

Engaging men in flexible working arrangements

Perspective Paper

Summary

Research shows that women, especially those with caring responsibilities, are more likely than men to both request and access flexible work.¹ As a result, it is often assumed that flexible work is more relevant to women. Organisational practices are often developed with this perspective in mind. However, workforce demographics and family models have changed (e.g. 63% of fathers with resident dependent children now have a partner in the paid workforce²) and this has led to increased work/family conflict for men.

Many men do not conform to the ideal 'full-time' worker model and instead have a range of priorities and aspirations, e.g. to be active and engaged fathers. Research also shows that workplace flexibility is a key driver of employment decisions and job performance for both women and men, including young men, male managers, men approaching retirement and especially younger fathers.³ Given the above, having greater access to flexible work will enable men to increase their engagement in caregiving and household work, which in turn will help to facilitate gender equality at work. When couples share caring and domestic tasks more equitably, women who have traditionally undertaken the majority of these responsibilities are better positioned to access quality employment opportunities. Yet it is a rare organisation indeed that has focussed on gender equality in caring or on the critical role that men accessing flexible work might play in this.

The current state of play

Gender equality in access to and utilisation of flexible work arrangements is a critical platform for enabling genuine choice for women and men in designing their work and caring arrangements, and in providing greater opportunities for men to choose to be more actively involved in caring.

Flexibility and seniority

There is a perception that flexible work arrangements are not possible or feasible for people in senior roles. A recent UK report has suggested that this perception is also shifting. UK jobs website, *Timewise Jobs*, published their 'Power Part Time List', featuring 50 people who are at the top of their professions and who work less than five days a week. While the majority on the list are women, six men are featured. They include Andi Britt, executive partner at IBM; Jake Hoban, senior IT executive at UBS; and Cameron Hepburn, executive director and co-founder of Climate Bridge finance company.¹ While this is encouraging, access to flexible work is still strongly gendered.

As outlined by the Diversity Council of Australia (DCA),⁴ significant changes have occurred in men's work and family/personal experiences over the past 30 to 40 years. This period has been characterised by increasing numbers of dual-earner families, with 54% of all couple families having both partners employed.⁵ Consequently, fathering and family expectations have intensified, and an increasing proportion of men no longer identify as the 'ideal worker' (i.e., a full-time, fully committed employee without personal or family commitments that impede their availability to work). In place of the traditional ideal worker/breadwinner role, men's identities, priorities and aspirations in relation to work and family/personal life have diversified. In tandem with this, men's (and particularly fathers') needs have also changed, but employers have not kept up with these changes, and as a consequence have been unresponsive to men's and fathers' needs.

Recent Australian research shows there are significant gender differences in the uptake of flexible work.⁶ Women are more likely to utilise part-time work, parental leave and other non-standard working patterns, resulting in increased gender inequality in access to quality work and promotions. Further, there are fewer opportunities for combining flexible

work (especially part-time work) with management and supervisory positions, which are traditionally dominated by men.⁷ The challenge facing employers is “to increase flexible work arrangements that do not condemn employees to low quality jobs and leave women on the ‘mommy track’ of jobs that lack quality and career opportunities”.⁸

A recent survey of 2,887 Australian workers provides strong evidence for the gendered nature of flexibility requests.⁹ The survey found that 24.2% of women had requested flexibility compared to 17.3% of men. Requests were also much less likely to be reported by those working in male-dominated industries and male-dominated jobs. A significant number of men (24.8%) did not request flexibility despite not being content with their current work arrangements, and having a preference to work fewer hours. Men (17.4%) were also much more likely than women (9.8%) to have their request for flexibility declined. Men who requested flexibility, and were fully granted this, reported lower levels of work-life interference than those who were either partially granted or had their request declined.

Overall, research findings suggest there may be significant individual and workplace barriers to men requesting and therefore utilising flexible work. Further, it seems that organisations could be ignoring opportunities to facilitate the engagement by men in flexible work.

Evidence based benefits for flexible working

Business benefits

Recruit from a broader talent pool of men and women

DCA research¹⁰ shows that flexibility is one of the top five employment drivers for each of five groups of male workers – men overall, young fathers, male managers, men under 35 without caring responsibilities and men who are over 55 years of age. For young fathers and men under 35 years of age, flexible work was even more critical, being the third most highly valued job characteristic.

The DCA research also found that a significant number of men desire greater access to flexible work than they currently experience and this is especially the case for young men. DCA found:

- 79% of young fathers would prefer to choose their start and finish times but only 41% actually currently do.
- 79% of young fathers prefer to work a compressed work-week but only 24% actually do.
- 56% of young fathers would prefer to work part of their regular hours at home while only 13% actually do.
- Overall, men’s preferred forms of flexible work included increased opportunities to choose their start and finish times (64%), work a compressed week (56%), work some regular hours at home (34%), and work part-time (20%).

