large and small towns) compared to rural areas. Rural locations tend to directly hire more short-term workers than urban areas, reflecting the presence of primary industries in country areas and thus greater need for seasonal agricultural workers. The urban areas, in contrast, are somewhat more likely to be using overtime than rural areas. This may reflect a higher degree of variability in demand patterns for urban employers compared to the rural demand pattern which is closely tied to the more gradual rhythm of the seasons. Notwithstanding this, a significant per centage of rural employers also rely on overtime. The use of agency labour is restricted mainly to the large towns where agency-hire firms are more likely to be located.

Table 7: Labour Adjustments to Additional Short-term Demand by Location, Australia and New Zealand, Incidence (percentage)

Item	New Zealand			Australia		
	Large Town	Small Town	Rural Area	Large Town	Small Town	Rural Area
Overtime	83	85	64	72	73	60
Directly Hire on Short-term basis	33	38	52	31	27	51
Temporary Agency Labour	12	3	5	13	2	4
Other	5	3	6	12	11	14

Table 8 shows similarities in the use of regular overtime in both countries. As we might expect, rural areas, engaged in seasonal production, are less likely to use overtime on a regular basis than large or small towns. When regular overtime is used, it does tend to involve a considerable per centage of the workforce in each geographic location. The minor exception here is the rural area in Australia where the per centage of the workforce regularly working overtime is lower than New Zealand and the urban areas in Australia. The average number of paid overtime hours worked tends to be highest in the large towns and lowest in the small towns. New Zealand workplaces worked more average overtime hours than Australian workplaces in all locations.

Table 8: Overtime by Location, Australia and New Zealand, Incidence

Item	New Zealand			Australia		
	Large Town	Small Town	Rural Area	Large Town	Small Town	Rural Area
% of Regular Paid Overtime	27	27	16	22	18	17
% of workforce Regularly Working Overtime each week	45	51	56	39	44	30
Average Hours of Paid Overtime each week	10.1	7.4	8.1	8.8	5.8	7.6

Mode of Operation

In Table 9, the data are disaggregated by private, public and not-for-profit (NFP) modes of operation. All types of operations in both New Zealand and Australia make extensive use of overtime – particularly the New Zealand private sector. Again, in both countries, short-term workers are generally used less extensively than overtime. The exception here is the public sector in New Zealand where a greater proportion of workplaces are using short-term workers as opposed to overtime. There is also a fairly large proportion of the Australian public sector using short-term workers. The high usage of short-term flexible labour supports the finding from earlier research that employer flexibility strategies have been more widely adopted in the public than in the private sector (Anderson, Brosnan and Walsh, 1996: 53). Agency labour is more commonly used in the NFP sector, followed by the public sector with the private sector showing the lowest usage. The higher use of agency labour may be due to the extensive provision of health and welfare service by NFP firms in both countries and the public sector in Australia where nursing agency labour is commonly used.

Table 9: Labour Adjustments to Additional Short-term Demand by Mode of Operation, Australia and New Zealand, Incidence (percentage)

Item	New Zealand			Australia		
	Private	Public	NFP	Private	Public	NFP
Overtime	83	52	67	70	71	72
Directly Hire on Short-term basis	37	56	41	33	57	25
Temporary Agency Labour	9	12	23	7	23	27
Other	4	12	8	12	5	15

The use of regular overtime is dispersed widely across different modes of operation in both countries. Regular overtime is used more extensively in the private than the public sector in both countries. The percentage of the workforce regularly working overtime is also higher in the private than the public sector. A key inter-country difference is that regular overtime is used more widely in the NFP sector and affects a greater proportion of the workforce in Australia than in New Zealand. Average paid overtime hours are highest in the private sector in both countries.

Table 10: Overtime by Mode of Operation, Australia and New Zealand, Incidence

Item	New Zealand			Australia		
	Private	Public	NFP	Private	Public	NFP
% of Regular Paid Overtime	26	17	2	20	14	28
% of Workforce Regularly Working Overtime each week	48	37	6	42	26	22
Average Hours of Paid Overtime each week	9.6	8.7	5.1	8.2	6.4	6.5

Conclusion

A key aim of employers in the 1980s and 1990s has been to improve their capacity to adjust the utilisation of labour to match changing market circumstances. In particular employers have sought greater internal and external flexibility in the deployment of labour hours and employment. This desire for enhanced labour flexibility has underpinned employer demands for labour market deregulation. New Zealand and Australia governments have responded to employer demand in two distinct ways. New Zealand opted for the radical free market model whereas Australia elected to pursue a more moderate and cooperative approach to labour market reform. In this paper we sought to establish whether there were any major differences in the propensity of Australia and New Zealand employers to use overtime and flexible labour in response to demand surges.

In general, we found a great deal of similarity in the use of overtime, short-term workers and agency labour in Australia and New Zealand. Overtime was widely used in all industry sectors, in all firms size categories, in all geographic locations, and in all modes of operation. Employers were much more likely to use overtime than short-term workers and agency labour, with few exceptions. Labour agency was the least preferred employment option due to the unpredictable nature of the quality of labour supply.

More specifically, in both countries, the survey revealed that overtime was most likely to be used in the secondary sector, in large workplaces and in urban areas – all likely to be capital intensive. Workers directly hired on a short-term basis were most commonly used in capital intensive larger workplaces and in the public sector – a leader in flexible labour-use. These workers were also commonly used in primary sector workplaces and rural areas where demand patterns are seasonal. Agency labour was used most extensively in the tertiary sector, particularly in not-for-profit workplaces and in large workplaces and large towns.

The differences between the countries were, on balance, relatively modest. New Zealand workplaces were slightly more likely to be using overtime and short-term workers than Australian workplaces on a majority of items. The higher New Zealand usage of overtime was most noticeable in the private sector, in secondary sector workplaces and among small businesses. The more intensive use of short-term workers in New Zealand was most evident in the primary sector, in medium and large enterprises and in the NFP sector. On many other items, though, the inter-country differences were relatively minor and in a small number of instances, the use of overtime and short-term workers was higher in Australian workplaces. While the results are mixed, the overall pattern indicates a broad similarity but with New Zealand workplace slightly more likely to use overtime time and short-term workers compared to workplaces in Australia.

A similar pattern of results was evident in the use of regular paid overtime in the two countries. New Zealand had a similar but slightly higher use of regular overtime than Australia with the secondary sector exhibiting the greatest degree of difference. With the exception of the NFP sector, New Zealand consistently reported employing a similar though higher number of average overtime hours affecting a larger percentage of the workforce.

Given the significantly different industrial relations systems operating in Australia and New Zealand, the differences between the countries in terms of the propensity of

workplaces to employ internal and external forms of labour adjustment is comparatively slight. These results suggest that the flexibility benefits to employers of the New Zealand labour market deregulation model are perhaps somewhat overstated. Moderately regulated industrial relations system – as the Australian system was in 1995 – do not appear to overly hamper employers' capacity to respond flexibly to changing market circumstances. As Doeringer and Piore (1979) pointed out long ago, organisations can employ a vast range of measures to adjust to changes in product and labour market conditions. The system of labour regulation, it appears, is not a major impediment to the firm-level labour adjustment process.

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