

Australian Work and Life Index 2012

The Big Squeeze: Work, home and care in 2012

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Executive summary

The AWALI 2012 survey

The Australian Work and Life Index (AWALI) survey measures how work intersects with other life activities, as seen by a randomly selected representative group of 2,887 working Australians.

Alongside its usual assessment of work-life interference in Australia, the 2012 AWALI survey offers new insights on six particular themes:

- How women who work full-time are experiencing worsening work-life outcomes;
- How employees are experiencing high levels of work intensification;
- How employee requests for flexibility have changed since the *Fair Work Act 2009* created new rights to request flexibility for some workers;
- How men request flexibility much less frequently than women, and are much more likely to have their requests refused;
- How the length of parental leave relates to work-life outcomes;
- How working from home affects work-life outcomes.

AWALI 2012 also included questions on ethnicity/language background, education and training and the meaning of work; these findings will be reported later in 2012 in publications from the Centre for Work + Life.

Some things change, but work-life interference is persistent

AWALI 2012 is the fifth AWALI survey, with previous surveys carried out in 2007, 2008, 2009 and 2010.

In recent years a number of major events have influenced Australians' work, personal, family and community lives. The global financial crisis commenced in 2007/8 and international financial markets have experienced continuing instability. The *Fair Work Act 2009* introduced a number of changes to the regulation of work. These included a new net of National Employment Standards that incorporated a formal right for some workers to request flexibility or extended unpaid parental leave from 1 January 2010. A national system of paid parental leave came into effect in January 2011. At the same time, the Australian labour force has continued to evolve, with increasing participation of women, declining rates of participation amongst men, an aging workforce and a continuing shift in the composition of employment away from manufacturing and agriculture towards the services sector.

Amidst these changes, widespread work-life interference has remained persistent since 2007 and particular groups are consistently more affected:

- Around one quarter of the Australians surveyed report that work frequently (often or almost always) interferes with other life activities;
- Women's work-life outcomes are worse than men's when we take into account differences in work hours;
- Mothers have worse work-life outcomes than fathers, whether single or partnered;
- Managers and professionals have worse work-life interference than other occupations;

- Work-life outcomes are worse for those in female-dominated industries, and in jobs that involve interaction and service provision to others. These include retail, accommodation and food services and education and training, allowing for differences in work hours;
- Workers in the mining industry have the worst work-life outcomes, probably reflecting their long average working hours;
- Long hours and a poor fit between actual and preferred working hours are both associated with worse work-life outcomes;
- Most of those who work long hours would prefer not to.

Full-time women: things are getting worse

Women working full-time are the exception to the general pattern of consistent findings over recent years. Their work-life outcomes have become worse on a range of indicators:

- Work-life interference for this group has increased from 2007 to 2012, whereas men's outcomes have remained steady;
- Full-time women's dissatisfaction with their work-life balance has risen (from 15.9 per cent in 2008 to 27.5 per cent in 2012) while men's has showed no change;
- Their experience of chronic time pressure has increased, with 68.6 per cent of full-time women often or almost always feeling rushed and pressed for time, up from 63.4 per cent in 2008 (with no change amongst full-time men);
- In 2012, the gap between full-time women's actual and preferred hours is the largest since 2007. On average they would prefer to work 8.7 hours a week less than they actually do;
- 41.8 per cent of mothers in full-time employment would prefer to work part-time – the largest proportion since 2007.

It is therefore unsurprising that issues like the pressures on working mothers and women cause vigorous public discussion. Women and mothers in full-time employment are hurting. The recent national and international debates on these themes - including the latest round in the US (Slaughter, 2012) and in Australia (ABC Radio National Breakfast: Panel 'Gender on the agenda', 5 July 2012; Kinchen, 2012) reflect the fact that many women are under pressure. The Australian policy environment has *adapted* to working women around the edges – modifying 'standard' employment practices, made in the image of men without care responsibilities, to provide part-time work and paid parental leave for example – but it has not fundamentally *transformed* to reflect the different life-time work and care patterns of most women. Women are stretched in light of this partial adaption which leaves them very busy on the work and home fronts.

