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“BUSINESS VERSUS BATH-TIME” - THE WORK AND FAMILY REPORT

“Business versus Bath-time” is a qualitative report prepared by the Office of Women’s Policy in Victoria. The project commenced in April 1998, and underwent significant revision in its scope and focus during its initial stages. It was completed in February 2000 and the Office of Women’s Policy expects to publish the report later in the year.

Briefly, the report examines:

- the types of family friendly policies and practices available in Victorian public and private industry sectors; and
- the issues women (and men) face in the workplace when accessing an organisation’s family friendly policies.

Today I would like to give you an overview of the report which included a literature review, an analysis of data obtained from focus group discussion and a questionnaire, as well the report’s key findings.

Part One: Literature Review

The literature review examined a number of areas, including:

- the social and industrial context of the work and family ‘debate’;
- industry responses;
- work/life findings for 1994-1996 from the Equal Opportunity for Women in the Workplace Agency; and
- prevailing issues including Australia’s federal industrial relations environment, paid maternity leave, and aged care issues.

Social and Industrial Context

With regard to the changing nature of families, it was noted that the traditional male ‘breadwinner’ / female full-time caregiver model of the family is no longer a reality for the majority of Australian families. Currently, such families constitute just over one third of the Australian family population. A significant prevailing issue for women in Australian families however, is that of unpaid work in the household. While most Australian families with dependent children experience both parents in paid employment, the gender division of household or ‘domestic’ work is still apparent. The report noted research indicating that women continue to undertake 70% of the unpaid work in Australian households, and are more likely than men to reduce or leave paid employment to fulfil these responsibilities.

With regard to changing workplaces, it was recognised that the following factors have had a significant effect:

- the changing roles and expectations of women and men;
- the increasing participation of women in the paid workforce;
- changing patterns of part time and full time work;
- a new industrial relations framework; and
- an increasing awareness of the link between supportive workplaces and productivity.

Other key issues in this section were the decline in full-time work and the growth of casual part-time employment for both sexes as well as divided opinion regarding the impact of a changing industrial relations environment on workplace flexibility,

particularly the introduction of Enterprise Agreements and Australian Workplace Agreements.

Industry Responses

The second area, concerning industry responses, looked at family-friendly practices and organisational factors. The need for employers to adapt workplace conditions to suit the growing number of employees with family responsibilities was noted, as was the benefits of implementing family friendly practices. These are often discussed, and as we know, include:

- increased employee productivity;
- a motivated workplace;
- the ability to attract skilled, efficient and diverse staff;
- an enhanced retention rate of experienced staff;
- an increased rate of return from maternity leave;
- a reduction in unplanned absenteeism; and
- and an improvement in the public image of the organisation.

The importance of developing a culture within the workplace that supports the use of family friendly practices by its employees and that is championed by senior management, was noted. The literature here suggested that Australia is only in the early period of improvement in this area. While the primary focus still remains on solving particular issues rather than tackling the problem of workplace culture, the steps already taken by some organisations such as NRMA's strategies developed in the early 1990's, was acknowledged.

Work / Life Findings

In the three years to 1997, the Equal Opportunity for Women in the Workplace Agency found that for organisations subject to reporting requirements:

- a significant number (between 15% and 20%) are not assisting employees with family responsibilities through the provision of permanent part-time work with pro-rata conditions.
- in 1996, 13% of male-dominated organisations and 16% of gender-mixed organisations provided paid maternity leave. 7% of female-dominated organisations provided paid maternity leave.
- male-dominated organisations were less likely than other organisations to include commitment to AA/EEO as a criterion for promotion as part of their performance criteria for managers and supervisors.

Prevailing Issues

The fourth area identified Australia's federal industrial relations environment, paid maternity leave, and aged care as prevailing issues that required further examination.

According to the Australian Centre for Industrial Relations Research Training, the most widespread family friendly measures within workplace agreements are:

- unpaid personal leave (9.4%);
- paid personal leave (in addition to sick leave (3.8%); and
- job sharing and paid parental leave (3.2%).

Other forms examined appear in only 1% of agreements or less. Despite this, only 1% of managers stated that personal leave was not available for the purpose of caring for family members, indicating that informal arrangements are often utilised in the workplace.

