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Breaking new ground – latest work/life research

Australian work/life expert, Juliet Bourke, says now is the time to make progress on work/life issues. Speaking at a March briefing in Auckland organised by the EEO Trust, Ms Bourke said the recent Mt Eliza study (see next story) showed that Australasian managers, regardless of age or gender, consider work/life balance to be their number one future leadership challenge.

“The challenge is to move that imperative from a future issue to current action, and this calls for organisational change,” said Ms Bourke.

She said that research shows that introducing work/life policies and programmes is a win/win for employees and employers. “They help employees meet their multiple responsibilities and improve business outcomes such as productivity, loyalty and retention. However take-up of these policies is limited by a hostile workplace culture.

“Balancing work and life is high on the personal agenda, and high on the future corporate agenda but little managerial time is devoted to organisational change issues to make this happen.”

The EEO Trust briefing by Juliet Bourke was attended by around 70 managers and human resources professionals. They heard about the key themes to emerge from the Florida work/life conference, *Breaking new ground: The latest in international research*, from which Ms Bourke was returning.

Reframe the issue

She emphasised that work/life balance is now beginning to be seen as a broad issue which affects and is affected by the community as well as individuals, families and workplaces. “At the moment employers operate as if they’re in their own

little bubble but they need to look at all the aspects of their employees’ lives and look at how a workplace aligns with the community.”

EEO Trust Executive Director, Trudie McNaughton, gave the example of some New Zealand tertiary institutions which align their teaching semesters with primary school holidays so that staff can better meet their commitments at home and work.

Ms Bourke said governments and businesses must take a more holistic approach and improve community resources and services and that employers need to invest in communities and demonstrate responsibility by measuring the triple bottom line.

She advised examining work/family needs in a social context with reference to community resources. “When you are designing something in-house regardless of whether it looks like it’s related to employment issues, make it a standard procedure to run it past human resources experts and ask are there any work/family implications in this.”

She gave the example of product development or planning an advertising campaign as areas where broader work/life issues need to be considered. “Raise the issue across the organisation so that the culture of the workplace says work and life is important at every level.”

Refine your strategies

Ms Bourke also reported that the latest research shows that one work/life solution will not fit everyone. “For example,



Juliet Bourke

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recent research by IBM (US) demonstrated that, of their employees, fathers experienced just as much work/family conflict as mothers, but had different needs.

"Fathers are much less likely than mothers to use work and family programmes that result in a tangible loss of income, being one-tenth as likely to have used parental leave and one-sixth as likely to have worked part-time hours. Fathers prefer telecommuting programmes with 48 percent working regularly from home.

"Employers must ensure that they understand and address the needs of disparate workplace groups and don't operate on false assumptions."

Managers have major influence

Ms Bourke also described a study which had showed how pressure/support from managers influenced how parents resolved work/family conflict.

The study of 55 husbands and 56 wives found that managerial pressure/support significantly predicts fathers' choices around attending a family event which clashes with overtime work.

"This shows it's really important to upskill managers and ensure they are aware of gender differences in terms of how their staff respond. You need to get managers on-side as, when push comes to shove, it'll be your managers who determine whether it happens."

"To move from the rhetoric about having a family-friendly culture to reality we must introduce hard-hitting solutions that improve managerial performance.

"One such solution is accountability. The study conducted by Mt Eliza demonstrated that 65 percent of managers allocate their time according to what is required to meet business targets. If organisations are serious about addressing work/life issues then they must hold managers accountable for reaching measurable work/life targets.

"This takes it from being a personal interest for managers to an organisational priority."

What's on the horizon in work/life?

Ms Bourke told attendees about some innovative solutions she heard of at the Florida conference. For example, she described a booklet which workplaces can give to staff to help them with elder care. It's called *Five Wishes At Work* and is a living will which elderly people can complete to state their wishes around death and dying. Details at agingwithdignity.org.

Ms Bourke said this was an excellent product and illustrated how workplaces could start addressing the issues of an ageing population. "I don't think employers really understood the implications of the statistics on an ageing population. We assume that when people retire they stop work but in fact 80 percent of people plan to work after retirement, but in a different job in a different way. Employers need to stay ahead of the demographics."