Full-time women perceive that the pressures on them are increasing. The evidence points to continuing and increasing strains for working women, despite some policy advances. This raises some important challenges in a country that aims to increase women's workforce participation, sustain fertility and respond to the needs of an aging population. Each of these aims is likely to intensify care responsibilities, most of which will fall to women. Combining paid work and care is currently - and likely to remain - a struggle for the majority of women. Inflexible work arrangements, work intensification and unsupportive workplace cultures need to be addressed. Until then it is likely that Australian women's employment participation will continue to lag behind comparable industrialised countries, as will their capacity to realise the personal and financial benefits of engaging in quality, well-paid jobs over the life-cycle.

21st century women in a 20th century world of work

Recent decades have seen profound changes in the way that men and women engage in paid work. Two-thirds of Australians are now participating in the labour force (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2012a) and women's rate of participation has been increasing. Dual earner families are increasingly the norm, and the majority of sole-parents are engaged in paid work.

Yet despite these profound social changes, the male breadwinner / female caregiver model of the 20th century is alive and well in 21st century Australia and many workplace cultures are made in the image of the full-time, male worker unencumbered by care responsibilities. Australian women work around this image and the practices it embeds – while doing around twice as much caring and domestic work as men (Craig, 2005). Not surprisingly, women are much more likely to work part-time (69.5 per cent of part-timers are women and almost half of women work part-time) with implications for their life-time and retirement earnings, training and job quality. However, AWALI surveys show that part-time work is not a 'silver bullet' for work-life conflict, and neither is self-employment or casual work.

- Women working part-time report the same degree of chronic time pressure as men working full-time;
- The self-employed have the same levels of work-life interference as ordinary employees – whether male or female and whether differences in work hours are controlled for or not;
- Casual workers have no better work-life outcomes than permanent workers when we control for differences in working hours.

Working carers and work-life strain

It is well established that combining paid work with caring for children increases work-life demands and pressures - the ubiquitous 'struggle to juggle' that most parents (and mothers in particular) experience on a daily basis.

AWALI 2012 shows that work-life strains continue to be high for working mothers.

Sole mothers

- Work-life pressures are particularly high for sole mothers: controlling for their fewer paid work hours, their work-life strain is equivalent to that experienced by long hours' workers or those with a wide gap between their actual and preferred hours.

These issues are a cause for concern. Increasing work and training participation requirements for sole mothers may have unintended consequences: sole mothers experience high levels of work-life spillover, especially where incomes are low or precarious.

Work-life outcomes for those who care for the aged or those with a disability

AWALI 2012 compares the well-recognised work-life strains experienced by working parents (especially mothers) with those workers with other kinds of care responsibilities, finding:

- Around a fifth of both male and female respondents have 'other' care responsibilities (i.e. personally looked after or gave help or support to family members or friends with a long-term physical or mental illness or disability, or who had problems related to old age). The incidence of these responsibilities increases with age;
- Work-life interference is comparable for mothers and women who care for others (both have AWALI scores of 48);
- This suggests that policies (like the right to request flexible work arrangements) are likely to be as helpful for women with non-parental care responsibilities as for mothers;

- Women who combine care of children with other care responsibilities – the ‘sandwich’ generation - have worse work-life outcomes than any other categories (with AWALI scores of 54.2);
- Work-life interference is higher amongst fathers than for those men who care for others, and both are higher than amongst men without parenting or care responsibilities. However, all are lower than amongst equivalent women.

Work Intensity

Jobs that overload workers and create time pressures are not good for health. They increase the likelihood of stress, burnout and poor physical health, and negatively affect relationships with family and partners. AWALI 2012 included three measures of work intensification, including the frequency of working at high speed, tight deadlines and work overload, finding that work pressures affect between 30-40 per cent of the workforce often:

- 36.8 per cent of workers say they are working at very high speed for three quarters of their working time or more (40.2 per cent of women, 33.9 per cent of men);
- 40.6 per cent say they work to tight deadlines three-quarters of the time or more (38.7 per cent of women, 42.2 per cent of men);
- 31.7 per cent believe that they have too much work for one person to do (33.2 per cent of women, 30.3 per cent of men);
- Women are more likely to work at high speed for most of the time, and parents and sole-parents in particular, are most likely to report having to work at very high speed for most of their working time;
- These perceived rates of intensification are higher than in Europe using similar measures;
- Higher rates of work intensification – on all of the above measures – are associated with worse work-life interaction for both women and men.

