

## Mixed signals on work and family



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A recent major survey suggests progress is finally being made in providing a better balance between work and family responsibilities for Australian employees. But massive differences remain between the public and private sectors. And some specific sectors — law firms, for example — are found to be so rigidly structured that major barriers to employee flexibility continue to exist. The survey has been completed by Barbara Holmes in conjunction with CCH Australia. It follows a similar investigation in 1997.

Many respondent organisations identify commercial rewards from a more enlightened approach to work and family issues. In particular, there is a strong relationship between availability of flexible work options and the retention of staff. When workloads and stress levels rise, problems with increased labour turnover are twice as common in companies which offer few flexible work opportunities. As well, high-flexibility enterprises report greater success in attracting top-quality applicants.

Business attitudes have improved in recent years. Two-thirds of Australian businesses now report significant success with work/family policies and eighty-three per cent believe the climate for such initiatives has improved markedly in the past five years. More than eighty per cent of Australian organisations intend to make further positive changes. Respondents believe progress has resulted from several key factors, including greater involvement and commitment from senior management, wider workforce access to flexible work options, better publicity and communication and inclusion of work/life clauses in enterprise agreements. The significance of this last element is confirmed by current data on major provisions in enterprise agreements throughout Australia. In the year to December 1998, twenty-seven per cent of agreements included detailed work-family provisions, compared with only three per cent from five years ago.

But among almost all respondent organisations, increased pressure and longer working hours are holding back improvements to the work-family balance, even where progress has been achieved. The effect is moderated by high-flexibility policies, but it remains a problem in most organisations. Pressure, both blatant and subtle, on employees to work far more than standard hours is not abating. Sixty-five per cent of respondents from organisations with more than 1000 employees believe that staff must work extra unpaid hours to demonstrate commitment to their jobs. Eighty-seven per cent believe progress is being hindered by increased work demands which overshadow personal needs. In organisations rated poorly, hostility among senior managers, lack of funding and training, downsizing and continuing restructuring were common features.

In almost all flexibility areas, private companies lag behind their public sector counterparts. Study leave, for example, is available in sixty-five per cent of public organisations, compared to forty-eight per cent of private companies. Other comparisons include paid parental leave [fifty per cent compared to twenty-nine per cent], part-time work [forty-five per cent compared to twenty-six per cent], job sharing [twenty-six per cent compared to fourteen per cent], flexi-time [thirty-seven per cent compared to seven per cent] and career breaks [twenty-nine per cent compared to ten per cent]. There are, however, some indications that the private sector is beginning to acknowledge the business case for more effort in this area, with leading organisations such as NRMA and AMP recently making public statements on financial returns available from greater investment in family-friendly people management.

The suggestion that things are starting to happen in the work/life area is welcomed by ALIA and its members. This is a field in which we have repeatedly called for real action to accompany the extensive rhetoric which has been apparent. But we need to be watchful for discrepancies between results reported by employers and the feelings of the employees who are subject to these policies. A continuing problem with much research is the extent to which results of managerial policy changes are assessed by reference to the views of those responsible for developing and implementing them. This approach does not necessarily catch the real impact.

For Australian librarians there is clearly some way to go. ALIA's recent survey of working conditions for library workers directly canvassed the question of work and family balance. The results were less than encouraging and were certainly less positive than those reported in the CCH survey. Among more than fifty topic areas, our survey's 1600 library-worker participants were asked to rate their satisfaction with work and family balance, as compared to twelve months ago. Only fourteen per cent of respondents reported an improvement. Forty-eight per cent felt there had been no appreciable change and thirty-eight per cent were less satisfied.

The CCH survey concludes with several sensible suggestions for further progress. Among them is a recommendation for more careful collection of organisational data on what has been achieved to date. Given the experience of ALIA members, that is clearly necessary. A good starting point might be creation of a common measuring system based on results from an employee perspective. That would be a much more valid yardstick than a collection of comments from employers on what they think the outcomes have been or what they would like them to be. ■

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