



4 Data

The data used in this paper are derived from the Australian Workplace Industrial Relations Survey (AWIRS95), a large-scale survey of workplaces and workers conducted in 1995 by the then Australian Commonwealth Department of Industrial Relations. The survey has four components, including a number of sub-components containing specialised questions on labour relations. The primary components are: main survey; panel survey; employee survey; and small workplace survey. Each survey was administered at a “workplace”, defined as “a single physical area occupied by the establishment from which it engages in productive activity on a relatively permanent basis”. Although the AWIRS95 data were collected prior to changes brought under the Workplace Relations Act 1996, the nature of employment relations has changed only gradually since that time and the conclusions drawn using these data remain valid. A more recent Australian data set does not exist.

The main survey comprised face-to-face interview-based questionnaires administered to the most senior manager, the manager responsible for workplace relations and a delegate from the union representing the majority of employees in the workplace. The sample for the main survey comprised 2001 workplaces with 20 or more employees, and covered all industry sectors except agriculture, forestry and fishing, and defence.

The employee survey involved a self-administered questionnaire that was either collected by the interview team or returned by mail. The sample for the survey was randomly selected from lists of employees at each of the workplaces in the main sample, where management gave permission for this to occur. Permission was granted at 1,896 workplaces, or 95 per cent of the sample. A total of 30,005 questionnaires were distributed resulting in 19,155 employee responses suitable for analysis. The survey provides detailed information on employee wages, weekly hours worked, and a large range of individual characteristics such as level of educational attainment and number and age of dependent children. A key feature of the survey in respect to the current study, is that each respondent can be linked to workplace-level data collected in the main survey, allowing comparison of individuals at the same workplace.⁷

The AWIRS95 data set contains questions on a wide range of work practices that may assist employees to balance family and work demands. This paper considers four work practices: control over start and finish times (hours flexibility); access to a telephone for family reasons; availability of permanent part-time employment; and the type of leave usually used when taking time off to care for a sick family member.

The variable measuring control over start and finish times is constructed from a question about the amount of influence the employee has over when they start and finish work. An employee is regarded as having control over start and finish

times if they have “a lot” or “some” influence over when they start and finish work.⁸ A detailed definition and description of the construction of all of the variables used in this paper can be found in Appendix B.

Employees were asked whether they would, if needed, be able to use a telephone at work for family reasons. The question contains the option “not relevant to me”, which means that it is possible to restrict the analysis to employees for whom access to a telephone for family reasons is relevant.

An employee with limited family responsibilities who takes one day a year as leave without pay to care for a sick family member is in a very different position to an employee who takes 10 days each year for similar reasons.

Only 8.5 per cent of employees responded that having access to a telephone for family reasons was “not relevant to me”.

The question about whether the employee, if needed, could get permanent part-time employment similarly included the option “not relevant to me”. A somewhat higher 24.0

per cent of employees responded that permanent part-time work at their current workplace was not relevant to them.⁹

Finally, employees were asked to indicate from a list of options how they usually take time off to care for a sick family member. The options were: paid family leave; use own holiday leave; use own sick leave; take time off and make it up later (flexitime); take leave without pay; other way of taking time off; and not able to take any time at all off. Multiple responses were allowed.

A number of issues exist in regard to the question about how time is taken off to care for a sick family member. First, there is no information about the frequency or usage of the options provided for different types of leave. An employee with limited family responsibilities who takes one day a year as leave without pay to care for a sick family member is in a very different position to an employee who takes 10 days each year for similar reasons. Second, the question asks what employees *usually* do, rather than what they are *allowed* to do, under their current employment conditions. Hence responses reflect what is formally (and/or informally) permitted as well as differences in employee preferences. Third, there is no ranking of employee preferences for type of leave taken. This means that it is not possible to rank the different ways of taking time off from “most family-friendly” to “least family-friendly”. For example, some employees might prefer to use paid family leave, while others might prefer to take time off and make it up later.