These findings may well help explain why full-time women are experiencing worse work-life interference, more time stress and are becoming less satisfied with their work-life outcomes and more inclined to reduce their working hours. It is not just their full-time hours that contribute to work-life interference and time pressures, but the intensified work expected in each working hour.

The Right to Request Flexibility at Work

The Australian Government has recently introduced two reforms with the aim of better supporting parents to manage work and care. From 1 January 2010 as part of the National Employment Standards (NES) parents of pre-school children or children under 18 with a disability have a ‘right to request’ (RTR) flexibility from their employer. Secondly, a national system of Paid Parental Leave (PPL) is now available to parents of children born or adopted after 1 January 2011, providing 18 weeks of paid parental leave at the minimum wage to the primary carer. These initiatives are important supports for working parents. They are designed to help parents put together their jobs and caring responsibilities over the life cycle.

Results from AWALI 2009 showed that workers who ask for flexibility and get it, have lower work-life interference than those who would like flexibility and do not ask, or those who ask and do not get what they want (Skinner and Pocock, 2011). AWALI 2012 shows that:

Awareness of the RTR

- Many workers are unaware of the right to request flexibility: 26 months after its enactment only 30.2 per cent of those surveyed knew about the RTR. Awareness was particularly low amongst those eligible to make requests: only 23.5 per cent of mothers of pre-schoolers knew about their right (34.0 per cent of similar fathers);
- Awareness was higher amongst those from higher income households, in larger firms, in managerial and professional occupations and in the public sector;

Rate of request-making

- The rate of request-making has not increased in 2012 compared with 2009: in the 12 months to March 2012, 20.6 per cent of workers had made a request for a change in their work arrangements, just below the level of 22.4 per cent recorded in AWALI 2009. The new RTR has not been accompanied by a greater general inclination to request flexibility;
- Most of the decline in request-making is concentrated amongst full-time women whose rate of request-making has fallen from 26.4 per cent in 2009 to 20.3 per cent in 2012;
- It seems that fewer people are discontent with their work arrangements and seeking out flexibility in 2012: for example 55.1 per cent of full-time workers who had not requested flexibility were content with current work arrangements in 2012 compared with 44.9 per cent in 2009. Greater perceived economic uncertainty may be at work here, affecting full-timers' inclination to seek a change in work arrangements;
- However, a quarter of workers are not content with current arrangements but have not requested flexibility (a third of full-timers). We call these 'discontent non-requesters'. Many of these say that flexibility is simply not available to them (either because they are not convinced their employer will allow it, or their job does not allow it, or flexibility is simply not possible);

Who asks?

- Not surprisingly, patterns of request-making remain highly gendered. In 2012, 43.0 per cent of eligible women (mothers with pre-schoolers) made a flexibility request (47.8 per cent in 2009), compared to 19.8 per cent of similar fathers – up a little from 17.1 per cent in 2009;
- Many workers without children seek flexibility: 19.7 per cent of women without children asked for flexibility in 2012, and 16.0 per cent of similar men;

Why ask?

- Most requests are to meet childcare (more common amongst women) or study commitments (more common amongst men), and the majority relate to working time (working part-time or reduced hours);

Who gets it?

- The majority of requests are fully agreed by employers. This is comparable with outcomes in 2009 (61.9 per cent were agreed in 2012, compared with 68.8 per cent in 2009);

Does it help?

- As in 2009, having a request fully agreed is associated with lower work-life interference, compared to those who do not have their requests fully met.

These findings suggest that targeted information to those eligible for the RTR would be helpful.

It seems that a fifth of workers do not need a legal right to facilitate flexibility requests: they were asking for flexibility before the right came into law, and a similar proportion continue to do so. On the other hand 15 per cent of employees perceive that flexibility is simply not possible in their workplaces as things stand: they think it is not worth asking for this. It may be that a greater level of flexibility – especially for workers in inflexible workplaces – may require a stronger right to request flexibility, backed up by some means of external review when requests are refused. It may also be assisted by a wider set of policy interventions, including promulgation of positive practical examples and benefits of more flexible work provisions to meet employee needs.

