

Governing work-life intersections in Australia over the life course: policy and prospects

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the current situation of Australians as they put together their work and larger lives, under a particular policy regime. It reviews current work and life outcomes for Australians arising from a recent survey, Australian Work and Life Index (AWALI). The paper argues that an ethic of care needs to accompany Australia's well developed ethic of work, and that new arrangements are necessary to govern their simultaneous realization, drawing particularly on some recent proposals put forward by the author and the larger group, *The Work And Family Policy Roundtable*.

Introduction

The latest Census data confirm Australia as a place of change: change in our patterns of paid work, in unpaid work, and in our households. Our experiences within these changes are governed by a range of factors:

- the internal, psychological governance of our expectations, aspirations and lived cultures of 'worker', 'parent', 'manager' and so on;
- the institutions which govern our lives at work and around work (including labour law and its institutions of enforcement, workplaces, transport systems);
- and the institutions which govern our households and communities, including care arrangements and supports, the family, various laws, and gendered household cultures and practices.

In this paper I want to concentrate on the outcomes of some of these institutional arrangements for workers in particular, along with their households, reflecting on some ways in which better policy settings at work and in society can result in better outcomes. In doing so I would like to discuss

- the conceptualisation of work and life issue;
- the state of work and life in Australia;
- and thirdly, the public policy challenges that exist.

I am drawing on two recent papers (which are on the Centre for Work + Life's web site):

1. *Work, life and time: The Australian Work and Life Index 2007* (released 27th June 2007)
2. *The Work + Family Policy Roundtable Benchmarks* released Monday 9th July.

This means this paper has several authors, and relies on the work of others, including Dr Natalie Skinner, Dr Philippa Williams, Dr Jude Elton from the Centre for work + Life, Dr Elizabeth Hill from the University of Sydney along with the other members of the Work + Family Policy Roundtable - not least, Professor Bettina Cass.

1. Conceiving of work and life

Our understanding of the interaction between work and life has become more sophisticated over the course of the past twenty years. Analysts increasingly apply a life-course approach, and better data is being collected in a range of countries. However, the discussion is marked by some conceptual grey areas.

Firstly, it is helpful to define what we mean by ‘work’ and ‘life’ and consider their relationship with work and family. I define work as paid work and life as the activities outside paid work including household activities and those with family, friends and community including care activities and voluntary activity. This definition subsumes ‘family’ activities within the definition of ‘life’ activities, so that work-life policy discussion subsumes the very significant field of ‘work and family’ policy. I do this because for many people without their own children or living in any familiar form of nuclear family, work-life issues are having important effects, not least upon their steps towards family formation and their social fabric. A life-cycle approach demands a broader consideration of the interaction of work with life outside work and outside family, beyond the years of direct family formation and child-rearing, if it is to be broadly useful to social policy analysts.

Secondly, it is important to consider the scope of work-life issues which some suggest are narrowly about time and thus particularly about the ‘fit’ of working time to time for life and activities outside work. (see for example Ungerson & Yeandle 2005 who make this argument). This is certainly an important aspect of work and life, but it does not capture the full interaction. Work-life issues are broader and deeper than work consuming more of our time (although growth in the average length of the working week for full-time Australians over the past thirty years certainly makes this important). Some aspects of work have effects beyond working hours: for example, demanding jobs can affect health and mental and emotional well-being. Indeed it is this kind of spillover from the nature of parents’ jobs that many children notice (see for example, Galinsky 2000 and Pocock 2006). Children in Galinsky’s US study were often very alert to ‘the level of stress and exhaustion that parents bring home from work’ – effects that are created not only by the hours of work but also its conditions (Galinsky 2005, p 229). In this light, work-life discussion should not focus only upon *time* aspects of work-life interaction, but upon *both time and other general forms of interference*.

Finally, how should we think about work-life? Are they distinct spheres that can be held in balance? This is an important question. It lies at the heart of the common question: how can I get the balance right – as a mother, a worker, a manager? This question implies a frame – to use George Lakoff’s language - which places the individual ‘coper’ at the fulcrum of ‘getting it right’.

As Lakoff says, dominant frames are very powerful: ‘People think in frames... To be accepted, the truth must fit people’s frame. If the facts do not fit a frame, the frame stays and the facts bounce off’ (2007: 17) and there is plenty of neuroscience and political evidence to support his argument. Even as individual women struggle in daily life to ‘get a balance’, even as they hear from other women and so many self-help books that getting a balance is pretty hard for many people, they still frame the problem as one they must get right individually, through their personal efforts.

This frame has powerful force, partly because it is partly true. What the individual does – their hours of work, their material aspirations, their patterns of thinking – affects their experiences of work and life. What is more, many individuals cannot do very much about larger public policy settings so they concentrate, very sensibly, on what they *can* control.

The concept of balance is not helpful given its implication that at the centre of such balance exists a clever or lucky individual who managed to keep things 'in balance'. This denies the complex range of actors and forces at work in constructing work-life outcomes.

