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# The Case for Work/Life Balance:

Closing the Gap Between Policy and Practice



Hudson

*From great people  
to great performance<sup>SM</sup>*

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# 1: Introduction

Australian and New Zealand organisations are increasingly considering the benefits of ensuring their employees achieve 'work/life balance'.

The subject of how work/life balance can be achieved and enhanced has received significant attention from employers, workers, politicians, academics and the media. The concept, dubbed a 'barbecue-stopper' by Australian Prime Minister John Howard, has been described as the "biggest policy issue we have".<sup>1</sup> In an election year in New Zealand, the Labour Government similarly acknowledges that "work/life balance and having enough time for family is fundamental to the New Zealand way of life".<sup>2</sup>

However, it is in the context of both Australia's and New Zealand's current skill shortages and the prospect of an ageing workforce that it is now imperative for organisations to embrace work/life balance practices to attract and retain talent, not only from traditional sources but also from untapped and diverse social groups. These are social groups whose lifestyles can often demand greater attention to work/life balance: working mothers, mature workers and some minority groups.

For future commercial sustainability, organisations need to ensure they not just encourage but mandate a practical and workable work/life balance policy, benefiting and meeting the needs of both the organisation and its employees. And importantly, organisations not providing real opportunity for employee work/life balance are opening themselves up to increasing numbers of dissatisfied and unproductive employees and hence increased attrition rates. Merely creating a work/life policy framework is not enough; fostering an organisational culture that supports the use of available policies is also of great importance.

This paper explores the notion of work/life balance, including the empirically grounded benefits for employers and employees. The paper also challenges some of the rhetorical assumptions associated with work/life balance. Further, it outlines the cultural inhibitors to the implementation of flexible work arrangements and provides practical strategies for developing work/life balance agendas.

## 2: What is ‘Work/Life Balance’?

### Defining the Concept

Work/life balance, in its broadest sense, is defined as a satisfactory level of involvement or ‘fit’ between the multiple roles in a person’s life. Although definitions and explanations vary, work/life balance is generally associated with equilibrium, or maintaining an overall sense of harmony in life.<sup>3</sup> The study of work/life balance involves the examination of people’s ability to manage simultaneously the multi-faceted demands of life.<sup>4</sup>

Although work/life balance has traditionally been assumed to involve the devotion of equal amounts of time to paid work and non-work roles, more recently the concept has been recognised as more complex and has been developed to incorporate additional components. A recent study explored and measured three aspects of work/life balance<sup>5</sup>:

- 1** Time balance, which concerns the amount of time given to work and non-work roles.
- 2** Involvement balance, meaning the level of psychological involvement in, or commitment to, work and non-work roles.
- 3** Satisfaction balance, or the level of satisfaction with work and non-work roles.

This model of work/life balance, with time, involvement and satisfaction components, enables a broader and more inclusive picture to emerge. For example, someone who works two days a week and spends the rest of the week with his or her family may be unbalanced in terms of time (i.e. equal measures of work and life), but may be equally committed to the work and non-work roles (balanced involvement) and may also be highly satisfied with the level of involvement in both work and family (balanced satisfaction). Someone who works 60 hours a week might be perceived as not having work/life balance in terms of time. However, like the person who works only a few hours a week, this individual would also be unbalanced in terms of time, but may be quite content with this greater involvement in paid work (balanced satisfaction). Alternatively, someone who works 36 hours a week, doesn’t enjoy his or her job and spends the rest of the time pursuing preferred outside activities may be time-balanced but unbalanced in terms of involvement and satisfaction. Thus, achieving balance needs to be considered from multiple perspectives.

## A Balance of Family, Life and Work

In recent years, the term 'work/life balance' has replaced what used to be known as 'work/family balance'. Although the concept of family has broadened to encompass extended families, shared parenting, same-sex relationships and a wide range of social and support networks and communities, the semantic shift from work/family to work/life arises from a recognition that care of dependent children is by no means the only important non-work function. Other life activities that need to be balanced with employment may include study, sport and exercise, volunteer work, hobbies or care of the elderly. 'Eldercare' in particular is becoming a growing issue for employers. For example, about one-third of the 600,000 Australians who provide principal care for older relatives or friends are employed.<sup>6</sup> The timing of these care-giving responsibilities is important because, generally, people are established in their careers before the issue arises.<sup>7</sup> Hence, eldercare has the potential to generate greater corporate interest and response than did childcare.<sup>8</sup>

"The baby boomers will become responsible for their ageing parents just as they are ready to assume leadership positions in business and government. The need for attention to eldercare will be pushed by senior managers who are experiencing eldercare problems personally – a kind of pressure that childcare has not had."

**Friedman and Galinsky, 1992, p. 187.**

The universal adoption of the term 'work/life', as distinct from 'work/family' has other positive consequences such as legitimising non-standard work arrangements for a diverse range of employees. For example, although a lack of work/life balance is often associated with either working mothers or white-collar executives working long hours, there is a growing recognition that other groups too may experience less than optimal work/life balance. Recent reports suggest that as well as large numbers of unemployed people who cannot find any paid work, many workers are 'under-employed', preferring more paid work than is available. Blue-collar workers, the self-employed and those earning low hourly rates may also struggle to achieve balance.

## Work/Life Conflict

Work/life balance is out of kilter when the pressures from one role make it difficult to comply with the demands of the other. This is known as work/life conflict.<sup>9</sup> This means that if individuals do not feel they have a 'good' mix and integration of work and non-work roles, they may experience negative or conflicting outcomes.<sup>10</sup> This implies a bi-directional relationship where work can interfere with non-work responsibilities (work/life conflict) and vice versa (life/work conflict).<sup>11</sup>

Employees who experience increased stress due to work/life conflict and decreased perceptions of control over their work and non-work demands are less productive, less committed to, and satisfied with, their organisation and more likely to be absent or leave the organisation.<sup>12</sup> Individuals experiencing interference between work and personal lives are also significantly more likely to suffer from reduced psychological well-being and physical health.<sup>13</sup> In one study, people who experienced life/work conflict were nearly 30 times more likely to suffer from a mood disorder (e.g. depression), 10 times more likely to have an anxiety disorder and 11 times more likely to have a substance-dependence disorder (e.g., heavy drinking).<sup>14</sup> On the other hand, employees with lower levels of work/life conflict report higher job satisfaction overall.<sup>15</sup>

# 3: Public and Organisational Policy

## Public Policy Development

A range of public policies supporting work/life balance has been developed in response to economic and cultural trends, many of which focus on women's increased participation in paid employment. These trends include the long-term decline in fertility rates<sup>16</sup> and its impact on population and labour-force growth; the strong growth in women's labour-force participation by the child-bearing and rearing age group (15–45 years) and its impact on the demand for formal childcare; and the strong growth in participation in secondary and post-secondary education by women and its impact on career achievement.<sup>17</sup>

Legislative reforms such as the International Labour Organisation (ILO) Convention 156, Workers with Family Responsibilities 1981, anti-discrimination and affirmative action legislation and industrial relations changes have also lifted the profile of issues related to work/life balance and blurred the boundaries between public and private spheres. In Australia, these reforms have resulted in mandatory reporting of policies by organisations with more than 100 employees, the expansion of legal protections to include explicitly those with family responsibilities, and the availability, by agreement with the employer, of part-time work up to a child's second birthday.<sup>18</sup> The Australian and New Zealand governments also encourage employers to provide childcare support for staff with families.

