

Work and family — more talk than action

In this final article on challenges arising from Australia's ageing workforce, we look at work and family.



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Everybody is talking about work and family balance. It is a huge issue for Australia and for its libraries. For our organisations, a key question for the future should be: how can we provide fulfilling jobs for people who also have major responsibilities away from work? Leaders, including the federal Treasurer, have identified higher labour participation rates as a critical goal in seeking better national productivity. Practically, that means Australia must confront the problem of an ageing workforce by encouraging younger parents to re-enter the workforce sooner and by making jobs more attractive for older workers, who might otherwise retire. To do that successfully, more employers will have to start listening to people's real needs — and soon. For if flexibility in many enterprises continues to mean only longer working hours and reduced conditions, skill shortages will pose more and more problems.

As the House of Representatives Family and Human Services Committee begins an investigation into work/family balance, the results of Australia's only established survey on the subject make interesting reading. Conducted since 1997 by MWLB International and CCH Australia, this analysis reviews initiatives and results across a diverse range of Australian workplaces. Their 2005 report — from the ninth annual survey — shows yet again how often the divide between rhetoric and reality in labour market discourse is a chasm. At a time when work and family policy has never been so widely discussed, what are we to make of the clear finding that provision of work/life options has declined across the board in the past year? On six measures of available flexibility choices, only maternity leave has remained largely unchanged. The rest have gone backwards (see table below).

Overall, 37 per cent of staff presently enjoy some form of flexible work option, compared to 47 per cent a year earlier. The survey report expresses concern that 66 per cent of organisations say their efforts to offer better work/life balance

are hindered by senior managers who find it difficult to change their attitude to flexible working. This is especially disappointing when the same survey confirms the benefits of sound work and family policies. Compared to others, identified best practice organisations are found to do much better on a range of measures, including increased employee satisfaction, reduced absenteeism, lower staff turnover, and earlier and higher rates of return from parental leave.

Asking why progress has slowed, the survey cites failure to monitor performance and collect information as central issues. Just 26 per cent of participating enterprises have conducted an evaluation of work/life strategies and 54 per cent say inadequate data prevent development of a business case for strong work/life efforts. It is disturbing — and confusing — to note that only 18 per cent are measuring retention levels, despite the fact that 62 per cent say retention of staff is the prime motivation for work/life policies.

The report's conclusions are hardly surprising. Much more needs to be done, and done urgently. Crucially, employers should be making much greater effort to identify the needs of current staff and to adopt strategies that respond to their concerns. The survey clearly demonstrates that many employers simply do not understand what their employees want, which is hardly surprising if they are not asking them. The report says it is critical in this regard that detailed statistical and qualitative data be gathered urgently.

Are we likely to see more action on flexible work options any time soon? Reports like MWLB's make the need clear enough, as does the plethora of media coverage. Nobody can claim to be unaware of the issue. But optimism seems misplaced when proposals for statutory return to the 40-hour week appear at the very start of discussions on new approaches to Australia's workplace relations. This sounds much more like short-sighted policy for a labour market that is anything but family-friendly. ■

Availability of flexible options (% of organisations)

	Part-time work		Flexible start and finish times		Study leave		Paid parental leave		% of staff using options		Average % weeks paid maternity leave	
	2004	2005	2004	2005	2004	2005	2004	2005	2004	2005	2004	2005
Overall result	63	48	61	52	76	61	64	53	44	37	7	7
1-250 employees	53	40	63	55	69	53	50	34	48	39	5	4.5
251-1000 employees	66	51	60	51	79	68	63	57	41	39	6.5	7
Over 1000 employees	69	53	60	49	80	65	77	69	44	34	9	9

Source: MWLB International, *Work/life initiatives: the way ahead: report on the year 2005 survey*

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