SLIDE

The dominant metaphor of 'balance' over-states their place in the work-life picture. The metaphor of the juggle is not much better. While these are the dominant discursive metaphors, discussions with people about their life and the complex interactions of work and life beyond work do not support the notion of balance and independent spheres. I have found the collision metaphor more accurate.

Work and life are not dichotomies but interactive fields, with spillover between them. The boundaries between work and life are not closed but porous. This porosity is at once *spatial* (with work increasingly undertaken away from the workplace, in the car, on the train, in the home and walking down the street or over food), *temporal* (with work and care undertaken at the same time), and *interactive* (with the effects of one sphere affecting the other). For these reasons the term interaction seems superior to 'fit' (given the latter's implications that the two spheres of life sit alongside each other). I agree with Halpern and Murphy when they reject the balance, juggling and separate spheres metaphors and point to the positive (as well as negative) interactive nature of work and life:

Work and family are not a zero-sum game. Although there are reasonable limits to all activities, there are many benefits that accrue to people who both work and have families and other out-of-work life activities. It is time to change the metaphor (Halpern & Murphy 2005, p 3).

At the huge Happiness conference in Sydney a couple of weeks back I was asked by Wendy Morrison, Director of the Australian Human Resources Institute 'Isn't it possible to find balance even in very demanding jobs – look at St George's CEO, Gail Kelly who has managed it?'

Gail Kelly heads up a very large company with a residential loan book of over \$62 billion (MPA Issue 5.3, p 52). The company is implementing some very important work and family initiatives, including 13 weeks paid maternity leave, the chance to purchase extra leave and career breaks, opportunities for part-time work on return from parental leave flexible working hours for older workers and, most recently, 12 months unpaid leave for grandparents.

Gail Kelly is often held up as an icon of work-life success for women (most recently in *Charter*, an industry magazine for accountants). They said 'Since she has been at the helm, [St George] has experienced enormous growth...At the same time, Kelly has managed to raise four children [including triplets], keep herself in tremendous shape and ensure she is personally accessible to staff. Not surprisingly, she is reported to sleep just four hours per night' (MPA Issue 7.3, p 52).

They included a beautiful picture of her tremendous shape. SLIDE

Gail Kelly's income is reported to currently be \$4.4 million a year.

Compare her situation with that of Rosa, a sole parent Jude Elton interviewed in 2006 as part of a project we are conducting with the Brotherhood of St Laurence and the LHMU at our Centre.

SLIDE - ROSA

Rosa¹ is a sole parent living in Sydney who provides for herself and five dependent children by working two days a week as a room attendant at a luxury hotel. She was at that time being paid \$14.33 an hour. Rosa also works an additional 16 hours a week at a shop, where she was paid the below award rate of \$10.70 an hour, generating a yearly income of about \$30,000 including government allowances, rent subsidy and tax benefits. Rosa's work-life situation, with her long commute and high household demands, is poor. She is *time* as well as *income* poor.

Gail Kelly earns four times Rosa's annual salary every week.

For both Rosa and Gail, personal strategies matter, but they are unlikely to be the determining factor. Inequality defines their difference.

Professional workers like me and Gail rely on workers like Rosa to undertake their long commutes, daily juggles around multiple jobs and to live on their low pay to sustain our work-life 'balance'. We require a much more complex juggle of those we rely on than we undertake ourselves, with our white cars with their drivers, personal assistants, carers and cleaners all essential to our days.

Our over-developed 'work ethic' is embedded in a wider ethics of work – and beyond this in an ethic of care – to use Fiona Williams' (2001) and Joan Tronto's (1993) phrase. This ethic of care has its international and racial dimensions as many social scientists have discussed (Salazar Parrenas 2001). I understand that Gail Kelly raised her triplets in South Africa where the circuits of racialised paid work and care are underpinned by the wide use of low paid workers – perhaps more accurately described as servants than workers.

Notice that I am comparing women here. This discussion is highly gendered. It is no coincidence that most circuits of 'work-life' and its discussion are primarily built around and conducted by women. Men are often shadowy figures in this world. Every picture of the competently balancing woman should include a crowd of ghosts: men - employers, fathers, partners, sons, government ministers - who shape outcomes (for better or worse) for Gail and Rosa, but are all too rarely either visibly or conceptually, central. They should be. As should the army of helpers – cleaners, carers – who maintain and support. All these ghosts shape outcomes much more than the volumes of work-life tips that the self-help industry profitably sells women in bookshops and airports.

There are those who think that work-life issues are at the warm and fuzzy end of the human resources industry and policy spectrum - a long way from the hard edges of industrial law making. They are wrong: the rewriting of industrial law in Australia through *WorkChoices* is having important effects on work-life outcomes for many Australians, especially those on lower incomes and on the lower rungs of the labour market.

2. The state of work-life interaction in Australia

What is the state of work-life outcomes in Australia? Our Centre recently conducted a survey about work-life interaction in Australia. The AWALI 2007 sample is a national stratified random sample of 1435 Australian workers conducted through computer-

¹ Rosa is her real name, used at her request. Rosa was interviewed by Jude Elton, a Research Fellow at the Centre for Work and Life, on 18th May 2006 as part of the Low Paid Services Work Project coordinated by Dr Helen Masterman-Smith.

assisted telephone interviews over the two weekends of 23–25 March and 31 March to 1 April 2007. Newspoll conducted the survey².

