



## 7 Concluding comments

This paper presents the first large-scale analysis of the extent to which employees within organisations in Australia have differential access to a range of family-friendly work practices. Such practices include: control over start and finish times (hours flexibility); access to a telephone for family reasons; availability of permanent part-time employment if needed; and the type of leave used to care for a sick family member. The extent to which differential access to family-friendly work practices is due to differences between workplaces and/or differences among employees within the same organisation is a question that is of policy importance.

The analysis reveals that the variation in access to each of the work practices is greater among employees working in the same workplace than between workplaces. There are relatively few workplaces in which a high proportion of employees reported having access to each work practice.

Statistical modelling was used to explore which employee characteristics are associated with having control over start and finish times, access to a telephone for family reasons, and the availability of permanent part-time employment if needed. In general, employers are most likely to offer family-friendly work practices to employees with high skills levels or in whom they have invested training or other resources. This has significant ramifications for those in the labour market who are most vulnerable but unable to access these work practices.

It is worth highlighting that the research in this paper is based upon the latest data available, collected in 1995. There is an urgent need for a new AWIRS-style survey to provide more recent data.

There are several implications for policy of the analysis presented in this paper.

- Evidence of differential access of employees within organisations to family-friendly work practices means that policy makers need to focus on increasing the availability of such practices within organisations to *all* employees, regardless of occupational or employment status or training, who would benefit from access to these practices.
- While there is strong evidence from other studies that the work practices examined in this paper assist employees in balancing work and family responsibilities, the analysis of the AWIRS95 data reveals that there is no relationship between having dependent children and the likelihood of having access to family-friendly work practices. In other words, those identified as having the most need for family-friendly work practices are no more likely to be able to access these work practices than are otherwise similar employees with no child or non-child dependants.

- The finding that employees with the lowest levels of education, job tenure and organisation-provided training are least likely to have access to family-friendly work practices means that policies need to pay particular attention to the situation of these types of employees.

The question, of course, remains as to what policy instruments the government can use to increase the coverage of access to family-friendly work practices, particularly to employees with dependent children or other care responsibilities. Possibilities include regulation of the conditions of employment via industrial relations legislation and information campaigns aimed at raising the awareness of employers to the potential workplace benefits of offering family-friendly work practices.

Any attempts to increase access to such work practices via legislative or other means must take account of the risk that if the costs to employers are perceived to increase, then employers may choose not to employ those likely to make heavy use of these work practices, or alternatively, employees with family responsibilities may bear the costs indirectly through lower wages and conditions.

Attempts to educate employer groups about the benefits of assisting employees to balance work and family commitments will be strengthened by highlighting the long-term pecuniary benefits of such policies to employers, for example, through reduced tardiness and absenteeism, better morale, improved retention of workers and greater productivity.