

Summary

The interaction between work and family has long been of concern to policy makers and researchers. Initially this concern was driven by the substantial increase in the rate of female labour force participation over recent decades, particularly of mothers, and what the implications of this were for the ability of mothers to combine paid employment and child-rearing successfully.

More recently, there has been a growing awareness that the balance between work and family is also important for men. An important component of the ability of people to balance work and family commitments is the availability of working arrangements that facilitate the reconciliation of work and family life – often referred to as “family-friendly” work practices.

This study analyses the extent to which access to family-friendly work practices is influenced or determined by differential access *within* organisations as compared with differential access *between* organisations. The analysis is based upon the Australian Workplace Industrial Relations Survey 1995 (AWIRS95), a linked employee–employer data set. The linked nature of the data allows information from employers and employees to be combined, providing a unique perspective on the incentives and constraints employers face when deciding which work practices to make available to which employees. These data allow the first large-scale study in Australia of differences in access to family-friendly work practices amongst employees working in the same workplace.

Four particular family-friendly work arrangements are analysed: control over start and finish times; access to a telephone for family reasons; availability of permanent part-time employment; and type of leave used for the care of a sick family member. These work practices have been chosen because they have been shown to be of importance in assisting people to balance work and family responsibilities.

For each of the work practices examined, there is a great deal of variation in access to family-friendly work practices among employees in the same workplace, as well as between employees working in different workplaces. Nonetheless, the variation in access to a range of work practices is greater among employees working in the same workplace than the variation between workplaces. Indeed, there are relatively few workplaces in which a high proportion of employees reported having access to each work practice. For example, in only 35 per cent of workplaces did more than 70 per cent of employees report having control over start and finish times, and in only 6 per cent of workplaces did more than 90 per cent of employees report having flexibility of hours.

The finding that employees have differential access within organisations to family-friendly work practices raises the question as to which characteristics impact upon the likelihood of an employee having access to, or using, these

practices. A multivariate regression framework (random effects probit) is used to identify the determinants of access to family-friendly work practices. The statistical methodology employed allows the effects of each factor to be determined whilst holding constant the impact of other factors.

A number of employee characteristics are found to be related to the probability of accessing family-friendly work practices after controlling for the impact of other factors. The most important findings are:

- Employees with dependent children are no more likely to report having access to family-friendly work practices than are other otherwise similar childless employees.
- Employers are most likely to offer family-friendly work practices to employees with high skills levels or in whom the employer has invested in the form of training.
- After controlling for other factors, there are no differences between men and women in the probability of having control over start and finish times or access to a telephone for family reasons. However, women are more likely than otherwise similar men to be able to get permanent part-time work in their current workplace if needed.
- There is a very strong occupation effect, with professionals, managers and administrators being much more likely than otherwise similar employees in other occupations to have control over start and finish times and access to a telephone for family reasons.

These findings have important implications for policy. First, 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. Second, 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.