The survey gives a good representation of the Australian labour force, and we have weighted our analysis by age, schooling, sex and geographic area to reflect population distributions.

I want to concentrate on four main findings which I think have rich policy implications: the overall patterns of work-life interaction, outcomes in relation to hours, and hours preferences and the effect of poor quality jobs on work-life outcomes.

1. Spillover from work to life, and from life to work: work takes more than life

We asked people about the frequency that work interferes with activities outside work, for time with family and friends, with community connections. And we asked them how frequently the reverse occurs: how often personal life interferes with work activities and restricts time spend at work. Confirming international findings, we find that work interferes with life much more than the other way around.

For example, seventy per cent of both women and men felt that personal life never or rarely interferes with work activities, compared to the 45.1 per cent of men and 50.2 per cent of women who felt that work never or rarely interferes with activities outside work.

It is interesting to note that workers often try to protect their workmates from the effects of stress on the home front: they talk of keeping it to themselves. However, they are not always so able to protect those they live with from stress arising from work: as a woman interviewed by *The Australian* put it when our results were published: ‘I’m an angel at work and a devil at home’. It seems that we work hard to perform ourselves as even-tempered at work, while spilling tensions on those we live with in the hope that our reserves of love and affection – will absorb what we cannot spill at work. This emotional and social ‘bank’ has its limits as many discover, and research amongst children shows (Galinsky 1999, Pocock 2006).

Work-to-community interaction is widespread

Public policy and academic debate about the relationship between work and life outside work tend to focus on the reconciliation of work and family, occasionally focusing on workers’ capacity to pursue personal and social interests. However, the impact of work on workers’ capacity to develop and maintain connections in their community is generally overlooked. These effects include the impact of work on social networks, social cohesion and social capital. Robert Putnam has drawn attention to these complex and multi-faceted concepts and the links between them (Putnam 2000). We asked respondents how often work interferes with their capacity to develop or maintain connections and friendships in their community as a broad indicator of the spillover of work onto the broader community fabric. Our findings on this issue indicate that work’s interference with community connections is surprisingly widespread.

Just under half the respondents (47.3%) feel that work interferes with their capacity to build and maintain community connections and friendships to some extent (sometimes, often or almost always).

² In accordance with usual Newspoll practice, the respondents were selected by means of a stratified random sample process. The concepts, methods, literature, measures and pre-tests underpinning AWALI are set out in Pocock, Williams & Skinner 2007, ‘The Australian Work and Life Index (AWALI): Concepts, Methodology & Rationale’ (<http://www.unisa.edu.au/hawkeinstitute/cwl/publications.asp>).

Table 1 Work interferes with community connections by gender and work status, employees, AWALI 2007 (%)

	Never/rarely	Sometimes	Often/almost always	Total
Men				
Full time	47.3	30.0	22.7	100
Part time	74.7	17.1*	8.2*	100
Total	51.2	28.1	20.7	100
Women				
Full time	48.9	26.2	24.9	100
Part time	61.5	30.9	7.5	100
Total	54.6	28.4	17.0	100
All				
Full time	47.8	28.7	23.5	100
Part time	65.2	27.0	7.7	100
Total	52.7	28.3	19.0	100

Note. Data weighted by Australian Bureau of Statistics data on age, highest level of schooling completed, sex and area. *Estimate not reliable. Hours usually worked per week used to categorise full-time (35 or more hours) and part-time (34 or less) work status. Table excludes self-employed persons.

Feeling rushed or pressed for time: women feel it most

Over half the respondents report frequently (often or almost always) feeling rushed or pressed for time (52.5%). Women report more frequent feelings of time pressure (55.6%) than men (49.9%). Given that women are more likely to work part-time and that part-timers overall are less often rushed or pressed for time, this effect for women is pronounced. Working part-time offers men more relief from time pressure than it does women. Overall, women working full-time are most likely to experience high levels of time pressure in their daily lives.

Table 2 Rushed or pressed for time by gender and work status, employees, AWALI 2007 (%)

	Never/rarely	Sometimes	Often/almost always	Total
Men				
Full-time	17.0	29.8	53.2	100
Part-time	34.0	35.4	30.6	100
Total	19.4	30.6	49.9	100
Women				
Full-time	8.2	32.4	59.4	100
Part-time	15.8	33.1	51.0	100
Total	11.6	32.7	55.6	100
All				
Full-time	14.0	30.7	55.3	100
Part-time	21.0	33.8	45.3	100
Total	15.9	31.6	52.5	100

Note. Data weighted by Australian Bureau of Statistics data on age, highest level of schooling completed, sex and area. Hours usually worked per week used to categorise full-time (35 or more hours) and part-time (34 or less) work status. Table excludes self-employed persons.