A good example of childcare support is Star City Casino in Sydney. The casino management provides a 24-hour childcare facility so that employees can work the round-the-clock shifts necessary in a casino. The facility has a playground, is close to the casino, in a secure building and is licensed for 15 children under two years of age. Management believes this has helped both staff and the organisation, as evidenced by the lowest staff turnover rate of any casino in Australia.<sup>19</sup>

Provided the contract of employment is not broken, employees in public and private sectors in both Australia and New Zealand are entitled to 12 months' unpaid maternity leave. After this time, they are entitled to return to the position held before the leave, or to a position of comparable status and salary. Unlike New Zealand, where employed women are entitled to 13 weeks' government-funded paid maternity leave, Australia has no statutory paid maternity leave.<sup>20</sup> The New Zealand Government also supports and partly funds the Equal Employment Opportunities Trust which, among other things, initiates annual Work and Life awards; tracks progress on work and family initiatives within organisations; and promotes the issue through conference speeches and press releases. The Department of Labour in New Zealand established a Work/Life Balance Project in the last half of 2003, which ran until the middle of 2004. Results from the project showed

that many people perceived their work and non-work lives were out of balance.<sup>21</sup> One recommendation was government assistance for employers to help them provide work/life balance initiatives.

## Organisational Policies

In addition to the development of public policies supporting responsibilities outside of paid employment, organisations have increasingly been developing formal policies that attempt to facilitate the work/life nexus. Work/life balance strategies enhance the autonomy of workers in coordinating and integrating the work and non-work aspects of their lives.<sup>22</sup>

Three broad types of work/life strategies have been created to help employees balance their work and non-work lives: flexible work options, specialised leave policies and dependant-care benefits.<sup>23</sup> These include a range of policies and practices:

1	Compressed work week
2	Flexitime
3	Job sharing
4	Home telecommuting
5	Work-at-home programs
6	Part-time work
7	Shorter work days for parents
8	Bereavement leave
9	Paid maternity leave
10	Paid leave to care for sick family members
11	Paternity leave
12	On site/near site company childcare
13	Company referral system for childcare
14	Program for emergency care of ill dependents
15	Childcare programs during school vacation
16	Re-entry scheme
17	Phased retirement
18	Sabbatical leave
19	Professional counselling
20	Life skill programs
21	Subsidised exercise for fitness centre
22	Relocation assistance
23	Work and family resource kit or library

Figure 1: Range of different organisational work/life balance initiatives.  
Source: Bardeel (2003).



These interventions are generally aimed at facilitating flexibility, supporting employees with childcare (and more recently eldercare) obligations and alleviating the negative impact of interference between work and non-work commitments and responsibilities.<sup>24</sup>

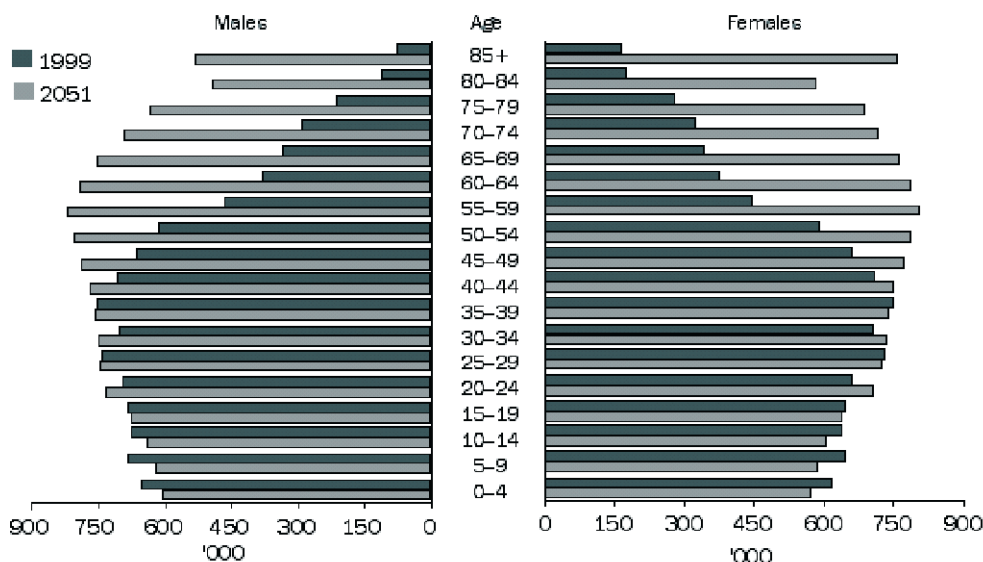
Public and organisational policy issues are not mutually exclusive. Rather, many legislative requirements (e.g., equal opportunity) affect organisations, while organisations voice their preferences for public policy to government. In accordance with legislation and principles of equity, public and organisational policy provides equitable, rather than identical, treatment to its recipients. That is, the pursuit of 'equitable', rather than 'same' treatment is behind the efforts to enable all employees to perform well and compete effectively for employment opportunities as they arise.<sup>25</sup>

# 4: An Imperative for Business

## Skill Shortages

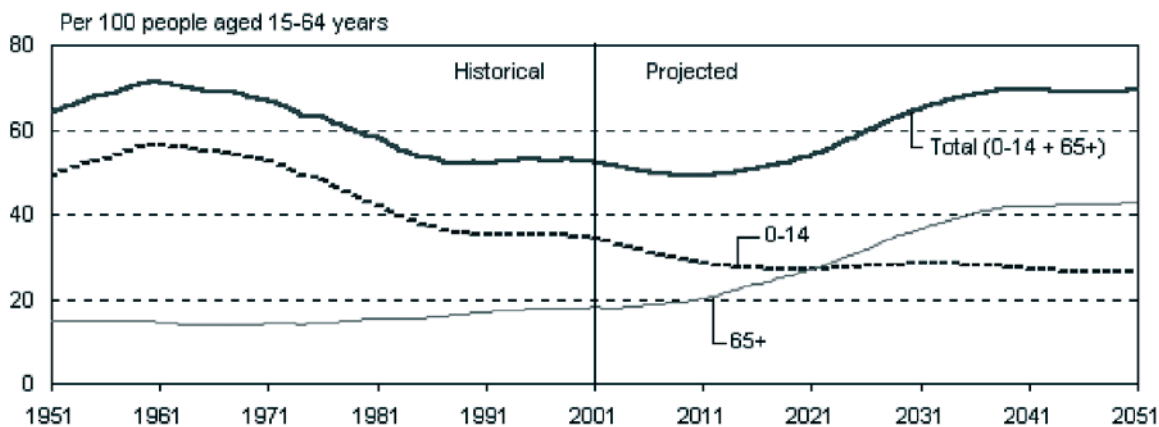
In the past, the provision of flexible work options was often viewed by the management of organisations as an optional ‘fringe benefit’. In the current demographic and economic climate however, policies and strategies that promote work/life balance for employees are becoming increasingly vital to commercial sustainability. Australia and New Zealand (and many other developed countries) are in the throes of serious shortages of skilled workers in many industries and sectors.<sup>26</sup> This problem is partly the result of, and will be exacerbated by, an ageing workforce that will grow proportionally over the next 20 years. A research report by the Australian Government Productivity Commission (2005) showed that one-quarter of Australians will be aged 65 years or more by 2044–45, giving rise to economic and fiscal impacts that pose significant challenges for organisations of all types and sizes. The report predicted that as more people move into older age groups, overall participation rates will drop and hours worked per capita will be around 10% lower than without ageing.

The graphs that follow show population projections for Australia and New Zealand. Both indicate an increase in the number of people in the dependent population relative to those in the age brackets most likely to participate in the labour force.



