



University of  
South Australia

Centre for  
**Work + Life**

# A qualitative study of the circumstances and outcomes of the National Employment Standards Right to Request provisions

## A Report to the Fair Work Commission



Natalie Skinner, Barbara Pocock & Claire Hutchinson  
Centre for Work + Life, University of South Australia

© Centre for Work + Life 2015

Published by the Centre for Work + Life  
University of South Australia  
<http://www.unisa.edu.au/Research/Centre-for-Work-Life>

**STREET ADDRESS**

St Bernards Road  
Magill SA 5072  
Adelaide

**POSTAL ADDRESS**

GPO Box 2471  
Adelaide, SA 5001 Australia

Authors: Natalie Skinner, Barbara Pocock and Claire Hutchinson

Title: A qualitative study of the circumstances and outcomes of the NES right to request provisions

ISBN: 978-0-9875120-7-9

**A Report for the Fair Work Commission**

This report is the product of independent research by the authors. The authors take responsibility for the contents of the report and the views it contains are theirs, not those of the staff or Members of the Fair Work Commission.

## Table of contents

Executive summary .....	1
<i>Overview of study methodology</i> .....	2
<i>Flexible work arrangements – key findings</i> .....	2
<i>Extended unpaid parental leave – key findings</i> .....	6
<i>Conclusion</i> .....	8
<b>METHOD .....</b>	<b>10</b>
Recruitment of employee sample .....	10
<i>Recruitment and selection of participants</i> .....	10
<i>Eligibility criteria for inclusion in the study</i> .....	11
<i>Employee sample characteristics</i> .....	12
Recruitment of employer sample.....	14
<i>Recruitment and selection of participants</i> .....	14
<i>Eligibility criteria for inclusion in the study</i> .....	14
<i>Employer sample characteristics</i> .....	14
Data analysis .....	16
Australian Work + Life Index (AWALI) survey 2012 / 2014 .....	16
<b>FLEXIBLE WORK ARRANGEMENTS – EMPLOYEE STUDY.....</b>	<b>18</b>
Knowledge of the Right to Request a flexible work arrangement under the NES .....	18
<i>AWALI 2012/2014</i> .....	18
Type of change to work arrangement requested .....	19
<i>AWALI 2012</i> .....	20
Reasons for requesting flexibility .....	20
<i>AWALI 2012</i> .....	21
Length of time requested for flexible work arrangement.....	21
Request making processes and outcomes .....	21
<i>Person to whom request was made</i> .....	21
<i>Procedure for making the request</i> .....	21
<i>Time elapsed between submission of request and response</i> .....	22
Accepted requests.....	22
<i>AWALI 2012/2014</i> .....	22
<i>Factors perceived to facilitate a positive response to a flexibility request</i> .....	23
<i>Permanency of arrangement</i> .....	25
<i>Organisational review of existing flexible work arrangements over time</i> .....	25
<i>Change to work arrangements – workload, duties and responsibilities</i> .....	25
Impact of flexible work arrangement on personal and family well being.....	28
Impact of a lack of access to flexibility .....	30
Refusal of requests.....	31
<i>Response from employer</i> .....	31
<i>Impact of request refusal</i> .....	33
<i>AWALI 2012/2014</i> .....	33
<b>EXTENDED UNPAID PARENTAL LEAVE – EMPLOYEE STUDY .....</b>	<b>34</b>
Duration of extended unpaid parental leave .....	34
Reason for requesting extended unpaid parental leave .....	34
Awareness of entitlements to unpaid parental leave under the National Employment Standards .....	35
Process of requesting an extension to unpaid parental leave .....	36

Factors impacting on request outcome .....	36
Outcomes associated with having a request for extended leave accepted .....	38
Work arrangements on return from extended unpaid parental leave .....	39
Impact of a lack of access to extended unpaid parental leave .....	40
Impact of having a request for extended unpaid parental leave rejected .....	41
<b>EMPLOYER STUDY .....</b>	<b>42</b>
How employer participants became aware of the Right to Request .....	42
Perceived impact of the Right to Request on employee requesting .....	43
Request-making processes .....	45
Number of requests in the previous 12 months .....	46
Reasons for employee requests .....	47
Types of arrangements requested .....	48
Request-making outcomes .....	50
Reasons for accepting requests .....	50
Reasons for refusing requests .....	52
Management of workers with flexibility or extended unpaid leave .....	54
<i>Job roles and responsibilities</i> .....	54
<i>Internal review of arrangements</i> .....	57
Circumstances under which a flexibility arrangement ends .....	58
Impact on organisational outcomes .....	59
<i>Productivity and performance</i> .....	59
<i>Retention and turnover</i> .....	63
Impact on employees' health and wellbeing .....	65
<b>CONCLUSION .....</b>	<b>67</b>
<b>IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE .....</b>	<b>67</b>
<b>REFERENCES .....</b>	<b>71</b>
<b>APPENDIX .....</b>	<b>73</b>
<i>Employee interview schedule – flexible work arrangements</i> .....	73
<i>Employee interview schedule – flexible work arrangements</i> .....	76
<i>Employer interview schedule – flexible work arrangements and extended unpaid parental leave</i> .....	79