A significant proportion of the growth in casual employment has been that of women's employment. Casual employment is inherently less secure and retains less benefits than full time work. The literature suggests that this type of employment

should be strictly limited to the types of work that are temporary, seasonal, or variable.

In Australia in 1998, women accounted for 73.4% of the total number of workers employed part-time. In order for permanent part-time work to enable access to promotion and training opportunities, it must be incorporated into the core workforce, and made available to employees at their choice, where and when required.

Although one of the 163 signatories to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), Australia is only one of six that does not provide paid maternity leave. Some of the literature reviewed suggests that the provision of paid maternity leave encourages women's attachment to the labour force, and allows an increased retention of workers as well as promoting equal employment opportunities. In addition, women have been identified as one of the groups of workers likely to be required to meet employer's recruitment needs in the future.

The issue of aged care is becoming increasingly important in Australia. In 1993, over 300,000 people under the age of 65 provided substantial caring responsibilities for an elderly or long-term ill relative, or a relative with a disability. It is estimated that this figure will continue to increase and in the continuing efforts by organisations to become family-friendly, provisions for workers with aged care concerns will become increasingly important.

Part Two: Data Collection and Analysis

Some of the issues highlighted in the literature review were revisited in part two of the report, which examines the responses of participants in four focus groups as well as their written responses to a brief questionnaire. A total of 37 participants, 34 women and 3 men, aged from 25 to 55 years participated. They worked across various industries from the small business, medium business, large corporate business, and public sectors. Participants were asked about the kinds of family-friendly policies available within their organisation, whether they used them, and the effects on the employee as a result. The discussion focused on:

- work practices;
- organisational factors;
- career factors; and
- participant's recommendations.

Work Practices

Responses to the questionnaire indicated that the most common family friendly practices available in the participant's organisations were:

- maternity leave (27)
- family leave (25)
- paternity leave (25), and
- part time work (21)

When asked which practices they would also like available, participants rated highest:

- working from home (16)
- the provision of childcare (12)
- variable full time and part time work (12)
- work and family information (11)
- support to access or organise childcare (11)
- additional leave for school holidays (11), and
- flexible hours (11)

The workplace practices discussed in greater depth within the focus groups included maternity leave, part-time work, working from home, flexible working hours, parental/carer's leave, child care, and job sharing.

Maternity Leave

According to the questionnaire, maternity leave was the most widely available work practice amongst the participants. Nevertheless, those who used maternity leave generally gave negative comments about the experience. They said:

“I said I will be back in one year but the job was gone; the second time I took six months and came back to a lower position (but they paid me the same). So I left and got another job. I wish I made a fuss - but in a private organisation you can't rock the boat.”

Another participant remarked:

“While you are on maternity leave your position gets reviewed or your replacement is fantastic or better than you were.”

and another said:

“People are scared to go on leave - just not being there brings on a review of the position - people question if we have not filled the position do we actually need it?”

Part-time work

Part-time work was fairly widely available to most participants, however access to part-time work was still an issue for some, as were the disadvantages associated with going part-time. Some of the comments regarding access included:

“Part-time work is not available in my office - I am the only senior woman with family so I will have to challenge the barrier.”

“For the first three years I looked for a part-time position - I could not find one, so in the end I gave in and stayed full-time and put the kids in child care.”

In discussing promotion and training opportunities for part-time workers, participants commented:

“Bonuses - they are impossible to get if you are working part-time - you have to be seen to be doing enough work to get a bonus - part-timers are not taken seriously.”

and

“If I went to proper part-time I would lose the quality of work - it is a dilemma for people like myself - full-time with a good salary and a good job versus part-time with a poorer quality job.”

However, there were positive aspects to going part-time, and these were highlighted by the following comments:

“The time management skills came with working part-time - I started to be more realistic and chipped away at a task rather than leaving it to the end. I also think the quality of my work is better.”

and

“I work for a firm for 3 days a week and am at home with the kids 2 days - it is fantastic.”

Working from Home

As a relatively new phenomenon, the issue of working from home generated some interesting responses. It is worth remembering at this point that working from home was the flexible work practice rated highest on the list that participants would like to have available in their workplace. In general, this option appeared more accessible for small business participants who said:

“We have remote access and encourage staff on the road to work on the road and at home. It enables them to get work done when it suits them - as long as they are achieving the results.”