Source: Population Projections, Australia, 1999 to 2101 (ABS Cat. no. 3222.0).

Below-replacement fertility levels also contribute to this ‘structural ageing’. In 1976, the total fertility rate fell below replacement level (2.1 births per woman) and a record low of 1.7 births per woman occurred in 1999.<sup>27</sup> The combination of increased longevity and low fertility has led to a greater ratio



Source: NZ National Population Projections: 2001 (base)–2051 – Information Release  
 Please note: The top line [Total (0-14 + 65+)] represents a combination of the two lines below.

of retirees to working-age adults,<sup>28</sup> also known as a low labour-force dependency ratio.<sup>29</sup> This scenario has prompted concerns about the slowing of labour-market growth, with implications for overall economic growth.<sup>30</sup>

From an organisational perspective, the adoption of work/life balance practices can help ease the problem of skill shortages by attracting and retaining previously ‘untapped’ pools of talent – including mothers returning to the labour market, mature workers and certain minority groups – by creating work environments that would have been previously untenable. Trends towards greater diversity are already apparent in many organisations. For example, labour-force participation rates of women continue to increase, including those of women with under-school-age children (49%)<sup>31</sup> and school-age children (67%).<sup>32</sup> This increase reflects not only economic necessity but also demands – similar to those of men – for personal development and financial independence.<sup>33</sup> In the past 17 years the number of dual-earner couples, where one person is no longer exclusively available to attend to childcare and domestic tasks, increased by 58%.<sup>34</sup> This increase has been a major driver of the urgency in the work/life balance debate. Flatter and more participative organisational hierarchies, where fewer employees are expected to manage increased workloads,<sup>35</sup> have also highlighted the work/life balance agenda.

Greater workplace diversity is also evident in the emphasis on skills in migration policies that have led to migrants achieving superior labour-market outcomes compared with those of previous cohorts.<sup>36</sup> Further, participation rates for people aged 45–64 years are rising, having increased from 56% to 68% between 1983 and 2003, with men and women in this age group more likely to work part-time as they approach retirement.<sup>37</sup> An increasing number of small businesses are hiring older workers to address skill shortages.<sup>38</sup>

Hence, embracing diversity in the workforce to overcome skills shortage<sup>39</sup> appears to be a key strategy in 21st century workplaces and fundamental to that diversity is the notion of work/life balance.

The emergent challenge for organisations is to develop the capability to attract, motivate and retain a highly skilled, flexible and adaptive workforce.

**De Cieri, Holmes, Abbott & Pettit, 2005, p. 92.**

## Expensive Empty Desks

Work/life balance policies and practices can improve the 'employee experience' and hence help organisations to retain their staff. Turnover is a major issue for many businesses because of the costs of hiring and training new personnel, as well as the costs of not having departed employees working toward organisational goals.<sup>40</sup> In 1996, for example, the turnover cost for exit and replacement of a second or third-year female manager in Australia was conservatively estimated at \$75,000.<sup>41</sup> More recently, Ernst & Young estimated that the costs incurred for turnover in client service roles averaged 150% of a departing employee's annual salary.<sup>42</sup> Staff turnover can also substantially affect the retention of customers. In one study of more than 3,000 customers in six service industries, 80% saw employee retention as a problem for their service provider.<sup>43</sup>

The established link between the provision of flexible work options and reduction in turnover<sup>44</sup> means that work/life balance is now a strategic human resource issue. Research suggests that where employees' preferences for cultures and values are consistent with actual organisational cultures and values, turnover is decreased.<sup>45</sup> This is known as 'person/organisation fit' and is defined as "the compatibility between people and organisations that occurs when at least one entity provides what the other needs or they share similar fundamental characteristics or both".<sup>46</sup> Organisational cultures can include a range of values, meanings and assumptions, including responsiveness to work/life balance needs. Therefore, when employers and employees see work/life balance as a priority, employees are more likely to commit and stay with the organisation.

However, when priorities and goals are incompatible, employees are more likely to seek consistent cultures elsewhere. For example, the unavailability of part-time work can influence a mother's decision to seek a different employer.<sup>47</sup> Further, 43% of women with children and between 9% and 28% of eldercare-givers report having to quit work at some stage in their careers because of their responsibilities outside the workplace.<sup>48</sup> And when

they leave, they rarely intend to return. In a Harvard Business Review study, only 5% of highly qualified women looking to return to work after a period of leave for family reasons were interested in rejoining the companies they left.<sup>49</sup> Fay Hansen (2002) also reports the experience of company executives who state that during exit interviews many women say they are leaving the organisation to spend more time with their families, but when they are followed up a year later, they are working somewhere else.

In a further study, managers' desire for improved work/life balance was closely linked with an increased likelihood of searching for a new job.<sup>50</sup> However, *actual hours* of available leisure were not related to job-search behaviour. Instead, individual perceptions of the *adequacy* of leisure time were important. These results support the argument that work/life balance is more complex than simply the objective amount of time allocated to each role. Rather, it is the satisfaction or perceived fulfilment with the way paid work and non-work roles converge that is relevant to turnover intentions.

## Why Work Here?

In addition to staff turnover issues, organisations genuinely promoting and supporting work/life balance policies often receive community recognition as 'good' corporate citizens,<sup>51</sup> or 'employers of choice'. Where skill shortages are evident, or where skilled applicants have a number of job offers, the willingness or otherwise of an organisation to accommodate employees' work/life balance may well be a deciding factor in accepting a job offer. However, the extent to which organisations are concerned about public approval or disapproval may vary according to their size and location in the business environment. For example, because of their visibility, large organisations are likely to be sensitive to pressure from employees because resistance could lead to public disapproval, while for small organisations with lower economies of scale, the cost of offering formal work/life options may be disproportionately high.<sup>52</sup> Like large businesses, public organisations are inclined to respond to public pressure for work/life balance measures because they are more likely to be evaluated in terms of social legitimacy norms, while private-sector organisations are more likely to be evaluated in terms of profit-related standards.<sup>53</sup>

As well as the link between work/life balance initiatives and employer branding and turnover, there are a number of additional benefits for organisations in contributing to the work/life balance of employees. These include outcomes such as increased productivity, organisational commitment, morale and job satisfaction. These organisational benefits are illustrated in Figure 2.

Although they are represented as equally advantageous, their importance may differ among different kinds of organisations. Companies that employ large numbers of young women may experience the greatest value in early return to work following maternity leave, while those employing people with highly specialised skills may benefit most from reduced turnover and the increased availability of a talented applicant pool. The benefits may also be inter-related. For example, although improved job satisfaction for employees may not directly influence profitability, individuals with higher levels of job satisfaction exhibit less absenteeism<sup>54</sup> and less propensity to leave the organisation,<sup>55</sup> directly affecting the bottom line.