Finally these findings show that many workers without children seek flexibility and would benefit by wider practical access to it.

Paid Parental Leave

The new national system of Paid Parental Leave is an important benefit for working parents. Analysis of AWALI 2012 shows that:

- The majority of respondents – 76.6 per cent – were aware of the national Paid Parental Leave provisions. Parents are more aware of these provisions than those without children;
- Amongst female respondents who took parental leave, the average period of leave was 18 weeks paid and 18 weeks unpaid;
- The longer the period of parental leave taken by mothers, the lower their rate of work-life interference and the association is slightly stronger for paid than unpaid leave.

Working from home: a double-edged sword?

Working from home is increasingly enabled by new technologies and growth in jobs where work can be completed away from the workplace. AWALI 2012 included a range of questions about working from home, finding:

Who works at home?

- 16 per cent of respondents work at home on a regular basis, with little difference by gender, parenting status or work hours;
- Taking work home on an irregular basis is more common, with 40 per cent of workers reporting this (some workers did both). Parents are more likely to do this, as are part-time workers and women. Just over half of full-time women report taking work home;
- 44.2 per cent of respondents worked from home sometimes (whether regularly or not);

How many paid and unpaid hours are worked at home?

- On average respondents worked around 22.3 hours a month from home, about half paid (12.7 hours) and about half unpaid (11.8 hours). Thus those who work from home donate on average 17 days a year of unpaid labour to their workplace. There is very little variation in these hours between women and men, or those with and without children;

Why work from home?

- Many of those who work paid hours at home do so to be more productive (57.6 per cent gave this reason), while a similar proportion do so for flexibility (58.6 per cent) and a smaller proportion to catch up on work (48.2 per cent);
- Unpaid hours are motivated more by catching up on work: 70.5 per cent gave this reason, followed by 'having too much to do' (63.0 per cent). 62.3 per cent said they were motivated

to work unpaid hours because they enjoy their job. Just over a third believe that their unpaid hours will assist their career development;

A negative effect on work-life interference

- Those who take work home have worse work-life outcomes compared to those who do not work at home. This effect is concentrated amongst full-timers, and is common to both women and men;
- The worst work-life outcomes occur amongst those who work both paid and unpaid hours at home, followed by those who do unpaid work at home, and then those who work paid hours at home – but all are worse than those who do not take work home.

Hours of work

Men's levels of work-life interference have remained stable over the past five years. However, many men work long hours – most of them reluctantly - and experience high levels of work-life interference:

- 28.0 per cent of surveyed men work long hours (48+ hours a week) (9.7 per cent of women);
- There is little indication that these long hours are worked by choice: most men working long hours (72.0 per cent) would prefer to work at least half a day less;
- Fathers are the group most likely to prefer to work at least half a day less – half say they would like to do so.

AWALI surveys also reveal a strong and consistent preference for shorter hours amongst many working Australians.

Size of firm

AWALI 2012 includes data on size of firm.

- Workers in larger firms have higher work-life interference than those in smaller firms. This may reflect the larger proportion of managers and professionals in larger firms given that these occupations have worse work-life interference than others.

Getting more work out of Australian workers?

At a time where policy continues to focus on the need to increase the supply of labour, the risk of reduced hours from workers already in the labour market is of concern. AWALI 2012 shows that most Australian workers feel that they are giving sufficient or too much time to paid work. This is especially the case for men and women working full-time, and those working longer hours in particular. Part-time work provides a better work hours' fit for women, but increases the risk of under-employment, relative to preferences, especially amongst men. Parenting responsibilities also increase the likelihood of a poor fit between actual and preferred hours for men, as they are less likely than women to work part-time when they have children.

AWALI 2012 survey shows that mechanisms that help workers – both men and women – get the hours they prefer are important. Work-life interference is high amongst those working long hours, or more than they would like and those who do not get flexibility when they request it. Longer hours are particularly a problem for fathers, with many having a significant gap between their usual and preferred hours. As in previous years, most workers working long hours want to work less (taking account of the effect on their pay packets) but many appear to have difficulty reducing their hours.