Another innovative application of work/life initiatives was in front-line service occupations where workers suffer a high degree for exhaustion from "emotional labour", for example call centre workers and nurses. She said the exhaustion is linked to de-personalisation and leads to reduced commitment and performance and eventually loss of staff.

A US study of 502 telco employees including operators, sales and service staff and business reps found that an organisational culture which supports work/life balance predicts a lower level of work exhaustion. "The positive emotional energy stemming from a family friendly workplace protects employees from job stressors," said Ms Bourke.

In summarising the themes that had struck her in Florida, Ms Bourke advised:

- Think outside the box and particularly include communities in your thinking
- Remember one size does not fit all, refine strategies to improve access to work and life programmes
- Change your workplace culture through innovative programmes and hard hitting solutions

Work/life balance top future challenge for Australasian managers

Australasian managers overwhelmingly nominated work/life balance as their most important future challenge in a survey undertaken by the Mt Eliza Business School and released earlier this year.

The 2002 Mt Eliza Leadership Index survey shows that managers have shifted their focus since the inaugural survey in 2001 where achieving a work/life balance did not rate among their top five future challenges. This drive for work/life balance was reflected within each generational category with every group nominating it as their top leadership challenge for the future. This was the only future challenge within the survey that cut across generations.

In the current challenges, achieving a reasonable work/life balance rated second overall after "Building your team to achieve outcomes". The younger Generation Y respondents were alone in rating work/life balance as their top current and future challenge. It was the second most important current challenge for baby-boomers but well down the list for Generation X.

The findings also revealed that managers spent as little as ten percent of their time on strategic issues and that they felt challenged, pressured and frustrated within their role. The results contrast with the 2001 findings when managers described themselves as feeling challenged, enthusiastic, determined and stimulated.

Mt Eliza's General Manager of Leadership, Dr Karen Morley, said the results indicate managers were reassessing their priorities in a major way.

"We know that managers have been increasingly working longer hours and putting off tasks such as managing their own careers for the sake of the organisation," Dr Morley said. "We now need to question whether managers have reached the end of their tolerance."

The index also pointed to gender differences in relation to perceived leadership challenges for the future. While men felt their career development and attracting talented staff were most important, women saw their future challenges as being entrepreneurial, innovative and creating vision. www.mteliza.com.au



Australian men want to spend longer at work than women

Most Australians would rather spend less time in paid work according to analysis of data from the Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) survey of 14,000 Australians.

The findings of the analysis were presented by Robert Drago of Pennsylvania State University to a conference in Melbourne in March in a paper entitled *Family Structure, Usual and Preferred Working Hours, and Egalitarianism*.

In their study, Drago and Yi-Ping Tseng of the Melbourne Institute of Applied Economic and Social Research, sought to:

- get a glimpse of actual and preferred working hours across family types
- identify the extent of any time divide for the men or women involved in diverse families
- identify egalitarian parents, and parents who wish to be but are not egalitarian in terms of working hours.

Overall, employed Australian men living in a couple household work an average of 46 hours a week and would prefer to work 42 hours a week.

In contrast, employed women in couple households spend on average 31 hours in

paid work and would like to work 29 hours a week.

Less than one-third of the adult population are couples with dependent children in the home.

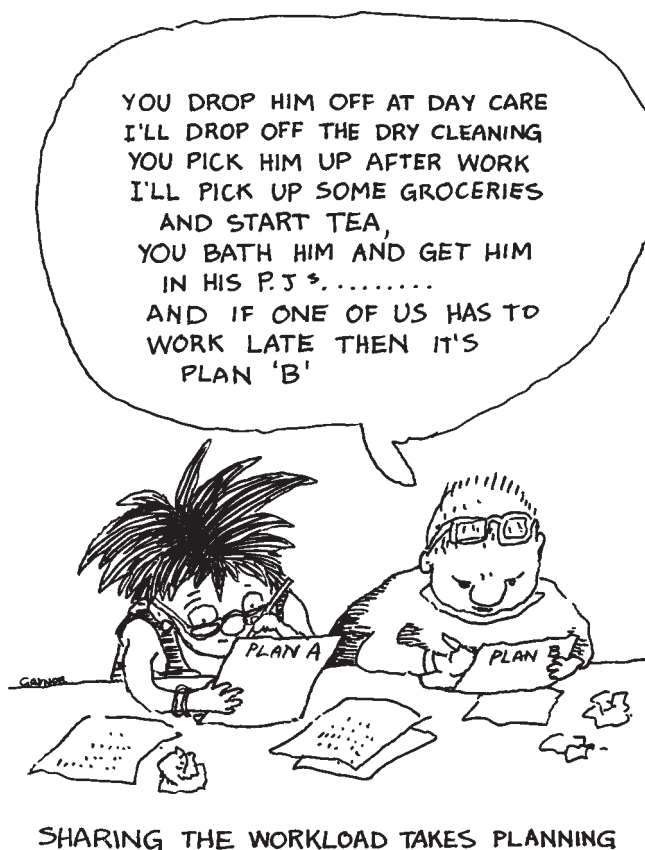
In dual-earner couples with children, men typically work longer hours than women (20 hours per week more) and if people worked their preferred hours, men would still work 18 hours per week more than women.

