



DIVERSITY  
COUNCIL  
AUSTRALIA



# Men Get Flexible!

Mainstreaming Flexible  
Work in Australian Business

Creating quality flexible work and  
careers as standard business practice  
in Australian workplaces.

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Written by Dr Graeme Russell and Dr Jane O'Leary

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Diversity Council Australia Limited  
Level 25, 133 Castlereagh St, Sydney, NSW, 2000  
Phone: 02 9035 2852

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“ We are very pleased to be partnering with Diversity Council Australia. Flexibility at work has been a key area of focus for us and a source of competitive advantage.

This important companion report to DCA's '*Get Flexible*' research acknowledges the pivotal role men play in promoting flexibility in the workplace. It recognises that men and women have similar requirements when it comes to working flexibly.

At Westpac Group we know flexibility is a key ingredient for creating the agile and diverse workplace needed to both serve our customers and ensure the wellbeing of our employees.

Flexibility of work schedule, workplace and work design will be critical success factors for the future of Australian workplaces. Dynamic organisations will be the leaders of this change. ”

**GAIL KELLY,**  
MANAGING DIRECTOR  
AND CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER



“ One of the top reasons that employees work at Stockland is the ability to uphold personal responsibilities, whilst continuing to develop a successful career with us. We know that offering a flexible working environment is central to this, and it helps us to attract and retain the best talent. With our ongoing commitment to diversity, flexibility and Equal Employment Opportunity, we are proud to be involved in this forward-thinking project. ”

**MICHAEL ROSMARIN,**  
GROUP EXECUTIVE STRATEGY AND HR



“ At Origin, we recognise that flexibility can mean a range of arrangements for men and women and employees at different stages of their careers. Reports such as Diversity Council Australia’s *Men Get Flexible! Mainstreaming Flexible Work in Australian Business* play a crucial role in broadening the flexible work discussion and helping companies develop inclusive and effective policies. ”

**GRANT KING,**  
MANAGING DIRECTOR

## Allens > < Linklaters

“ At Allens our aim is to create a flexible working environment that supports all employees to achieve both career and personal goals. Diversity Council Australia’s ‘*Men Get Flexible*’ research, broadens the flexibility discussion to review the needs of men. ”

**MICHAEL ROSE,**  
CHIEF EXECUTIVE PARTNER

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS



This project was conceived by DCA Chief Executive Officer, Nareen Young and developed in consultation with Dr Graeme Russell, formerly a Board Member DCA, DCA Research Director, Dr Jane O'Leary, DCA staff and (then) Westpac Manager, Head of Diversity and Flexibility, Rachel Slade.

The project benefited significantly from the intellectual and practitioner insights of the diversity executives in the corporate sponsors, including: Jane Counsel, Head of Diversity and Flexibility, and Belinda Abbott, Manager Diversity and Flexibility, Westpac; Trevor Childs, (then) General Manager Employee Relations, and Julie Tanner, Senior Manager, Organisational Development & Diversity, Stockland; Catherine McNair, (then) National Manager Diversity and Inclusion and Catherine Bolch, Head of Diversity and Engagement, Origin; and Dr Jacqui Abbott, Head of Flexibility and Diversity, Allens.

DCA would like to thank the Westpac Group, Stockland, Origin and Allens, the key sponsors of this project. Without their support, this project would not have been realised.

Their partnership in this project clearly demonstrates their leadership and commitment to mainstreaming flexibility in Australian workplaces.

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



**Men Get Flexible! Mainstreaming Flexible Work in Australian Business** is a partnership research initiative between Diversity Council Australia (DCA) and its members, the Westpac Group, Stockland, Origin Energy and Allens.

DCA has released this report as a companion to its *Get Flexible!* report, which outlined how Australian organisations can ‘get flexible’ and mainstream quality flexible work and careers in their own workplaces. That report identified 11 critical strategies for moving flexible work and careers from the margins to the mainstream, and demonstrated that when organisations embark on such a journey they position themselves to be sustainable and adaptable to change, facilitate gender equality, attract and retain talent and improve workplace productivity.

This follow-on report, *Men Get Flexible!*, provides a framework for action for organisations seeking to mainstream flexibility through focusing on the issue of ‘men and flexibility.’ It recognises ‘men and flexibility’ constitutes an important enabler of mainstreaming flexibility in Australian business, through its capacity to assist organisations:

- Promote flexible work and careers as legitimate for and available to all, rather than merely the domain of mothers with young children, working at lower levels and in lower paid roles;
- Encourage leaders, who are disproportionately men, to lead ‘the charge’ in making flexible work and careers standard business practice; and
- Make and communicate a broader business case for mainstreaming flexibility, which sees the connection between flexibility for men and organisational productivity and sustainability.

A supplementary driver for this report has been the recent heightened global interest in men’s role in leading organisational change around (gender) diversity, gender equality and flexibility. If men are to be charged with changing the world when it comes to diversity, gender equality and flexibility it is important that considered attention be brought to what this means in principle and practice for organisations. We believe this report contributes to this objective.

With the above in mind, DCA and project sponsors felt it critical to investigate and report on how Australian organisations can mainstream quality flexible work and careers in their own workplaces through focusing on men and flexibility.

## **Our approach**

Our approach in this report was to investigate and report on the following three key questions:

- *Why flexibility for men?* What is the evidence base for a focus on men and flexibility?
- *What is the current situation?* Do men value flexible work? To what extent do men utilise flexible work and in what forms?
- *What needs to change?* How can we increase men’s engagement in flexible work and thus help to move flexible work from the margins to the mainstream?

To respond to these key questions, we drew on three primary sources of evidence, these being: (i) academic and industry research on men and flexibility; (ii) previously unreported findings from DCA’s (2012) *Get Flexible!* project; and (iii) previously unreported findings from DCA’s (2010) *Working for the Future* project.