Work-life satisfaction: most employees are satisfied with their overall work-life balance

Most respondents (75.4%) are satisfied with their work-life balance. There are small statistically significant associations with gender and part-time/full-time work status. Women (77.2%) were more likely to report feeling satisfied than men (74%), and part-time employees (84.6%) more frequently report satisfaction than full-timers (71.8%). Overall, women working part-time are most likely to be satisfied with their work-life balance.

Table 3 Satisfaction with work–life balance by gender and work status, AWALI 2007 (%)

	Not satisfied	Satisfied	Total
Men			
Full-time employees	27.4	72.6	100
Part-time employees	17.7*	82.3	100
Total	26.0	74.0	100
Women			
Full-time employees	29.7	70.3	100
Part-time employees	14.4	85.6	100
Total	22.8	77.2	100
All			
Full-time employees	28.2	71.8	100
Part-time employees	15.4	84.6	100
Total	24.6	75.4	100

Note. Data weighted by Australian Bureau of Statistics data on age, highest level of schooling completed, sex and area. *Estimate not reliable. Hours usually worked per week used to categorise full-time (35 or more hours) and part-time (34 or less) work status. Table excludes self-employed persons. Response range on satisfied with work–life balance: 1 ‘not at all satisfied’ 2 ‘not very satisfied’, 3 ‘somewhat satisfied’, 4 ‘very satisfied’. Responses 1 and 2 categorised as ‘not satisfied’, responses 3 and 4 categorised as ‘satisfied’.

2 Work–life interaction and working hours

In the past 30 years the pattern of working hours in Australia has changed significantly, with growth in both part-time and extended full-time working hours. In November 2006, 36.8 per cent of Australian employees worked overtime (40.8% of men and 32.5% of women), and almost half of these (48.0%) were not paid for these hours (ABS Cat. No. 6342.0, November 2006). In our survey, 33.4 per cent worked more than 45 hours a week (20.3 per cent worked more than 45 hours a week, of which 7.7 worked 60+ hours). Different working hours are associated with sizeable and significant differences in work–life outcomes.

Long hours

The most striking finding is the consistent association between long (45–59 hours) and very long hours (60+) and poorer work–life outcomes. This association is very pronounced for men and women. More than twice as many men working very long hours often or almost always perceive that work interferes with non–work activities, compared with men working around a full-time week (35–44 hours). The effect is three times greater among women, although the number of women working long hours is small and the result should be treated with caution.

This is most clearly seen in relation to the index of work-life interaction. We construct this index by averaging responses across five measures of work-life interaction: the frequency that work interferes with activities outside work, with time for family and friends, with community connections; the frequency of feeling rushed or pressed for time and the overall work-life satisfaction³. The average score is set at 100 and with a standard deviation of 15 (very similar to the treatment of standard IQ scores). A score higher than 100 indicates a worse than average work-life outcome and a score lower than 100 indicates a better than average work-life outcome.

³ The scale has a satisfactory internal consistency (Cronbach’s alpha = 0.81)

When we look at this index in relation to working hours there is a consistent statistically significant association between longer work hours and poorer work–life outcomes ($P < 0.001$) for both men and women.

As Figure 1 shows, there is a clear relationship between worse work–life outcomes and longer hours.

Long hours are consistently associated with worse outcomes relative to the average score of 100, and this effect persists as hours increase from standard full-time to moderate long hours, to extended long hours. Work hours account for 10 per cent of the variation in work–life outcomes as measured by the work–life index.

With the exception of employees working short part-time hours (<16 hours) or standard full-time hours (35–44 hours), women consistently have worse work–life outcomes than men as they work longer hours. Overall, women working very long hours (60 or more) have the worst work–life outcomes. However, the findings for this group should be interpreted with caution as the cell size is small.

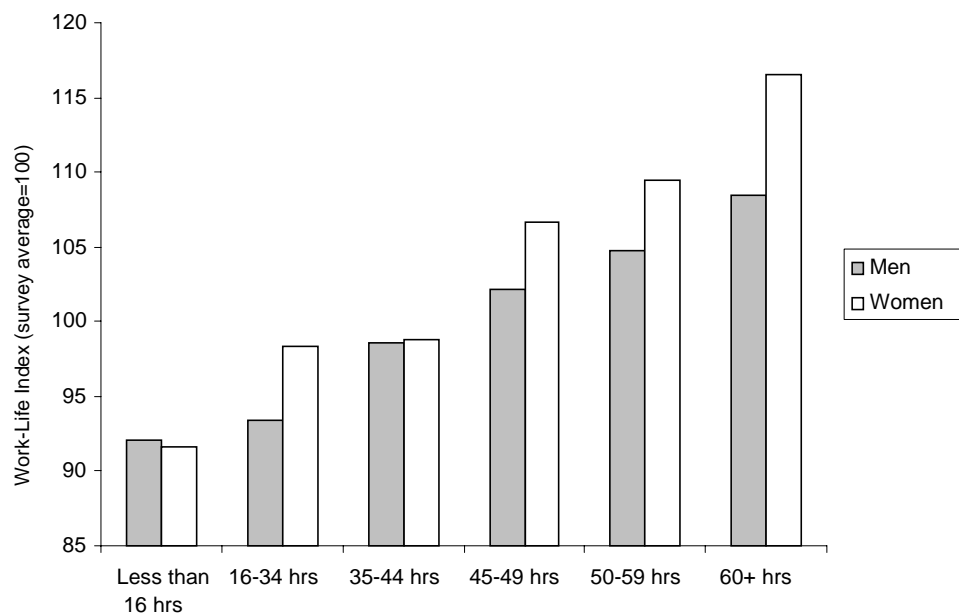


Figure 1 Work–life index by hours of work, AWALI 2007

Note. Data weighted by Australian Bureau of Statistics data on age, highest level of schooling completed, sex and area. Estimate for women working 60 or more hours is not reliable. Figure excludes self-employed persons.