Drago and Tsen says that many individuals who work short hours would prefer to work longer hours and vice versa, however the average employed adult would prefer fewer hours of employment, the one exception here being employed lone mothers, who would prefer to work longer hours.

“The second major conclusion is that men’s stated work hours preferences are typically longer than those for women. The result holds for lone parents, wherein women express a preference for around 30 hours a week, and men prefer above 40 hours per week.”

The father and mother spend the same number of hours in paid work in just under one-fifth of families with dual-earner couples and children. The authors say that there is evidence that in these families, child care is shared between the parents.

They conclude by saying that “expanding the menu of possible and acceptable work hours arrangements would be a boon to many Australians”.



Families Commission to open next year

Late last year the Government announced the proposed establishment of The Families Commission in July 2004 as part of its confidence and supply agreement with United Future New Zealand.

The Commission will be a separate, government funded organisation, not tied to any ministry. It will be led by up to seven Commissioners and will be responsible for:

- Advocating for families and promoting better understanding of family issues and needs amongst government agencies and in the wider community
- Promoting, purchasing and disseminating research into family issues
- Contributing to policy development across the government as a key stakeholder on family-related issues

Legislation on the establishment of the Commission is expected to be introduced to Parliament within the next few months and passed this year.

United Future Party leader, Peter Dunne, says that attempting to define “family” would be unwise and the Commission would recognise a wide variety of family structures.

United Future MP, Judy Turner, says that one of the overriding roles of the Commission will be to identify stress factors in family life, and the range of coping strategies that families need to thrive rather than just survive. “Working parents often struggle with issues of priorities in a work environment that doesn’t consider their needs. The Commission will be able to add its voice to those who already champion the cause of better work and family interface. It is unacceptable that parents have to make career versus children choices.

“The answer does not however lie just with employers creating more family friendly working schedules, and more flexible exit and re-entry points, but includes the need for government to value the role of parenting to the degree that parents who want to have realistic options to stay at home during those important pre-school years.”

Social Services and Employment Minister, Steve Maharey, has welcomed the focus of the Commission on families caring for children or other dependents. He says the Commission will “join-up” the expertise of non-government, academic and government sectors. “It will act as an advocate for families generally, rather than dealing with an individual family’s specific case. As such it will have a close working relationship with other advocacy agencies, including the Office of the Commissioner for Children.”



Judy Turner MP

Paid parental leave knocked sideways in Australia

The latest news from Australia is that Prime Minister John Howard has not completely ruled out taxpayer-funded maternity leave but is looking at an overhaul of the family payments systems.

On March 2, Mr Howard stopped short of committing to a timetable for a decision on paid maternity leave but said it or “some equivalent, is still on the table”. However, he said that paid leave should not be seen as a catch-all solution but needed to be

considered with other measures to support women who worked part-time and those who stayed at home.

Sex Discrimination Commissioner Pru Goward said that forcing mothers back to work in part-time jobs after giving birth could not replace paid leave, and could be difficult for both baby and mother.

“It’s the decent thing to do to ensure that all women, whether they’re working full-time or part-time, can be home with their babies full time for the first few months of life.”

Greens seek legislation on flexible work

Green Party MP and women’s spokesperson Sue Kedgley has drawn up a Bill which she said aims to make working life easier for working parents of young and disabled children.