Increasing men’s use of flexible work and their active involvement in caring also increases opportunities for women to engage more fully in the workforce. This can result in businesses having access to a broader talent pool, and an overall increase in national productivity.¹¹

Increased employee engagement and discretionary effort

Research shows that when men do not have flexibility in their jobs they find it more difficult to simultaneously manage the demands of their work and personal/family lives.¹² Negative outcomes of this include decreased job satisfaction, increased turnover intentions and declining job engagement. Men who are struggling to balance work and family lives may be less likely to contribute their discretionary effort to achieve business objectives.

Increased performance and productivity

While it is a challenge to conduct research to establish causal links between men’s utilisation of flexible work and either job performance or productivity, several studies show a link or indicate that a link can be implied.

Work performance. Flexibility has been shown to contribute to improved work performance. For instance:

- Schedule flexibility (flexible start and finish times) for both women and men reduces work/family conflict and provides better work/life balance which has a positive impact on self-ratings of both work and family performance and satisfaction.¹³
- High performers set work boundaries. A study of 60 men employed in a prestigious consulting firm identified that men who shared a high commitment to work but bounded their availability to work (e.g., by being home at night to have family meals, not working on weekends etc.), were in fact the highest performers based on independently obtained performance evaluation data.¹⁴

Dealing with work overload. Workload management can be enhanced by flexible work. For instance:

- Fathers who have more flexible working options are less troubled by stress and have a higher sense of purpose and well-being.¹⁵
- Fathers who work flexibly, compared to those who don't, have a better work-life balance and are able to deal with work overload more effectively.¹⁶
- Men who reported they had the flexibility they needed in their jobs were better able to juggle the demands of work and family and experienced less stress and burnout.¹⁷

Improved organisational performance. When an organisation doesn't formally enable flexible working arrangements, it can have a negative impact on performance. In a study of men employed in an auto parts plant, it was found that without formal flexible working arrangements in place, active fathers engaged in independent actions that can result in lower levels of productivity (e.g. pretending they had been involved in an accident outside of work) or placing the father's job at risk (e.g. by sabotaging production machinery to enable them to leave work to attend a child's activity).¹⁸

Active fathers in the study would often work around the employer's lack of flexibility using a variety of informal approaches, including making ad hoc arrangements with a sympathetic supervisor and having co-workers cover for their absences.

Facilitating a more equitable and less gendered division of labour at home also has direct relevance for organisations, as it enables women to increase their workforce participation and engagement.

Minimising absenteeism. Research found that when men working irregular working hours gained control over their working time, i.e. changed to a regulated flexible schedule or had complete flexibility in their work schedule, they had lower levels of self-reported absences for illness.¹⁹

Reduced turnover of male employees. Lack of flexibility was reported by 18% of men as a prime reason they had seriously considered leaving their organisation in the previous six months. Young fathers and men under 35 years of age without caring responsibilities were much more likely to indicate this – 37% and 29% respectively.²⁰ This represents a potential risk to organisations in terms of loss of talent and corporate knowledge, as well as direct financial costs. A U.S. survey of 963 working fathers in Fortune 500 companies found that fathers who worked in a family supportive work environment had higher job and career satisfaction, and were less likely to indicate they intended to resign from their current employer.²¹

Benefits for individuals, relationships and families

While direct, tangible business benefits can be generated from men working flexibly, indirect business benefits can also be identified through improving outcomes for men and their families, and the community.

There is a growing body of research that focuses on fatherhood, flexibility, parental leave and paternity leave.²² Flexible work provides the opportunity for men to be more engaged in both caregiving and parenting. A significant number of men are seeking to be active fathers. Important questions then are: what impact does active fathering have and should this be of concern to organisations? Data suggests that the role of men as fathers should be of interest to organisations. Research findings show that when men are actively involved in fatherhood, several positive outcomes are found.²³

Enhance family relationships

Studies have revealed a positive relationship between men who access flexible work and improved family relationships.²⁴ Fathers also experience less work/family conflict when they work in a family-supportive organisational culture.²⁵

Active fathering and psychological well-being

Fathers' active engagement in parenting, which is enabled by flexible work and careers, has a positive impact on their psychological well-being,²⁶ as well as that of their partners,²⁷ and on the quality of marital and couple relationships. Father involvement has also been found to be linked both with the psychological well-being and self-esteem of mothers, and also with their improved success in the labour market of mothers.²⁸

Active fathering and equitable division of labour

Engaged fathering can change the gendered division of labour, particularly for childcare. When fathers are able to experience their partners' everyday lives at first hand, they are likely to develop a greater recognition of the unpaid work often done by women.²⁹ One study found an association between fathers taking four weeks of parental leave and subsequently reduced levels of couple conflict over housework, along with greater equality in the division of household tasks.³⁰

Strategies and options for addressing the issues

There are a number of avenues open to organisations who want to improve men's access to flexibility in work. Building a focus on men and flexibility into the flexible work framework will help to encourage and support men to access flexible working arrangements, with its associated benefits to organisations, individuals, and the community.