Part-time work

The picture is interesting when we turn to part-time work.

Many Australian women attempt to reconcile work and family through part-time work. Most of them work long part-time hours (two–thirds of all female part-timers in our sample).

Overall, part-time hours (< 35 hours per week) are associated with better work–life outcomes. But part-time work hours have different effects for men and women ($P < 0.001$), suggesting that part-time work is not a very effective protector against negative work–life spillover for women. Long part-time hours are associated with significantly worse work–life outcomes for women compared to short part-time hours.

Further, there is no difference in work–life outcomes for women working long part-time or standard full-time (35–44) hours.

In contrast, work–life outcomes for men do not differ between short and long part-time hours, and men working long part-time hours have better work–life outcomes than men working standard full-time hours (35–44 hours).

This suggests that extended part-time hours – the work-life mechanism of choice for many Australian women, much more widely used in Australia than in most OECD countries – may not shield well from time pressures or frequent negative work-life spillover relative to full-time work. This might be explained by a range of factors including the possibility that part-time jobs are low quality jobs (a relationship I explore in a moment), or that part-timers have less external support (from partners, the market or the extended family than full-timers enjoy – which might in turn reflect their internalised belief that as part-timers they should *need* less support).

3 The fit between actual and preferred hours and work–life outcomes

Many Australian workers work more hours than they want to, while others work less. The latest Australian data on working time preference refers to Queensland (ABS Cat. No. 6365.3). In that state in November 2006 just over half of all wage and salary earners worked their preferred hours, while one–third wanted to work less and 14.1 per cent wanted to work more. In our study, less than of employees (40 per cent) had a good fit between their actual and preferred hours, which we defined as one hour or less difference between their actual and preferred hours per week (changing this definition to two hours or less made little difference to our analysis). Sixty per cent did not have a good fit, and – as for the ABS data - most of these wanted to work less. Overall, 43.5 per cent of employees wanted to work less. Another group of about 16 per cent wanted to work more.

This result is perhaps surprising, given that the survey was conducted at a time of low official unemployment and high labour demand, when conditions might be expected to favour a good fit between workers’ preferences and outcomes through worker mobility or negotiating strength.

International studies suggest that workers who have a good fit between their working time regime and their preferences are likely to have better work–life outcomes (Fagan & Burchell 2002; Messenger 2004). From the perspective of the ILO, Messenger has included the notion of ‘employee say over working time’ as a key element of ‘decent work’ (Messenger 2004). Indeed some countries have taken steps to attempt to make this better fit possible for workers through facilitative labour laws that confer a right to request a change in hours of work. The Australian Industrial Relations Commission took a step in this direction in its 2005 family leave test case decision. This has since been removed as a general right through Workchoices changes to federal labour law. Our data provide good evidence in support of the proposition that a good fit between hours of work and preferences improves work–life outcomes, reinforcing studies in other countries.

Significantly better work–life outcomes occur for those workers who can get a better fit between the hours they work and their preferences. Most employees who prefer more hours are working part-time (65.7% compared to 34.3% working full time), and most employees who prefer fewer hours are working full-time (89.4%, compared to 10.6% working part-time)

Satisfaction with overall work–life balance is very high among those who have a good fit: around 85 per cent are satisfied, compared with around 75 per cent of those who would like to work more hours and only two–thirds of those who would like to work less. Gender differences within these groupings are small. For those with a good fit between

their hours and preferences, only 12.8 per cent often or almost always feel that work interferes with their activities outside work, compared to 27.5 per cent of those working more hours than they prefer. Those who would like to work more hours are not much different from those with a good fit to preferences.

Similarly, work interferes with time for family or friends often or almost always for a third of those who would like to work less, compared to 14.9 per cent of those with a good hours fit. Only a fifth of those who would like to work more say that work often or almost always interferes with their time for family or friends.