“The pressure of trying to work fulltime and care for young children at the same time is putting a huge strain on families and young children,” Ms Kedgley said. “It is in everyone’s interests that we help parents with young or disabled children to live more balanced lives.

“My Employment Relations (Flexible Working Hours) Amendment Bill will give employees with young and dependent children the right to request reduced, part-time or flexible hours. Employers will have a legal duty to consider any such request seriously, and must be able to demonstrate good reasons for a refusal.”

The Bill will apply to parents of children aged under five, and parents of disabled children aged up to 18 and is based on UK legislation being introduced in April this year.

“It will not only make life better and more enriching for parents and children, but will also benefit employers,” Ms Kedgley said. “Overseas studies show that family-friendly strategies in the workplace reduce staff turnover and recruitment costs. They also reduce absentee rates, and improve morale, employee loyalty and workplace productivity. Greater flexibility will enable parents who would otherwise leave the labour market to remain in employment after their parental leave.”

Under the Bill, employees who have worked for the same employer for at least six months could apply to work reduced or flexible hours. They would make their requests in writing, setting out the working patterns they wanted, and showing how it could be made to work. Employers would have to formally assess how such flexible working could be achieved.

“Where cases can’t be resolved in the workplace, binding mediation and arbitration would be available, as would the opportunity for an employee to go to the Employment Tribunal. However, hopefully recourse to mediation and arbitration will be rare, as this Bill really provides a win-win scenario,” Ms Kedgley said.

The Bill is currently awaiting selection from the private member’s ballot.

Please Read On...

University policies and procedures for the allocation of workloads

This policy from Massey University outlines the university's policies around allocation of workload. The principles behind the allocation of workloads include that workloads be "reasonable" and "safe". The paper also outlines the disputes procedure to be followed if a staff member and his/her manager do not agree on work allocation.

Development of the policy goes back to 1998, when staff workloads became a concern after a number of research reports were commissioned by several unions on members' workloads and stress. As part of the agreement reached during the 1998 salary negotiations, the then Vice-Chancellor undertook to establish a Workloads Advisory Group in June 1999.

In their final report, released in August 2000, the Workloads Advisory Group provided the rationale that formed the basis of the Workloads Policy.

Further information about the policy can be found at www.quality.massey.ac.nz

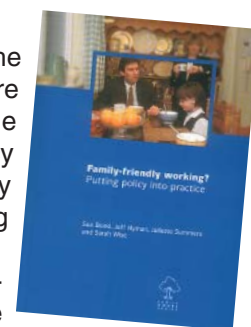
Family-friendly working? Putting policy into practice

This book summarises recent research on family-friendly initiatives in the financial sector in Scotland. The study highlights how 17 companies are establishing family-friendly policies and explores the extent to which the presence of trade unions influences policy provision. It explores how policy is translated into practice in four companies, what progress voluntary initiatives are making, and whether they are having an impact on converting policies into practice.

Of the 17 companies studied, only two said they were moving in a family-friendly direction primarily in order to help their staff achieve balance between their working and domestic lives. All the companies were motivated largely by business competitive concerns and the need to meet statutory requirements.

Gender was not an important variable in the uptake of family-friendly policies, though women were more likely than men to change their contracted working hours. They were also more likely than men to feel they did not have access to the family leave they wanted.

Authors: Sue Bond, Jeff Hyman, Juliette Summers and Sarah Wise. ISBN 1 84263 050 4. Available from Marston Book Services, PO Box 269, Abingdon, Oxon OX 4YN, UK. Ph: 44 01235 465500, fax: 44 01235 465555.



Upcoming Events

EEO Trust Work & Life Awards 2003

The closing date for entries in this year's EEO Trust Work & Life Awards is Thursday May 29. Developing an entry is a relatively straightforward process, says EEO Trust Executive Director Trudie McNaughton, but she advises people considering entering their workplaces or managers to allow plenty of time for consultation within the workplace to ensure their entry presents a complete picture of work/life balance initiatives and their effects.

A record number of organisations entered the awards last year. Trudie McNaughton says she was particularly pleased with the number of smaller organisations entering and encourages small workplaces to consider entering this year. "While small organisations might not have comprehensive formal policies, they are often doing excellent things to help staff maintain balance in their lives. We'd like to hear from more of them."

A copy of the Entry Guidelines is available from the EEO Trust.