## Why men & flexibility?

Significant societal changes have occurred in men's work and family/personal experiences over the past 30 to 40 years, triggering amongst men a growing interest in, and need to, access quality flexible work. Such changes include:

- Increasing number of dual-earner families;
- Intensified fathering and family expectations;
- Increasing number of men transitioning to retirement; and
- An increasing proportion of men from all demographics not identifying as the 'ideal worker' (i.e. a full-time, fully committed employee without personal or family commitments that impact on their availability to work).

Our review of available research clearly demonstrates the return on investment that can be generated when organisations consider flexibility as it relates to men. We encourage organisations to take a broader social perspective than that customarily taken and recognise three major reasons why a focus on men and flexibility is critical:

1. *To directly sustain or improve business outcomes*, including in relation to recruiting from a broader talent pool of men, increasing performance and productivity and reducing turnover of male employees.
2. *To sustain or improve individual, relationship and family outcomes*, including in relation to reducing men's stress and burnout, enhancing family relationships and enabling active fathering which, in turn, enhances men and women's psychological well-being and gender equality both in domestic work and paid employment.
3. *To sustain or improve community well-being*.

## What is the current state-of-play?

DCA and other research shows that:

- A significant number of men desire greater access to flexible work than they currently experience and this is especially the case for young fathers.
- More men are interested in flextime, compressed work-weeks and working from home than in part-time work.
- More men tend to 'tinker' with flexible work (i.e. rely more on informal flextime and *ad hoc* working from home structured around full-time work). Very few currently work part-time (and very few desire this as an option), and very few take extended leave at the time of a child's birth or adoption.

## Engaging men around flexibility: An organisational framework for action

Our review of research revealed that a significant number of men want flexible work but their uptake is moderate only, and most commonly involves 'tinkering' with flexibility. Recognising that organisations and men and their families can benefit from men's higher utilisation of flexible work, we drew on key lessons learned from DCA and other research to develop a framework for action for organisations seeking to mainstream flexibility through focusing on men and flexibility. What should be evident from this framework is that 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.

Our framework for action is represented in a diagram (see Figure 4 on page 38) and encourages organisations to take action in the following seven key areas:

1. *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 flexibly, and formal, informal and dynamic flexible work.
2. *Diversity amongst men*: Structure work in multiple ways to respond to the diversity amongst men in terms of age, cultural background, life-stage, nature of work, sexual orientation, work-life priorities and so on.
3. *Culture*: Foster an organisational culture that is supportive of flexible work for men, pro-actively encouraging men to engage in flexible work and providing opportunities for men to share their experiences of flexible work.
4. *Leadership*: Develop and publicise senior male role models of flexible work to break the perception that senior roles = no flexibility.
5. *New model of success*: Address men's reluctance to use flexible work for fear of career penalties by designing new roles with flexibility as standard, integrating flexibility into senior roles and illustrating 'success stories'.
6. *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.
7. *Fatherhood*: Utilise fatherhood as an effective entry to integrate flexibility and reduce gender differences in accessing flexible work, and focus on a long-term approach beyond parental leave.

## **Recommendations**

*For organisations*

1. Articulate a business case for engaging men around flexibility in your organisation.
2. Get clear on what it would look and feel like if men in your organisation were engaged in flexible work and flexible careers.
3. Use the seven components of the 'Men Get Flexible' framework to engage men in the mainstreaming flexibility journey.
4. Take a first step by engaging senior leadership teams in an enquiry process similar to that used in this project.
  - *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 we increase men's engagement in flexible work and thus move flexible work from the margins to the mainstream?

5. Consider men's experiences of both accessing flexible work and careers AND leading organisational approaches to mainstreaming flexible work. While many men may be interested in accessing flexible work, not all will necessarily be in a leadership position that enables them to lead the 'flexibility charge.'
6. Develop a set of process and outcome indicators for, and measures, of men's effective engagement in flexible work and flexible careers.
7. Focus on men and flexibility as part of your organisation's strategy to mainstream flexibility, but be cautious about treating this as the silver bullet for delivering on your flexibility, diversity and gender equality objectives.
8. Take a bigger picture approach to the issue of men and flexibility, and consider the contribution men and fathers make to individual, family and social well-being. There is an abundance of research demonstrating the positive impact engaged fathering has on men themselves, women and children, and organisations can play a key role (in addition to government, community and families themselves) in facilitating this through making flexible work and careers standard business practice.
9. 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. Facilitating the more equitable and less gendered division of labour at home can have positive flow on consequences for your organisation, as women are freed up to increase their participation in and engagement with the workplace.

#### *Change the business and community debate*

1. Design a business and community awareness campaign to:
  - Reframe the debate about flexible work and flexible careers so that it focuses on *mutually beneficial* flexibility for employers and employees. This should engage directly with the evidence that links mainstreamed flexibility and: (i) business performance, productivity and sustainability, and (ii) workforce well-being and sustainability (see DCA's *Get Flexible!* report).
  - Focus on the community benefits of flexibility in terms of personal and family well-being, as well as the community risks and costs associated with not mainstreaming flexibility.
  - Use the framework for organisational action to identify organisations that are effectively engaging men in their mainstreaming flexibility journey, and publicise these.
  - Challenge gender-based societal and organisational expectations and norms about care-giving, household responsibilities and domestic organisation, with a view to encouraging men to increase their overall engagement in these areas and thus address the persistent gendered division of labour in Australian families. This is not solely the responsibility of workplaces and requires a shift in thinking across the community more broadly.
2. Actively engage in debates with employer organisations, unions and governments to show how flexible work based on mutuality and made available to both men and women can and will contribute to increased productivity and to the success of the Australian economy.