Other small businesses had only begun to dabble with the option of working from home, but it was the medium and large business participants who reported the most difficulties with accessing working from home. Large corporate participants said:

“Working from home is a hot potato - some positions are suited to this and some are not - it is almost a discriminatory area and there are a few problems with that.”

and

“If you are in manufacturing or research and development there is no chance to work from home but if you are in Info Tech it is very flexible. We are grappling with this.”

Flexible working hours

Flexible working hours were found to be available to over half the employees in the medium and large corporate groups, and for just under half the public sector participants. For small business participants, only one third indicated these arrangements were available. Where they were, however, the situation generally drew a positive response. Participants said:

“As a male I negotiated an arrangement to leave work early - it was a reasonable hour, not as early as 4pm - and take work home. It was a win-win situation.”

and

“The combination of being able to set your own hours and days, with the choice of working in the office or at home is the best.”

Parental/Carer's leave

The discussion on parental/carer's leave demonstrated the disadvantage in combining leave entitlements. Wolcott (1993) has suggested that the use of sick leave and annual leave by an employee for the care of children (or other family member) can adversely effect the performance and wellbeing of employees. As one public sector participant noted:

“The care of any person within a specified list comes out of sick leave - so effectively you are penalised for looking after family.”

Child Care

Child care was one of the most discussed issues across all focus groups, and only four participants indicated its availability in the workplace in response to the questionnaire. Participants discussed the cost of child care, the use of family members and friends, employer-sponsored child care, and issues with school holiday periods.

Participants from most groups agreed that the cost of child care is prohibitive. They said:

“There is really no way you could afford to put a child into child care unless you were earning \$40,000 - \$50,000.”

Those who were forced to rely on family members and friends for care felt guilty for doing so, and felt they were being exploitative. The provision of child care by organisations drew a mixed response, with some participants reporting that fixed places and subsidised care were available but under-utilised, while another participant indicated that the prohibitive cost of child care in Melbourne had meant the company was unable to offer the child care available in their Sydney office which had resulted in an 80% return to work rate. School holiday periods were particularly difficult times for parents, and the provision of school holiday programs was often mitigated by them not being age-appropriate.

Job sharing

Job sharing was the last practice discussed within the focus groups. This option was currently available to just over half the participants, and did not generate as much discussion as the practices mentioned earlier. One participant from the large corporate group said:

“Return to work rate - we introduced job sharing and part-time work - our retention rate jumped from 20% to 80%.”

Organisational Factors

The second key area discussed by participants within the focus groups were organisational factors that effected their use of family-friendly work practices. These factors included:

- organisational culture and attitudes
- economic, industry sector and occupational grouping, and
- employment conditions.

Organisational culture and attitudes

The issue of organisational culture drew a strong reaction from all groups. Generally, participants found the culture of their workplace to be a negative influence. Responses included:

“Attitudes of department managers are indifferent to change because they have been there for a long time. For example, one guy in the production area asked for parental leave - the response was ‘what have you got a wife for?’”

and

“I worked in a male dominated organisation once and a young man told me he had to lie when he was picking up his kid - the culture of the

organisation was that men stayed back late networking or 'dodging bath time'."

Economic, industry sector, and occupational grouping

Other participants observed that particular jobs and industries made balancing work and family commitments difficult. One small business participant said:

"People don't die between 9am - 5pm so in the funeral industry it is difficult to manage family and work - the nature of the industry makes it difficult."

Participants from a medium-sized business in the construction industry also found the work and family balance difficult to achieve. Other participants however, found that their positions in the health industry (particularly hospital shift work) actually assisted their work and family balance, though this was not the case for all health workers. Seniority was an issue for some participants, particularly in the small business arena. One participant commented:

Sometimes there is more flexibility as you get to the top of an organisation but it is not always exercised - the higher you get, you're expected to drive things more."

Economic factors in the work and family debate were also discussed by participants, and disappointingly, these often seem to outweigh other factors such as employee morale or staff retention. One large corporate business participant noted:

"Hours are allocated to a desk not to a person. They refuse to rethink the work process. However, they are now starting to think about it because ten staff are pregnant in one batch so they are looking at work allocation from an economic point of view."