Environments that support employees' work/life balance have been found to improve organisational commitment<sup>56</sup> – defined as a belief in and acceptance of organisational goals and values, a willingness to exert effort toward these goals and a desire to maintain organisational membership.<sup>57</sup> A US survey has demonstrated the strong relationship between employee commitment and return to shareholders, finding that companies with highly committed employees had a 112% return to shareholders over three years, compared with a 76% return for companies with low employee commitment, and 90% for companies with average commitment.<sup>58</sup>

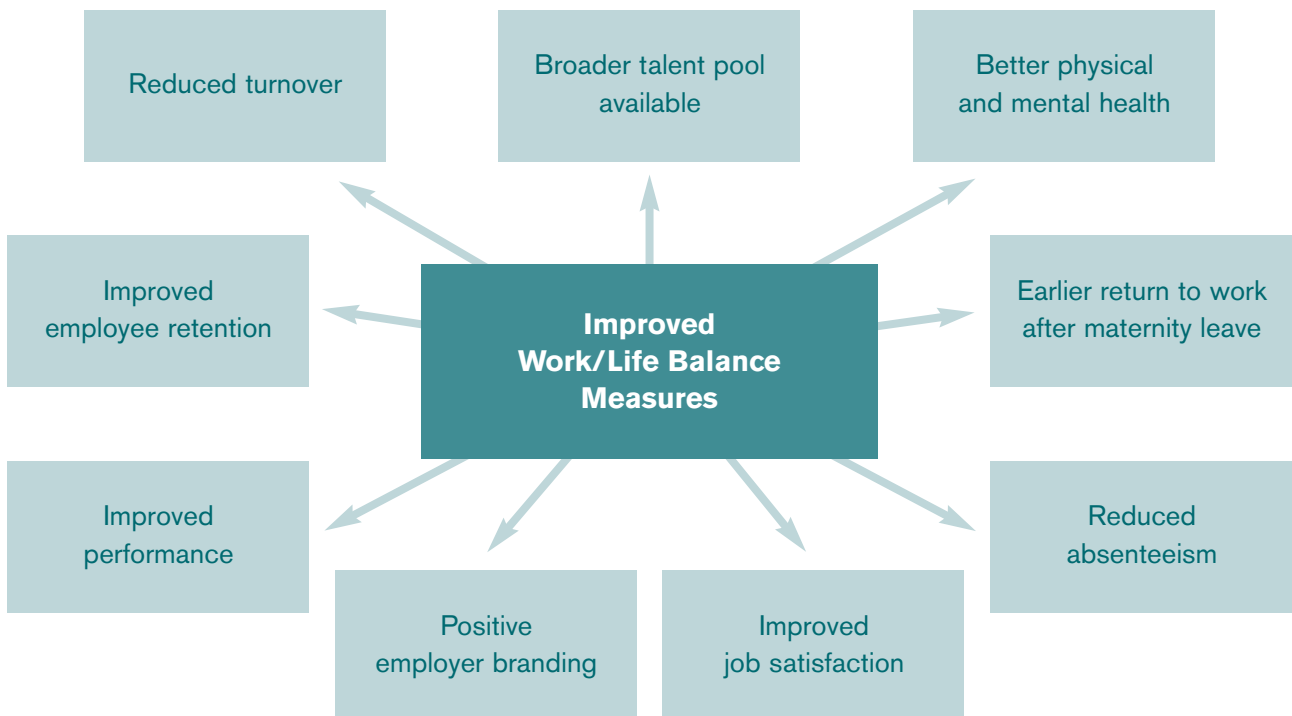


Figure 2: Benefits to employers and employees in providing and supporting employee work/life balance.

Closely related to organisational commitment, job satisfaction has also been shown to increase with the use of work/life balance strategies.<sup>59</sup> Data collected in a variety of industries and locations in New Zealand showed that work/life issues have raised employee satisfaction by an average of 11%.<sup>60</sup> The presence of work/life policies has also been associated with higher levels of organisational performance,<sup>61</sup> increased organisational productivity<sup>62</sup> and improved morale.<sup>63</sup>

Studies have also found that providing alternative work practices may benefit organisations by reducing absenteeism.<sup>64</sup> Stratex Networks (NZ) Ltd, for example, stated that as a result of work/life initiatives, absenteeism was down by 8% and employees averaged only 2.9 sick days per year.<sup>65</sup>

## Money in the Bank

Although the formal evaluation of work/life programs is often difficult because of the problem of calculating the costs and benefits of different strategies, some companies have attempted to quantify the outcomes of specific policies. A leading Sydney law firm estimated that it would cost about \$80,000 to replace a solicitor with two years' experience who did not return from maternity leave, but only \$15,000 to pay 12 weeks' maternity leave and a three-week budget-free period on return to work.<sup>66</sup> In the first year of operation of a six-week maternity leave scheme, Westpac Banking Corporation experienced a drop in the resignation rate of women on maternity leave from 40.6% to 17.9%.<sup>67</sup> SC Johnson, a family-owned consumer-goods company in New Zealand, says improved staff retention as a result of work/life initiatives saves the company more than \$200,000 a year.<sup>68</sup> Research consistently confirms that women with flexible start and finish times work longer into pregnancy and return to work sooner following childbirth.<sup>69</sup> Indeed, flexibility is a major factor for parents when considering their choice of work.<sup>70</sup>

“By a considerable margin, highly qualified women find flexibility more important than compensation.”

Hewlett et al, 2005

In summary, a successful convergence between work and non-work aspects can be a win-win situation for employees and employers alike. The ability to achieve satisfying experiences in all life domains enhances the quality of personal relationships and a range of organisational outcomes. On the other hand, conflict between different roles has been linked to negative outcomes such as job dissatisfaction, psychological strain and substance abuse. Thus it is imperative for employees and companies to connect work/life issues with strategic business needs.<sup>71</sup>

# 5: The Gap Between Policy and Practice

Despite an apparently widespread commitment to the principles of work/life balance, the reality for many employees is not always consistent with the rhetoric. Empirical studies show that the mere availability of extensive and generous work/life policies does not necessarily result in widespread utilisation by employees or subsequent improvements in work/life balance and reductions in work/life conflict.<sup>72</sup> The low uptake in some organisations appears to be related to different organisational environments, also known as 'organisational work/life cultures', which affect the extent to which flexible work options can be utilised and work/life balance achieved.

Five distinct aspects of work/life culture have been identified from previous studies,<sup>73</sup> all of which should be considered by organisations when attempting to improve employees' work/life balance. These are outlined below in Figure 3.

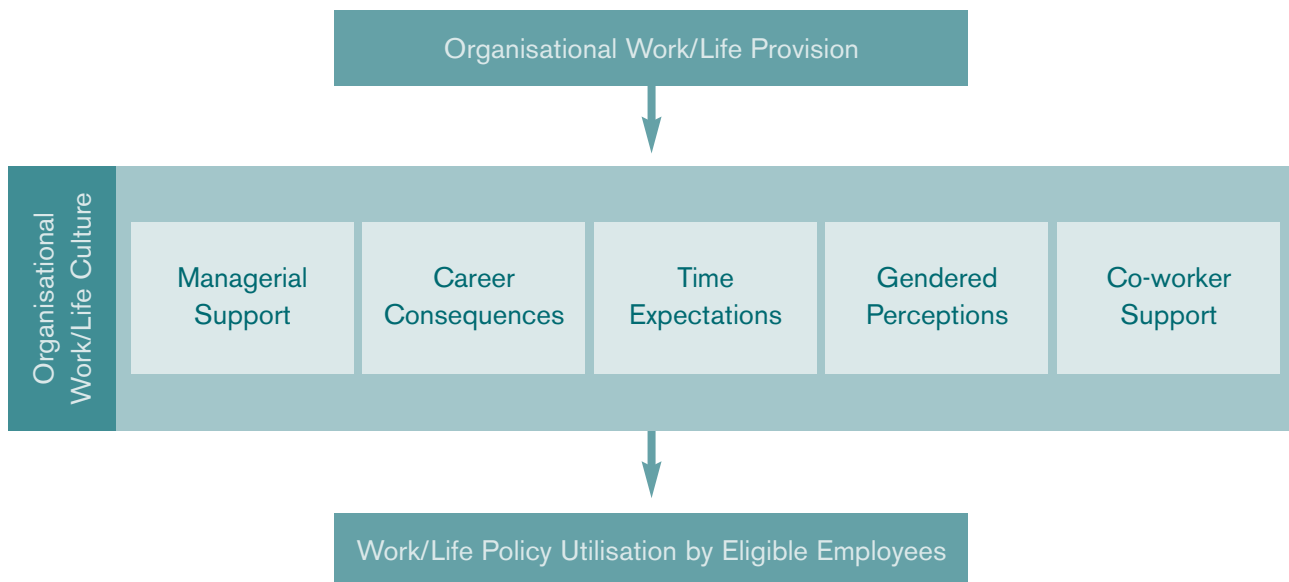


Figure 3: Five dimensions of organisational work/life culture that account for the gap between policy and practice.