Recognise the diversity amongst men

Organisations need to recognise diversity of men's work, life-stage and lifestyle (e.g. both older and younger men seeking flexible work for lifestyle reasons), cultural background, sexual orientation and so on. Understanding this diversity is critical to effectively respond to men's workplace needs, as well as being able to engage them in the flexibility journey.

Build a focus on men and flexibility into your flexible work framework

Options include:

- *Flexibility reframed*: Emphasise the business case for men to engage in flexible work and broaden the definition of flexibility to include full-time work, self-managed flexibility, and formal and informal flexible work.
- *Culture*: Foster an organisational culture that is supportive of flexible work for men. Effective strategies might be to pro-actively encourage men to engage in flexible work and to provide opportunities for men to share their experiences of flexible work. Flexible work and careers need to be promoted as legitimate and available to all employees, rather than simply the domain of mothers with young children, and those working at lower levels and in lower paid roles.
- *Leadership*: Develop and publicise senior male role models of flexible work to break the perception that senior roles equal no flexibility. Take a first step by engaging senior leadership teams in an enquiry process to explore a few key themes:
 - *Why flexibility for men?* What is our business case for a focus on men and flexibility?
 - *What is the current situation?* Do men value flexible work in our organisation? To what extent do they utilise it and in what forms? What is the diversity amongst men in terms of valuing and utilising flexible work?
 - *What needs to change?* How can men's engagement in flexible work be increased and thus move flexible work from the margins to the mainstream?
- *New model of success*: Address men's reluctance to use flexible work for fear of career penalties by designing new roles with flexibility as the standard, integrating flexibility into senior roles and illustrating 'success stories'.
- *Team focus*: Recognise that success in integrating flexible work hinges on the relationship between individuals and their teams, and build flexibility into standard team-based operating procedures.
- *Paternity leave*: Review current policies and provide men with greater access to parental and paternity leave. While many organisations have increased the options for women to take maternity and parental leave, few have adopted a gender equality framework for these leave provisions. This lack of gender equality in parental leave is also evident in the national paid parental leave scheme.
- *Fatherhood*: use fatherhood as an effective starting point to integrate flexibility and reduce gender differences in accessing flexible work. Focus on a long-term approach beyond parental leave. Take account of:
 - fatherhood is relevant for a majority of men – around 80% of men will become fathers during their lifetime.³¹ Most men (and women) will have children in their early 30s when they are also in the key years of their experience of paid employment³²
 - access to flexible work is particularly critical for this demographic group for the achievement of gender equality in work and caring
 - the transition to fatherhood presents a key opportunity for organisations to engage men in accessing flexible work.
- Consider the contribution men and fathers make to individual, family and social well-being, and the indirect benefit this will have on business performance.
- Recognise that gender equality at work depends in part on gender equality at home. Consider how your organisation's communication strategies around flexibility can validate men increasing their overall engagement in caregiving and household work.

Conclusion

A significant number of men want flexible work but their uptake is moderate at best, and most commonly involves 'tinkering' with flexibility or accessing informal rather than formal flexible work. Yet, organisations, men and their families, and women's experience of gender equality at home and at work, can benefit from men's higher utilisation of flexible work. Engaging men around flexibility is not necessarily about designing and implementing discrete programs or initiatives for men at work. While such initiatives certainly have a place, engaging men is about broadening the approach and integrating a focus on men and flexibility across existing initiatives and strategies relating to flexibility and cultural change, leadership commitment and capability development, high performing teams and career development.

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- ¹ Data generally show that there are few gender differences in access to flexible work but that women are much more likely to utilise “formal” flexibility such as part-time work, and men are much more likely to utilize “informal” flexibility such as flexible start and end times; Skinner, N, Pocock, B (2011) ‘Flexibility and work-life interference’, *Journal of Industrial Relations*, vol. 53 (1): pp. 65–82; Skinner, N, Hutchinson, C, Pocock, B, (2012) *The big squeeze: Work, home and care in 2012*, University of South Australia: Centre for Work + Life: Adelaide; Skinner, N, Pocock, B (2011) ‘Flexibility and work-life interference’, *Journal of Industrial Relations*, vol. 53 (1): pp. 65–82.
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