Employment conditions

Employment conditions such as workplace arrangements and agreements, as well as education and information in the workplace also provided a range of responses.

Small business participants reported both advantages and disadvantages in the use of informal workplace practices, and varying responses were received across all groups regarding the use of workplace agreements. One medium business participant emphasised the issue is often one of knowledge. They said:

"I'm now nearly 40 years old and have only lately got the confidence to push and stand up for myself - for someone younger and on a lesser salary they need to ask for help and they have less to bargain with; you don't know how to negotiate or understand the legislation or the parameters - people don't know the family friendly conditions in the Act."

In discussing employment conditions, participants also highlighted the importance of being able to access family friendly policies. Access can be hindered by cultural factors and a lack of knowledge, education or awareness. Finally, participants discussed the issue of performance assessment, which on the whole was viewed as detrimental to achieving a work and family balance. Participants said:

"If a performance indicator is the attendance level then you feel you are letting the team down if you are taking leave for family or other reasons, so you come to work when you or your children are ill."

and

“People are being set up to fail - if key performance indicators are not met and you don’t get the bonus, it results in lower self esteem, etc.”

Career Factors

The logical follow-on from the discussion of organisational factors and work practices was for the participants to discuss how these elements affected them personally in terms of their career aspirations.

Some participants, as a result of taking up the option of part-time work, were seen as less committed to their jobs, and unsuitable for training opportunities. Two small business participants said:

“Colleagues can perceive that you have a casual mindset - that you only come to do your hours and don’t ask me anything else.”

and

“The discrimination can be very subtle - as a part-timer you are less inclined to be offered training, or other opportunities that come along are missed.”

Participants with children found that accommodating their needs affected their working lives in various ways, whether it was for the financial implications or the impact of a negative organisational culture. Participants said:

“You cannot have a family and a career because of problems with child care - even if you do have the perfect partner.”

and

“I returned to work after being at home with my children - I was asked at a job interview why I had a gap in my work record - ‘what were you doing?’”

Other problems included the scheduling of meetings at breakfast time, the difference in time constraints as a result of the transition for children from day care into primary school, and the effect of delaying a career as a result of childrearing.

A medium business participant who had taken maternity leave on two occasions found returning to work unsatisfactory both times with regard to the positions she was given on her return. Another participant commented that their career had ‘stopped dead’, while another felt that finding the balance was a manageable situation that had its advantages.

These comments highlight the need for organisations to ensure they do not remain static, but to continue to develop the workplace to facilitate the changing needs of their employees over time.

Participant’s Recommendations

The recommendations of the participants focused on accessibility and awareness, changing organisational culture, funding for child care, and developing provisions for employees with aged care responsibilities.

Some of the comments included:

“It is about communicating your policies and practices and then making them a reality and just not words, and educating people to use them wisely.”

and

“Organisational culture needs to change so as not to be only driven by monetary and business factors, but cultures that value family life.”

Summary of Key Findings

Some of the key findings of this report include:

- that a number of barriers still exist in achieving a satisfactory outcome in balancing work and family life, such as organisational culture and attitudes, employment conditions, and industry sector;
- that negotiation within workplace agreements and enterprise agreements can be disadvantageous to women, particularly women from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, and women with disabilities;
- that many organisations have no (or very few) formalised family friendly policies available for the use of their employees, with resulting disadvantages for employees and the organisation; and
- that employees who utilise family friendly practices to achieve a work and family balance often experience a negative effect on their career, including unsatisfactory outcomes after utilising maternity leave (such as job review or dissolution), a fear of losing job quality, less access to training, and a lack of promotion and bonus opportunities.

In summary, the report demonstrated that employees across a number of sectors and from a variety of industry groups continue to have difficulty in balancing work and family commitments. Becoming or continuing to be a family-friendly workplace requires more than just the existence of policies that may assist employees with their work and family balance. It also requires organisations to: make policies accessible, encourage employees with family commitments to make use of them, develop a workplace culture that is supportive of family-friendly measures, and ensure the workplace responds to the changing needs of employees. This commitment requires time, effort, and in some cases, money. The long-term benefits of a family-friendly workplace would suggest the commitment is worth it.