## Managerial Support

'Managerial Support' is consistently emphasised in discussions and studies as a factor influencing work/life balance. Managers play an important role in the success of work/life programs because they are in a position to encourage or discourage employees' efforts to balance their work and family lives.<sup>74</sup> Where supervisors enthusiastically support the integration of paid work and other responsibilities, employees will be more likely to take



up available work/life programs. On the other hand, it has been suggested that even in 'family-friendly' organisations, managers may send negative signals indicating that the use of flexible benefits is a problem for them, their colleagues and the organisation as a whole.<sup>75</sup>

The contention that managerial support helps explain work/life policy utilisation rates is well supported. Managerial support on a daily basis appears to be a critical variable in employees' decisions to use available benefits and programs.<sup>76</sup> This is particularly the case if employees work with supervisors and colleagues who can buffer them from the perceived negative effects of their careers.<sup>77</sup> In other studies, employees whose supervisors supported their efforts to balance work and family were less likely to experience work/family conflict<sup>78</sup> and, in a sample of New Zealand nurses, were less likely to experience job burnout.<sup>79</sup> These findings have been echoed in studies that establish a strong association between supervisor support and family-supportive work environments in general.<sup>80</sup>

## Career Consequences

The second factor associated with work/life culture, and one that has been strongly associated with the under-utilisation of work/life policies, is the perception of negative career consequences.<sup>81</sup> The most significant example of this problem is the part-time work option. Schwartz (1989) was one of the first to identify the career disadvantages inherent in part-time employment and described women who returned to their jobs part-time following a birth as being 'mommy track' workers. She argued that part-time women received less training, were paid less and advanced more slowly because employers attach a higher risk to investing in them. In other studies, both male and female part-time workers were worse off, in terms of promotion prospects and entitlement to fringe benefits, than those who worked more hours a week.<sup>82</sup>

"I work part-time in my branch at quite a low level and I've been overlooked several times... When we looked at the list, 25 people have leapfrogged me for other positions."

**Female administrative officer, part-time**

These findings are echoed across other industries and sectors.<sup>83</sup> Allen and Russell (1999) found that the allocation of fewer organisational rewards, including advancement opportunities and salary increases, resulted from perceptions of decreased organisational commitment by employees who used family-friendly policies. Such perceptions suggest compelling reasons why part-time employment tends to be underused by men, single workers

and career-oriented mothers,<sup>84</sup> although there is little available literature explaining how other forms of flexible working, such as telecommuting, affect perceived and actual career opportunities. However, the long-term success of work/life balance options seems to rely on the feasibility of such arrangements at all levels of the workforce, including management.<sup>85</sup> Importantly, participation by managers themselves in work/family programs challenges the perception of work/life policy utilisation and career progression as being mutually exclusive paths within the organisation.<sup>86</sup>

## Time Expectations

The third construct purported to influence the uptake and overall supportiveness of work/life policies is organisational time expectations<sup>87</sup> – the number of hours employees are expected to work; how they use their time (e.g., whether employees are expected to take work home); and the level of discretion in one's work schedule.<sup>88</sup>

A supportive work/life culture in terms of organisational time expectations has been found to reduce work/family conflict,<sup>89</sup> improve job satisfaction<sup>90</sup> and increase productivity.<sup>91</sup> In several studies, however, long working hours have been identified as a signal of commitment, productivity and motivation for advancement.<sup>92</sup> Known as 'face time', being visible at the workplace during long working hours has been seen as a major barrier to achieving work/life balance.<sup>93</sup> One study, based on interviews with engineers in a Fortune 100 company in the US, concluded: "If one is to succeed, one has to be at work, one has to be there for long hours, and one has to continuously commit to work as a top priority. To be perceived as making a significant contribution, productivity alone is not enough. One has to maintain a continual presence at work."<sup>94</sup>

Working long hours though, hinders the ability of employees to meet conflicting responsibilities,<sup>95</sup> and subsequently forces some employees to choose between achieving balanced roles and progressing in their careers.

"The earlier you are there, the later you stay, the more serious you are about your job... people like to be depended on, so they like themselves to be irreplaceable. You conform to this to show you are an important part of the furniture."

**Full-time, male, white-collar worker**

It has been suggested that organisations could move towards more supportive time expectations by loosening managerial control while fostering high productivity through outcome-oriented employee evaluation.<sup>96</sup> However, a move from the traditional notion of 'face time' as the primary measure of productivity to performance-based assessment<sup>97</sup> is likely to require a significant paradigm shift for some organisations. The shift to evaluating performance on the basis of outputs rather than time spent physically at the workplace is, however, an essential part of developing a culture that supports work/life balance.

## Gendered Perceptions

Although the language of organisational work/life policies is generally gender-neutral and non-discriminatory, these policies have revolved historically around facilitating the working conditions of women.<sup>98</sup> Men's uptake of alternative work options has tended to be extremely low. Perceptions that work/life policies are developed *only* for women are the fourth factor related to their use.

A recent review of men's use of family-friendly employment provisions argues that barriers to men's use arise from three major sources.<sup>99</sup> First, the organisation of the workplace is said to be problematic, in that the culture of many workplaces casts doubt on the legitimacy of men's claims to family responsibilities. Also, in situations where men's use of work/life policies is novel or unusual, a snowballing situation may eventuate which deters other men from using the policies. Second, the business environment, imposing competitive pressures to maintain market share and increase earnings, is thought to deter men from using work/life options. Third, the domestic organisation in employees' own homes often precludes men from taking up available work/life options, focusing on the centrality of the father's rather than the mother's career.<sup>100</sup>

Disparate utilisation rates by men and women may have far-reaching consequences. They entrench women's place as primary carers,<sup>101</sup> reinforcing the strongly gendered way in which employment and care-giving is combined in western societies. For example, the extension and continuance of gender inequality has been attributed to working arrangements in neo-traditional families in which the woman continues to perform most unpaid work in the household and holds a subordinate and/or part-time position in the labour market.<sup>102</sup>

Some work/life provisions, such as paternity leave, are intended specifically for men and aim to foster a greater sharing of responsibilities between men and women.<sup>103</sup> However, European evidence suggests that offers of longer

periods of parental leave have little appeal to male employees.<sup>104</sup> It seems, paradoxically, that devotion to one's job is both a sign of financial commitment to fatherhood (i.e., providing for one's family) and an activity that detracts from the time a father spends with his children.<sup>105</sup> Thus, encouraging more men to use opportunities for flexible work is important but clearly this requires a supportive work environment as well as changes in attitudes and expectations in the wider community.