Table 4 Working hours preferences and work–life outcomes, AWALI 2007 (%)

	Never/rarely	Sometimes	Often/almost always	Total
Work interferes with activities outside work				
Actual and preferred hours match	55.7	31.5	12.8	100
Prefer more hours	54.5	30.0	15.5	100
Prefer fewer hours	36.9	35.7	27.5	100
All	47.3	33.1	19.6	100
Work interferes with enough time with family or friends				
Actual and preferred hours match	49.1	36.0	14.9	100
Prefer more hours	44.2	34.6	21.1	100
Prefer fewer hours	27.8	38.3	33.9	100
All	39.1	36.8	24.1	100
Work interferes with community connections				
Actual and preferred hours match	64.1	24.2	11.7	100
Prefer more hours	56.2	32.3	11.5	100
Prefer fewer hours	40.8	30.6	28.6	100
All	52.7	28.3	19.0	100
Feel rushed or pressed for time				
Actual and preferred hours match	20.8	33.9	45.4	100
Prefer more hours	17.6	38.4	43.9	100
Prefer fewer hours	10.9	26.4	62.8	100
All	16.0	31.3	52.7	100
Satisfaction with work–life balance				
		Not satisfied	Satisfied	
Actual and preferred hours match		15.1	84.9	100
Prefer more hours		25.1	74.9	100
Prefer fewer hours		33.1	66.9	100
All		24.5	75.5	100

Note . Data weighted by Australian Bureau of Statistics data on age, highest level of schooling completed, sex and area. Hours match defined as 1 hour or less difference between actual and preferred hours per week. Table excludes self-employed persons.

Not surprisingly, those with a good fit of hours to preferences (as well as those who would like to work more) have much less work–to–community spillover than those who would like to work less. The latter group are more likely to be working longer hours. Over a quarter of those who would like to work less find that work frequently interferes with community connections.

In sum, the proportion of those with a good hours fit who experience frequent work to life interference is small, especially among women. For example, only 9.6 per cent of women whose working hours match their preferences often or almost always experience interference from work to activities outside of work or to their community connections, compared to 15.4 per cent and 13.5 per cent of men, respectively. On all measures of work-life interference, men are more likely to perceive frequent interference than women, whether their hours match their preferences or exceed or fall short of them.

However, the reverse occurs around feeling rushed: women are more likely to experience frequent feelings of being rushed than men, regardless of the fit of their actual and preferred hours. For example, 67.3 per cent of women who preferred fewer hours felt often or almost always rushed compared to 59.3 per cent of such men; 47.6 per cent of

women who sought more hours felt often or almost always rushed for time (40.8% men), not much different from the proportion of ‘rushed’ women (46.9%) whose hours matched their preferences.

In terms of the overall work–life index, there are significant differences between those with a good fit and those who seek more and seek less hours ($P < 0.001$; see Figure 2). Those with a good match of actual and preferred hours have the best work–life outcomes. Those who are working less than they want also have better than average outcomes. Those who are working more than they want, however, have the worst outcomes. This effect is partly explained by the fact that many who want to work less are working long hours.

When we control for differences in hours, however, this pattern, while moderated, is sustained. Controlling for hours, the adjusted work–life index scores are 95.9 for those with a good fit, 100.8 for those who prefer to work more hours and 103.6 for those who would like to work less. This pattern is observed for men and women. Figure 2 shows the original (unadjusted for hours) Index scores.

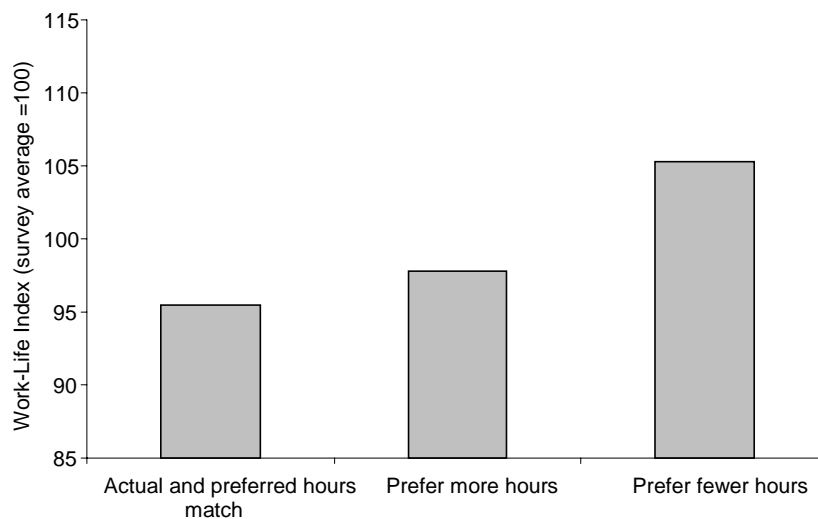


Figure 2 Work–life index by fit between actual and preferred hours, AWALI 2007

Note. Data weighted by Australian Bureau of Statistics data on age, highest level of schooling completed, sex and area. Hours match defined as one hour or less difference between actual and preferred hours per week. Original data shown (not adjusted for work hours). Figure excludes self-employed persons.

4 Job quality and work–life outcomes

What difference does the quality of the job make to work–life spillover?

Many aspects of a job can affect work–life outcomes, including the demands that a job makes (for example, the workload) and the resources it supplies (for example flexibility and satisfaction). AWALI assesses six job characteristics: work overload, job insecurity, time and task autonomy, work schedule flexibility and overall job satisfaction.

Our findings confirm what a large body of literature has already established: job security, load, and employee-control affect work–life outcomes and the general well-being of workers.

