



Building access to high quality, flexible work

Research clearly demonstrates the benefits of high-quality flexible work for prosperous economies, businesses, and communities. Employers in all industries need access to a skilled and diverse workforce; governments can drive employment and economic growth by encouraging more people to participate in paid work; and families and communities need flexibility to care and to thrive.

What is the problem, and for whom?

An undersupply of good flexible jobs

Demand for high-quality flexible working has outstripped supply for many years, with key workforce groups, including those with care responsibilities and young professionals, showing a very strong interest in these arrangements (Chung and van der Lippe 2020). The forced experiment of remote work during the Covid-19 pandemic, especially working from home, saw many employees who had previously little access to this form of flexibility suddenly thrust into a new way of working. Recent government and industry research suggests that demand for workplace flexibility will increase after the pandemic recedes (Productivity Commission 2021, Chief Executive Women 2021).

Researchers have identified several reasons for the undersupply of good flexible jobs including institutional and regulatory mismatches, industry norms and practices, organisational policy and workplace culture (Tomlinson *et al.* 2018, Cooper and Baird 2015). However, employers must prepare themselves for a workforce which will be less amenable to having their requests for more control over when and where they work refused.

A proliferation of 'bad' flexible jobs

By comparison, lower quality flexible jobs - where employees are engaged on insecure contracts, earning low pay, and with poor access to career development - proliferate across the Australian and global labour force (Birch & Preston 2021, Rubery *et al.* 2019).

Workers employed in these jobs have little control over their work schedules and their place of work. These workers, largely employed in frontline roles, were the first to lose their jobs during the recent crisis (Foley and Cooper 2021).

A gendered 'flexibility stigma'

Access to quality flexible working arrangements is highly gendered. Women are more likely to work in jobs with non-standard hours and to work at least part of their week remotely than are men (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2021). The gendered dynamics of care mean that women, mostly mothers, perform the lion's share of unpaid work at home, a phenomenon that has amplified through the pandemic (Cooper and Mosseri 2020). This constrains mothers' capacity to engage in paid employment and, because of the undersupply of good flexible working options, they often they 'trade down' from higher paid jobs.

In a world where flexible work is still considered an offence to the norm of the 'ideal' and committed worker, this stigmatises them, lessens earnings across the life course and puts a brake on career progression (Cech and Blair-Loy 2014). Men are far less likely than women to request flexible working arrangements than are women, and if they do, they are more likely refused and punished (Skinner *et al.* 2015). To remove the gendered stigma of flexibility, researchers and industry equality advocates have argued for mainstreaming of flexibility and making it more widely available for all workforce groups (Roderick 2018, Cooper *et al.* 2020).

Where to next with flexible working?

Many businesses are considering adopting a hybrid model, combining remote and on-site work, as the pandemic recedes. Workforce surveys in Australia and abroad show that more men than women intend to return to working primarily in the office.

It is possible that this might translate to entrenched and exacerbated gender inequality, especially considering the gendered unpaid work gap (Foley and Cooper 2021). To avoid these pitfalls, gender equality must be purposefully designed into flexible work policies and future working models.



What can stakeholders do?

To successfully embed high quality flexibility into our workplaces and labour market, it is important to consider its alignment with other workplace policies and organisational culture, to design for equitable access and to monitor outcomes.

Action might include:

- Understand the needs of all employees (men and women, parents, carers and others) across the life course and on a disaggregated basis;
- Consider the systems needs and which other policies, such as performance management and career advancement, may require changes;
- Understand the skills and capabilities needed by key organisational stakeholders (middle and line managers, employees, client) to successfully embed flexibility in practice

To find out more, visit: sydney.edu.au/gewl

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