## Co-Worker Support

The fifth factor that may contribute to the achievement of work/life balance is co-worker support. There is some evidence, for example, of a 'backlash' movement,<sup>106</sup> characterised by some employees' resentment of those using flexible arrangements, thereby contributing to a work environment where the utilisation of available opportunities is not encouraged. Kirby & Krone (2002), for example, explored the views of employees in a finance organisation about the implementation and utilisation of work/life balance policies. They found that attitudes expressed by co-workers illustrated how the construction of work/life benefits was affected by factors such as expectations of business travel for employees with and without family responsibilities; orientations of individualism and meritocracy; and traditional separations between public and private spheres. Thus, employees who utilised work/life policies felt resentment from co-workers and recognised the need to balance 'use' and 'abuse' so as not to be seen, and treated, as a less committed worker.<sup>107</sup>

The Childfree Network, an advocate group of some 5,000 members in the US,<sup>108</sup> is a manifestation of the resentment felt by some employees over this issue. Childless workers argue that they have fewer opportunities to take advantage of flexible work arrangements than employees with children and are expected to work longer hours and take assignments involving travel.<sup>109</sup>

Other studies have suggested that the 'family-friendly backlash' against work/life policies has been exaggerated, with co-workers in fact approving of policies in some instances, even when they were unlikely to benefit personally.<sup>110</sup> Notwithstanding these findings, some differences do appear between various groups in their perception of the fairness of access to flexible work arrangements. For example, those employees who have used flexible work arrangements themselves appear to have more favourable perceptions about work/life benefits than employees who have not.<sup>111</sup> Thus, the reactions of co-workers to policy users needs to be considered by managers and organisations concerned with the way the local work environment supports work/life balance.

## 6: How Does Your Organisation Stand Up?

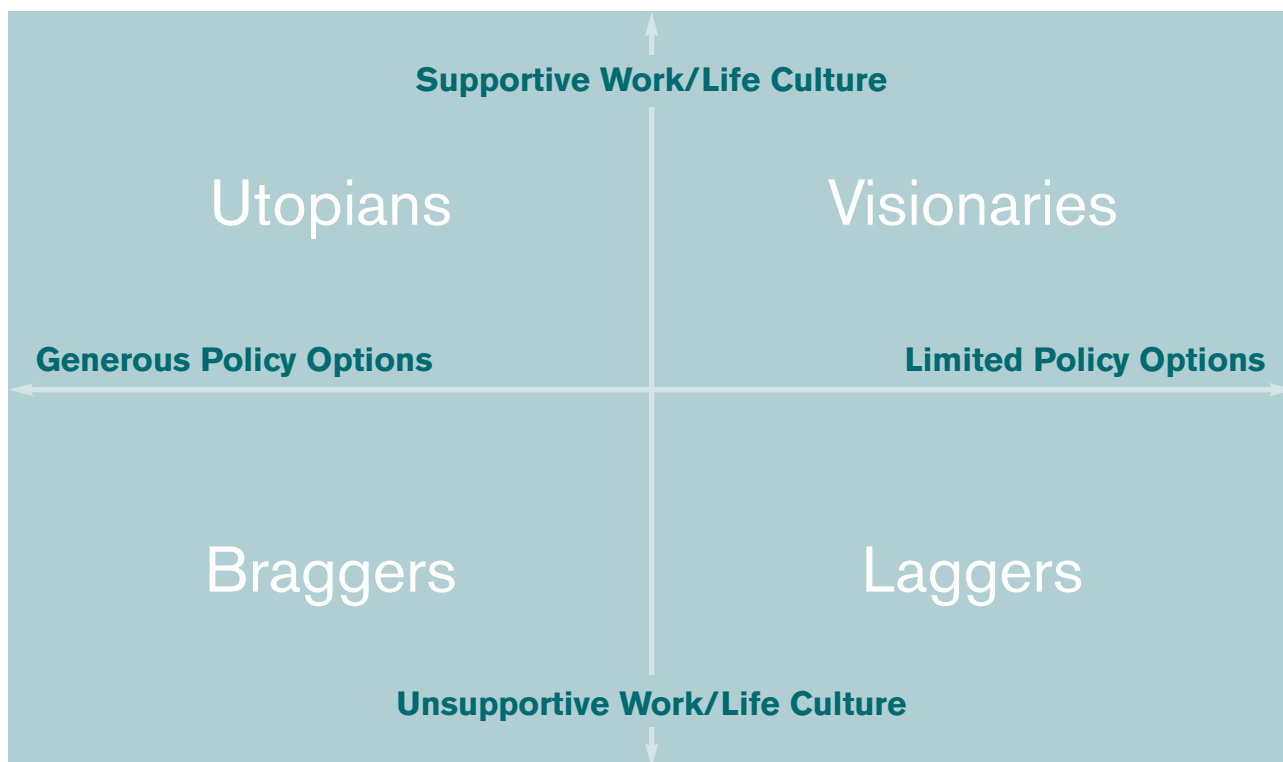


Figure 4: Two dimensions and four associated typologies of organisations' approach to work/life balance.

If we consider 'policy' and 'practice' as separate dimensions, we can illustrate four categories of organisation, each representing different approaches to formal policies and work/life cultures. Figure 4 above demonstrates this framework.

The **horizontal** dimension represents the formal and informal provision of policy options. At the lower end of this continuum there are few formal policy options to choose from and at the higher end a very diverse and generous approach is taken. An organisation placed highly on the scale provides a wide range of formal work/life options such as flexible start and finish times, telecommuting, part-time arrangements, paid parental leave, etc. In addition, it is likely to have workers using informal flexible arrangements of various types. It is important to note that the extent to which an organisation provides flexible work options may or may not be consistent with the supportiveness of take-up in local work contexts.

The **vertical** dimension in this figure represents how supportive the culture is towards flexible work arrangements and activities enhancing work/life balance. It is fully supportive at one end and non-supportive at the other, and refers to the five aspects of culture described above. Thus, an

organisational environment can be viewed as highly supportive when it responds positively to employees' need for flexibility, values productivity over 'face time', supports work/life balance for groups of employees beyond women with dependent children and minimises negative career consequences associated with non-standard work practices.

## Doing Well

Using this framework, optimal organisations or '**Utopians**' are generous in the options available to staff, and the local work environment actively and genuinely supports people utilising these options. These organisations practise what they preach and subsequently reap the greatest benefits from their employees' productivity and commitment. They are more than likely implementing creative solutions to address work/life balance for their employees. Ernst & Young, for example, specifies that flexible work schedules will not affect anyone's opportunity for advancement, at the same time designating certain partners as 'career watchers' who track individuals' progress and monitor the calibre of the projects and clients to which they are assigned.<sup>112</sup> Credit Union Services Corporation Limited (CUSCAL) also offers standard flexible work options including part-time, job-share, tele-working and compressed work weeks, but also encourages HR consultants to act as mediators between employees and supervisors regarding workloads and working hours.<sup>113</sup> SAAB Systems Pty Ltd provides employees with a childcare subsidy for up to three months after a return from maternity leave.<sup>114</sup> 'Utopians' must always monitor the effect on business needs of the flexibility they provide, but realise their reputation in the wider community is one which attracts high-quality job applicants and keeps them for longer.

The '**Visionaries**' are organisations that have a supportive culture but do not yet provide many formal policies in place for their staff. They may not have considered fully the wide range of formal and informal options that are available, or they may believe there are constraints on the options they can provide. They are, however, very supportive of people wishing to engage with the flexible work arrangements available.

To move into the Utopian quadrant, these organisations would need to understand more fully what options are truly feasible. Often there are implicit assumptions about the suitability of some options, which, if explicitly addressed and challenged, may be countered.