Table 5 Job quality outcomes by gender, AWALI 2007 (%)

	Strongly or somewhat disagree	Strongly or somewhat agree
Men		
Work load (often seem to have too much work to do)	43.9	56.1
Job security (worry about the future of the job)	65.9	34.1
Flexible working time (working times can be flexible to meet own needs)	34.6	65.4
Freedom when to do work (a lot of freedom to decide when to do work)	48.8	51.2
Freedom how to do work (a lot of freedom to decide how to do work)	27.0	73.0
Job satisfaction (satisfied with present job)	15.7	84.3
Women		
Work load (often seem to have too much work to do)	47.6	52.4
Job security (worry about the future of the job)	72.4	27.6
Flexible working time (working times can be flexible to meet own needs)	27.7	72.3
Freedom when to do work (a lot of freedom to decide when to do work)	50.8	49.2
Freedom how to do work (a lot of freedom to decide how to do work)	28.0	72.0
Job satisfaction (satisfied with present job)	11.9	88.1
All		
Work load (often seem to have too much work to do)	45.5	54.5
Job security (worry about the future of the job)	68.8	31.2
Flexible working time (working times can be flexible to meet own needs)	31.6	68.4
Freedom when to do work (a lot of freedom to decide when to do work)	49.7	50.3
Freedom how to do work (a lot of freedom to decide how to do work)	27.5	72.5
Job satisfaction (satisfied with present job)	14.0	86.0

Note. Data weighted by Australian Bureau of Statistics data on age, highest level of schooling completed, sex and area. Table excludes self-employed persons.

On each of the job quality measures, substantial proportions of employees report low quality working conditions and experiences (

Table 5). Specifically, 54.5 per cent of employees agreed somewhat or strongly that they are overloaded at work, 31.2 per cent are worried about the future of their jobs (job insecurity), 31.6 per cent have low flexibility around their schedules (job schedule flexibility), 27.5 per cent have little freedom to decide *how* to do their jobs (work task autonomy), 49.7 per cent have little freedom about *when* to do their jobs (work time autonomy) and 14.0 per cent are strongly or somewhat unsatisfied with their jobs (job satisfaction). Each of these indicators of poorer quality jobs is associated with worse assessments of work–life interference.

Spillover from work onto activities outside work is greater for those in poorer quality jobs, and this holds consistently for all six job quality measures and across the five work–life measures. For example, 27.7 per cent of those who experience work overload often or almost always feel that work interferes with activities outside work, compared to only 10.5 per cent of those with no overload. Workers who are worried about the future of their jobs are more likely to experience frequent spillover (26.7%) from work to activities outside work, compared to 16.6 per cent who have secure jobs.

Similarly, those with less flexible work schedules are more likely to experience spillover from work to activities outside work (27.4%) than those who have flexibility (16.5%). Freedom about when work is done and how it is done has a similar set of associations.

Similar findings of negative work–life spillover are evident for low levels of job security and autonomy. With the exception of job satisfaction, over 60 per cent of employees with poor job quality are also dissatisfied with their overall work–life balance. The relationship between job satisfaction and work–life balance satisfaction appears to be slightly weaker, with 58.7 per cent of dissatisfied workers also reporting dissatisfaction with their work–life balance.

Good quality jobs across a range of job characteristics are thus associated with better work–life outcomes. Lower work overload, more secure employment, more schedule flexibility, more autonomy at work and higher job satisfaction are all associated with less negative work–life spillover, having enough time with family and friends, less interference with community connections, less chance of feeling rushed or pressed for time and better self–assessments of work–life balance.

The overall work–life index scores confirms this picture. There is a consistent and significant difference between employees with a good quality jobs compared to poor quality jobs ($P < 0.001$). Those with poor job quality on each of the five measures had the worst work–life outcomes. This effect is particular strong for work overload, which accounted for 16 per cent of the variation in work–life outcomes. These effects are consistent for men and women. It is interesting to note that on each of the job characteristics those in poor quality jobs reported longer working hours. However, statistically controlling for work hours does not result in any meaningful changes to the figures reported or the interpretation of the data.

3. The public policy options

What do these findings mean for policy?

We are about to enter into another federal election. Beyond rhetoric, the 2001 and 2004 federal elections were not about work and family policy. The ‘barbeque stopper’ stopped before the BBQ was lit – in policy terms, beyond changes in financial benefits. These are not insignificant by any means, and their structure has improved over time, but a range of other changes have worked in the opposite direction, making it more difficult to reconcile work and family especially on the industrial front.

Changes in industrial law and work arrangements since the 2004 election have, in particular, already made a very significant difference to workers' voice at work, to payment for working unsocial working time, and to the security of employment. If left in place, we can expect them to make very significant change to working conditions affecting a broader range of workers across the labour market.

As the data I have explored show, issues of control over working time, say over working life, and quality employment have very important effects on the nature and dimensions of work-life interaction. Changes in unfair dismissal regulation in particular, cast a long shadow over security and voice at work. The prospect of clear unilateral freedom for employers to dismiss on a whim, has a powerful effect on workplace climates, especially where employees are unsure of their rights, and of course increasingly ununionised.