The Big Squeeze

AWALI data has now been collected five times since 2007, and there has been little positive change in Australians' work-life outcomes on average over this time. Indeed there is firm evidence that pressures are mounting on women who work full-time. Many workers would like more flexibility to vary their hours and to avoid working long hours. A quarter experience frequent negative spillover from work into life beyond their jobs – and many of these are not parents. Many experience job overload and high levels of work intensification.

Over the past five years some significant reforms that provide additional supports and entitlements to parents have been introduced. These are important steps in the right direction and they are associated with measurable positive effects. They include the right for many parents to request flexibility or extended unpaid parental leave, and an 18 week paid parental leave scheme. Where they are utilised, the right to request flexibility and parental leave make an important positive difference: for example, they are associated with lower rates of negative work-life interference.

However, many parents are unaware that they have a right to request flexibility, and – after its first two years of existence – it has not been associated with an increase in the rate of request making. To date, the new right has not served as a 'climate shifter'. As occurred before the RTR was introduced, around a fifth of workers request flexibility and most of them are women and mothers. The majority of requesters get what they ask for and they have not needed a formal right to ask for the flexibility they want.

In many workplaces getting flexibility is difficult especially where standard working arrangements are dominant, the climate is hostile to flexibility, or workers' anticipate a stigma arising from a request for flexibility. Improving things will require basic knowledge of rights to request, and workers' confidence that their request will be treated seriously and not result in negative consequences. Without effective redress, a right to request is not much help in workplaces where cultures are resistant and arbitrary refusal is likely.

Enabling men to work more flexibly – as many would like to – requires a change in workplace practices in many workplaces. Despite being discontent with their current work arrangements, many do not ask, and they are much more likely to be refused than women. A firmer, more widely understood right would be of particular assistance to men.

Further, many people beyond those who are eligible to request flexibility would like to request changes in their work arrangements. Carers of the aged or those with disabilities have the same levels of work-life interference as parents of young children. Beyond these, many people *without* caring responsibilities are not happy with their current work arrangements and would like more flexibility, as is the case for many older workers.

Five policy amendments to the RTR are therefore likely to help remedy these difficulties:

1. wider knowledge of the right to request;
2. high levels of confidence that the RTR process will unfold fairly and that unreasonable refusals have some means of redress;
3. more support for men to make requests, and have them treated reasonably rather than being refused at higher rates;
4. greater efforts to change cultures and practices in workplaces that are unused to non-standard hours and work arrangements, and wider publicity to managers and leaders about the benefits of flexibility;
5. access to a RTR, and protection from unreasonable refusal, to more workers: preferably to all who seek flexibility, but at least to all carers.

Other countries have extended an initial RTR for parents to all carers. For example, the UK Government has recently committed to extend these provisions to all workers (UK Government Consultation on Modern Workplaces, May 2011).

More policy change and more action in workplaces is necessary to better enable workers to reconcile their jobs with the rest of their lives. Such action needs to extend beyond parents and carers of babies, young children or children with a disability – important as the needs of this group are. In a diverse workforce that is also aging, there is a pressing need for reform that extends flexibility to all workers, regardless of their life circumstances, as well as management and cultural change in workplaces to reduce long hours of work, reduce work intensification and mitigate negative work-life interference.

However, change needs to include but go beyond legislate rights to request – to affect workplace cultures, supervision and management practices and leadership, especially in workplaces that are inflexible at present. Addressing workload management, job design, supervisor practices and workplace norms will help ensure that work-life reconciliation has real operational meaning in workplaces where cultures are firmly fixed against doing things differently (Bailyn, 1997; Lewis, 2001).

The high rates of negative work-life interference for full-time women along with the relatively high rates amongst part-time women, create a case for more active discussion about the ‘double day’ experienced by working women. Women’s continuing responsibility for the bulk of domestic work and care – while long-recognised – continues to be a significant reason for women’s high levels of time pressure. Women’s capacity for greater labour market participation, alongside an inexhaustible capacity to care, cannot be easily assumed. The combination is already exacting high costs for women’s private lives, and these demands are likely to increase amidst an aging population. Increasing men’s involvement in caring and domestic work is an important part of the longer term solution.