## Could Do Better

On the less supportive end of the culture continuum are the 'Braggers' and 'Laggers'. The **Braggers** theoretically provide a range of flexible work options, and consequently look good to outsiders, but do not follow through with support at the 'coal-face'. Braggers may also introduce work/life measures for reasons other than the enhancement of work/life balance.<sup>115</sup> For example, flexibility that is solely employer-driven, and has not been developed through a process of negotiation over the needs of employees and employers, may be more detrimental to work/life balance than no formal options at all. Examples of potentially problematic policies include increases in the spread of hours over which ordinary time is worked (thereby limiting access to penalty rates); a freeing-up of part-time work conditions with decreased minimum hours and an ability to 'flex-up' as required (thereby achieving a casual flexibility paid for at ordinary time); decreases in casual and penalty loadings; and changes to start and finish times.<sup>116</sup> There is also an important distinction between policies which provide time for work and non-work activities.<sup>117</sup> For example, telecommuting and flexible work schedules are arrangements that may, without associated support, result in high-status employees working very long hours.<sup>118</sup>

The **Laggers** have neither the formal options available, nor the support of the day-to-day work environment. With an ageing workforce and skilled labour shortages in many industries and occupations, these organisations will be increasingly left behind, experiencing high turnover and negative employer branding. Laggers need to work on developing formal policy options that publicly state their commitment to the work/life balance of employees, and develop strategies to support these policies in practice.

To find out the typology of your organisation, complete our quiz on pages 26 and 27 in the Appendices.

# 7: Recommendations

A number of recommendations, based on current thinking and empirical literature may assist readers to work towards making work/life balance both a strategic goal and a reality in their organisations.

## **1 Acknowledge that employees whose work and personal lives are balanced bring significant flow-on benefits for organisations. These include:**

- Improved organisational commitment.
- Reduced turnover and higher retention.
- Reduced absenteeism.
- Greater productivity.
- Reduced work/life conflict.

## **2 Change the widespread perception that visibility = productivity.**

- Focus on effectiveness rather than length of work hours.
- Use communication technologies and skilful time-management strategies to boost output.
- Consider the benefits to the organisation of having employees physically present for less time, such as overheads (electricity etc.) and potential reductions in office space requirements.

## **3 Recognise that to be at their best, employees need to view their work as personally meaningful.**

- Examine the type of work that each employee undertakes and attempt to maximise satisfaction by providing skill variety, task identity, task significance, autonomy and feedback.
- Be open about the potential for a broader range of jobs that might be suitable for flexible arrangements. Sometimes this is a matter of being creative, thinking about how the job or tasks it entails might be shared, broken up, done differently, re-allocated or performed at different times or locations. Although this might require more initial effort, the rewards will be there.

## **4 Ensure that formal policies in place are consistent with what employees actually experience. Policy provision alone is not sufficient to ensure employees' work/life balance.**

- Look at the uptake rates of policies across different areas in the organisation because this may provide clues to the existence of unsupportive cultures.



- Provide information and assistance to managers and supervisors about how to promote flexibility and work/life balance. This might include education about the link between work/life balance and productive employees; a detailed examination of how the jobs of their employees are designed; and how they can use information technology to facilitate appropriate remote supervision.
- Ensure that employees using work/life policies are not overlooked when promotion opportunities arise. This issue is often invisible in organisations and is linked with the misconception that physical presence equates to commitment. Employees who are productive, but not necessarily constantly visible, should have access to the same career opportunities as others.
- Communicate that work/life balance and the use of flexible options are not just for women with family responsibilities. An important component of this is role-modelling these messages. Senior managers in organisations need to 'walk the talk' and demonstrate that balancing paid work and non-work activities is positive, necessary for physical and psychological health and will not damage career prospects.

**5 Adopt a 'give and take' philosophy. Both employer and employee need to be willing to bend a little. The following example illustrates this point:**

An employee works from home each Wednesday. This arrangement may benefit the employee as he or she has less travel time and cost, and can be at home to manage personal-life tasks such as letting the plumber in to fix the hot-water system. But it also has benefits for the organisation in that the employee will have 'block time' to work on tasks that need several uninterrupted hours without having to go to meetings, chat with people in the lunchroom or experience other distractions. However, to maximise the benefits of this arrangement for both parties, co-workers would need to avoid scheduling meetings that involve the individual on Wednesdays and the employee would need to be willing to change the work-at-home day (or forgo it altogether) if his or her physical presence was required.

# Appendices

# Appendix 1: Diagnostic Quiz

Take the following diagnostic quiz to reveal how your organisation rates. To assess which quadrant of the policy–culture typology your organisation falls into, answer ‘yes’ or ‘no’ to each of the following questions:

<b>List 1: Policy</b>		<b>Yes</b>	<b>No</b>
1	I can change my start/finish times if I need to		
2	I can work from home at times		
3	I can choose to work longer hours on some days and have a day off in exchange		
4	I can take a lunch break when it best suits me		
5	I can take some time off to develop my skills/knowledge (eg, university study/in-house training program)		
6	I can access paid carer’s leave if I need to		
7	There are several flexible work arrangements that I could access if I wanted to		
8	There is paid maternity/paternity leave available in this organisation		
9	If I needed to switch to part-time work, this option would be available		
10	The work/life policies in this organisation are generous		
<b>Total number of ‘yes’ responses</b>			

Now answer ‘yes’ or ‘no’ to each of these questions about the supportiveness of the work environment.

<b>List 2: Culture</b>		<b>Yes</b>	<b>No</b>
1	I would feel comfortable asking my boss for time off if an emergency arose		
2	My co-workers do <i>not</i> make snide comments when someone leaves early to pick up children from school		
3	People who work part-time get promoted as quickly as people who work full-time		
4	The people in my work environment are more interested in <i>what</i> I do rather than <i>when</i> I do it		
5	Both men and women in this organisation can really use non-standard work arrangements (such as part-time work)		
6	Working long hours is <i>not</i> seen as an important signal of commitment in my organisation		
7	My co-workers would cover for me if I needed to leave work to deal with what was, to me, an important non-work issue		
8	Senior management in this organisation themselves make use of flexible work arrangements		
9	Employees who use flexible arrangements are just as likely to be able to develop their careers than those who do not		
10	It would not be considered strange for a man in this workplace to use alternative work practices		
<b>Total number of ‘yes’ responses</b>			

Identify which of the following four work/life balance categories your organisation falls into, based on your scores for both lists.