The prospects for more worker say, especially in smaller and medium sized companies, are poor in this new climate for those with weak labour market power – and this includes many workers with sizeable caring responsibilities.

Where tight labour market conditions exist, this voice might be bolstered by market forces, but these have an uneven and thus unfair effect and there are few signs of them in many areas of lesser skilled employment.

Workchoices swims in quite the wrong direction for better work and life outcomes. It has resulted in very significant losses in income for workers on AWAs in non-managerial employment, and the new 'fairness test' is far from a reliable measure to put a stop to this quite apart from the enforcement issues that surround it.

Australia's working carers deserve concerted action from all levels of government if they are to work and care under arrangements that recognise and better reward their dual contributions. An economy that openly relies on greater contributions out of our households to labour supply - indeed mandates it for certain family forms like sole headed households – must provide decent minimum labour standards and supports.

Without them, women and children in particular are the unsung shock absorbers of the current economic boom.

Labour and social policy has to be better framed for social justice objectives including a better social settlement for children, low income earners and women. These require new framings, better research and more use of the virtuous circle of good research/piloting/review/full implementation/new research.

Earlier this week a group of academics, the Work and Family Policy Roundtable, released a set of benchmarks on work and family policy which we hope will be of use to those trying to assess the alternative proposals that might come forward in what promises to be a crowded and heated election. (www.familypolicyroundtable.com.au)

The benchmarks touch on nine areas of policy: the fit of working time to preferences; long hours; quality part-time work; sick leave and annual leave; paid maternity, paternity and parental leave; a living wage; tax and welfare policy; early childhood education and care; and research and evaluation.

We attempt to draw on the large body of international and Australian research directions and standards against which policies might be assessed. It has led to responses from Julia Gillard and Minister Hockey, along with a range of industry bodies.

On childcare, we draw on the extensive research material that exists in support of policy change to support quality, affordable, accessible care options that help parents build social networks and are linked to educational and health facilities. The *Benchmarks* owe, in

this regard, a great deal to a 2006 roundtable of early childhood experts, including Fran Press and many other early childhood experts (a book out of this roundtable is forthcoming from University of Sydney press this year).

On working time, we recommended policies that improve the quality of part-time work, and work towards limiting long hours.

We also recommend giving employees the right to request changes in working time arrangements and confer upon employers a duty to reasonably consider such requests, and that this should be a general right for all employees with care responsibilities for children and adults to request such changes. Such a right can only have effective life where arbitrary dismissal is not possible. The best right to request laws will mean nothing in an environment without dismissal remedies (as now exists in companies with less than 100 employees) and where casual work is the norm. A right to shift from casual work to permanent work past a qualifying period is also important.

We also recommended policies that improve the quality of part-time work and recognise full-time work as a working week of about 38 hours worked in a span of 8-6 with penalties for work outside this, along with policies that contain long hours of work and confine the averaging of hours to 4 weeks or less.

Beyond the basics of decent sick and annual leave and family leave rights we think an appropriate benchmark for work and family policies should include at least the minimum ILO standard of 14 weeks government-funded paid maternity leave, along with a couple of weeks paid paternity leave. But we think a rich country like Australia can aim a little higher: for 12 months paid parental leave within a reasonable time frame.

We won't see all of these policies in the 2007 election.

But present arrangements are unsatisfactory given that they create pressure points for some many on an arbitrary basis. Current arrangements are distinguished by luck – especially around finding a good boss; by the individual's social and financial resources, and by their union coverage. Statutory standards (like minimum wages and penalty rates) and facilitative rights (like the right to request changes in hours or to convert from casual to permanent work) are the ways in which we take gross unfairness out of the system. We need better labour law to give workers *voice*, to give them *real options*, and to *give them time* - time to recover from work and to reproduce themselves and care for their families. We also need to underpin their labour market participation with good public care options, that do not introduce new very early circuits of inequality of the kind that Rosa's and Gail's children are probably experiencing with their very different levels of access to parental time, and quality care and education.

Our national leaders need to get with the program. I am very struck by how poorly our employer organizations are led in several instances, at present, with their mantra of local bargaining to solve all of these issues. Their approach does the many good employers in their organizations, or potentially in them, who already do much of what we suggest great disservice. However, even they cannot do it all within their companies (for example, provide childcare), and the absence of decent minima allows bad bosses to drive down the terms of labour, especially in small business. Bad employers drive out good ones. They narrow space for better treatment of working carers where they can bargain down controls over working time, wages and enforce long unpaid hours. Minimum standards are the friend of fair employers because they create a predictable platform of shared minima.

Politicians also trail along behind public opinion, instead of leading towards sustainable work systems that genuinely support strong communities and sustainable work under fair conditions.

Australia is a rich, happy nation enjoying an exceptional boom. But as long as Gail and Rosa and their children experience increasingly divergent work-life outcomes, we fail to underpin our ethic of work with a fair ethic of care. These are likely to remain pressing social policy issues well into the future. As a rich country we can do much better.

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