<b>List 1</b>	<b>List 2</b>	<b>Typology</b>
Less than 6	Less than 6	Lagger
Less than 6	6 or more	Visionary
6 or more	Less than 6	Bragger
6 or more	6 or more	Utopian

# Appendix 2: Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Sydney Morning Herald May 31, 2003
- <sup>2</sup> Address to Labour Party Congress 2 April 2005
- <sup>3</sup> Clarke, Koch & Hill, 2004
- <sup>4</sup> eg, Hill, Hawkins, Ferris & Weitzman, 2001; Marks, Huston, Johnson & MacDermid, 2001; Tausig & Fenwick, 2001
- <sup>5</sup> Greenhaus, Collins & Shaw, 2003
- <sup>6</sup> Dept of Workplace Relations, 1998; Hoskins, 1996
- <sup>7</sup> Shoptaugh, Phelps & Visio, 2004
- <sup>8</sup> Shoptaugh, Phelps & Visio, 2004
- <sup>9</sup> Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985
- <sup>10</sup> Frone, Russell & Barnes, 1996; Frone, Yardley & Markel, 1997
- <sup>11</sup> Frone & Carlson, 1999
- <sup>12</sup> Adams, 1996; Boles & Babin, 1996; Boles, Howard & Donofrio, 2001; Frye & Breugh, 2004; Netemeyer et al, 1996
- <sup>13</sup> Grant-Vallone & Ensher, 1998
- <sup>14</sup> Frone, 2000
- <sup>15</sup> Boles et al, 2001
- <sup>16</sup> The total fertility rate for any year is the number of children the average woman would bear during her lifetime, if she experienced the birth rate of that year (Norris, 1996). Australia's current fertility rate is 1.73 (ABS, 2002).
- <sup>17</sup> Ministerial Task Force on Work and Family, 2002
- <sup>18</sup> Ministerial Task Force on Work and Family, 2002; Russell & Bourke, 1999
- <sup>19</sup> Workplace, 2005
- <sup>20</sup> [http://www.hreoc.gov.au/sex\\_discrimination/pml\\_pregnancy.html](http://www.hreoc.gov.au/sex_discrimination/pml_pregnancy.html)
- <sup>21</sup> <http://www.dol.govt.nz/PDFs/wlb-consultation-summary.pdf>
- <sup>22</sup> Felstead et al, 2002
- <sup>23</sup> Morgan & Milliken, 1992; Ministerial Task Force on Work and Family, 2002
- <sup>24</sup> O'Driscoll, 2003
- <sup>25</sup> French, 2005
- <sup>26</sup> European Industrial Relations Review, 2001
- <sup>27</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2003a
- <sup>28</sup> Shaw, 2001
- <sup>29</sup> McDonald & Kippen, 1999
- <sup>30</sup> Barnes, 2001; Kavanagh, 2004; Ministerial Task Force on Work and Family, 2002
- <sup>31</sup> McDonald, 2001
- <sup>32</sup> Chapman et al, 2001
- <sup>33</sup> Elloy & Smith, 2004
- <sup>34</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics, 1997
- <sup>35</sup> Hall & Richter, 1988
- <sup>36</sup> Ho & Alcorso, 2004
- <sup>37</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2003b
- <sup>38</sup> Walker, 2004
- <sup>39</sup> Ross, 2005
- <sup>40</sup> Boles et al, 2001
- <sup>41</sup> Abbott, De Cieri & Iverson, 1996
- <sup>42</sup> Hewlett et al, 2005
- <sup>43</sup> Roper Starch Worldwide and Unifi Network, 2000
- <sup>44</sup> Capelli, 2000; Nord et al, 2002
- <sup>45</sup> Van Vianen, 2000
- <sup>46</sup> Kristof, 1996
- <sup>47</sup> Solihull & McRae, 1994
- <sup>48</sup> Hewlett, 2005; Scharlach et al, 1991
- <sup>49</sup> Hewlett et al, 2005
- <sup>50</sup> Bretz, Boudreau and Judge, 1994
- <sup>51</sup> Russell & Bourke, 1999
- <sup>52</sup> den Dulk, 2001
- <sup>53</sup> den Dulk, 2001
- <sup>54</sup> Spector, 1997
- <sup>55</sup> Boles et al, 1997
- <sup>56</sup> Allen, 2001; Russel, 1993
- <sup>57</sup> Mowday, Steers & Porter, 1979
- <sup>58</sup> WorkUSA, 2000
- <sup>59</sup> Bedeian, Burke & Moffett, 1988

- <sup>60</sup> Managing Work/Life Balance International, 2004
- <sup>61</sup> Perry-Smith & Blum, 2000
- <sup>62</sup> Hunt, 1993; Konrad & Mangel, 2000; Russell, 1993
- <sup>63</sup> McCampbell, 1996
- <sup>64</sup> eg, Baltes, Briggs, Huff, Wright & Neuman, 1999
- <sup>65</sup> Managing Work/Life Balance International, 2004
- <sup>66</sup> Ministerial Task Force on Work and Family, 2002
- <sup>67</sup> Ministerial Task Force on Work and Family, 2002
- <sup>68</sup> Managing Work/Life Balance International, 2004
- <sup>69</sup> Hofferth, 1996; Melbourne Business School, 1998
- <sup>70</sup> Commonwealth Dept of Family and Community Services, 2002
- <sup>71</sup> Bardoel, Thanenau & Ristov, 2000
- <sup>72</sup> Bond, 2004; Fried, 1998; Hochschild, 1997; McDonald et al, 2005; O'Driscoll et al, 2003
- <sup>73</sup> McDonald, Bradley & Brown, 2005
- <sup>74</sup> Perlow, 1995; Thompson, Thomas & Maier, 1992
- <sup>75</sup> Rapoport & Baily, 1996
- <sup>76</sup> Bardoel, 1993; Thompson, Beauvais & Lyness, 1999
- <sup>77</sup> Blair-Loy & Wharton, 2002
- <sup>78</sup> Thomas & Ganster, 1995
- <sup>79</sup> Kalliath & Beck, 2001
- <sup>80</sup> Allen, 2001
- <sup>81</sup> eg, Griffin, 2000; Kirby & Krone, 2002
- <sup>82</sup> Kirby & Krone, 2002; Tam, 1997
- <sup>83</sup> Ginn, Arber, Brannen et al, 2001; Junor, 1998
- <sup>84</sup> Baily, Fletcher & Kolb, 1997; Whitehouse & Zetlin, 1999
- <sup>85</sup> Kossek, Barber & Winters, 1999
- <sup>86</sup> Schwartz, 1994
- <sup>87</sup> Human Resources Development Canada, 2000; Thompson, Beauvais & Lyness, 1999
- <sup>88</sup> Baily 1993, 1997
- <sup>89</sup> Frone, Yardley & Markel, 1997
- <sup>90</sup> Rothausen, 1994
- <sup>91</sup> Solomon, 1996
- <sup>92</sup> Clarkberg and Moen, 2001; Pocock, van Wanrooy, Strazzari & Bridge, 2001
- <sup>93</sup> Perlow, 1995
- <sup>94</sup> Perlow, 1995, p. 233
- <sup>95</sup> Baily, 1993
- <sup>96</sup> Glass & Finley, 2002
- <sup>97</sup> Glass & Finley, 2002
- <sup>98</sup> Charlesworth, 1997; Strachan & Burgess, 1998
- <sup>99</sup> Bittman, Hoffmann & Thompson, 2004
- <sup>100</sup> Bittman, Hoffmann & Thompson, 2004
- <sup>101</sup> Strachan & Burgess, 1998
- <sup>102</sup> Moen & Yu, 2000
- <sup>103</sup> Bercusson & Dickens, 1996
- <sup>104</sup> International Labour Review, 1997
- <sup>105</sup> Townsend, 2002
- <sup>106</sup> Haar & Spell, 2003
- <sup>107</sup> Kirby & Krone, 2002
- <sup>108</sup> Parker & Allen, 2001
- <sup>109</sup> Picard, 1997; Seligman, 1999
- <sup>110</sup> Drago et al 2001; Hgtvedt, Clay-Warner & Ferrigno, 2002
- <sup>111</sup> Parker and Allen, 2001
- <sup>112</sup> Hewlett et al, 2005
- <sup>113</sup> McLeod, 2005
- <sup>114</sup> Workplace, 2005
- <sup>115</sup> Whitehouse & Zetlin, 1999
- <sup>116</sup> Charlesworth, 1997
- <sup>117</sup> Glass & Finley, 2002
- <sup>118</sup> Glass & Fujimoto, 1995

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