Generally I think it's a very good thing. I think it's one of those situations if you can grant a request that may have a small level perhaps of inconvenience, the rewards that it will bring in will be quite huge in terms of a happy employee. Obviously a happy employee is going to be a better employee. It's obviously good for attraction, if people know that that flexibility is available. It's good from a moral and ethical viewpoint, if you can help people do something that improves their work-life balance. It's good for everybody and it's good for productivity. On the whole I think it's fantastic.

*(Female HR consultant, professional, scientific and technical services)*

## Executive summary

This report describes a qualitative research project which investigates two provisions in the National Employment Standards (NES): the right to request a flexible work arrangement and the right to request an extension of unpaid parental leave of up to 12 additional months beyond the first period of 12 months unpaid leave.

The aim of this research project was to examine employers' and employees' experiences of the circumstances under which these requests are made, the request-making process, the outcomes of such requests including the factors that led to acceptance or refusal of requests and the benefits and challenges of such arrangements for organisations and employees.

This research was conducted in August-September 2012 (employees) and 2013 (employers). Whilst the employer interviews were conducted after the 1 July 2013 amendment to the eligibility criteria for the right to request a flexible work arrangement, no employer participants reported receiving a request between 1 July 2013 and the time of interview (August-September 2013). Therefore the employer interviews address requests received from parents requiring a change to their work arrangements to care for a pre-school aged child or a child aged up to 18 with a disability.

There was substantial similarity between employees' and employers' views and experiences. It was a clear priority for employees to ensure that their young children had access to high quality care, whether this was provided by themselves or others. This was a major driver of requests for flexibility and extended unpaid parental leave. It was also clear that employer participants understood and respected their employees' need to ensure quality care for their children. Both groups reported that refusal of requests was rare. Overall, both groups took a 'dual-agenda' approach (Fletcher & Bailyn, 2005) to these work arrangements which recognised both the advantages to the organisation in terms of retention and productivity, and the benefits to employees with regard to family life and personal wellbeing.

As would be expected, there were some instances in which views and experiences differed. As described below, these differences mainly related to how workload and working hours are managed within a flexible work arrangement. Employees with a flexible work arrangement were more likely to describe the challenges of managing work demands, particularly under reduced hours arrangements.

The following sections overview the study methodology and summarise key findings. This summary starts with requests for flexible work arrangements, identifying major themes from the employee and employer studies, followed by key findings on extended unpaid parental leave.

## **Overview of study methodology**

The focus of this research was on requests made under the provisions of the National Employment Standards (NES). Employer and employee participants were excluded from the study where they were from organisations that had provisions in organisational policy, enterprise bargaining agreements or other industrial instruments that extended beyond the entitlements as set out in the NES. Study participants were recruited using databases of potential research participants sourced from the UniSA Centre for Work + Life and an external research company. Employee (n = 25) and employer (n = 15) participants were recruited from a range of industries and occupations. Employee participants were workers who had made a request for flexibility or extended unpaid parental leave under the provision of the NES. Reflecting larger workforce trends, the majority of employee participants were women. Employer participants were individuals with direct knowledge of, and involvement in, decision-making processes with regard to flexibility and requests for extensions to unpaid parental leave. They held managerial, supervisory and human resources positions, with approximately equal numbers of male and female participants.

It is important to acknowledge that the study sample represents a particular group of employees and employers. Both groups were from organisations that did not have enterprise agreements or organisational policy that provided rights to request flexibility or extended unpaid parental leave that went beyond the entitlements as provided by the NES. The employees interviewed in the study had made a formal written request to their employer under the NES. Excluded from this study were employees who made more informal requests, for example by relying on solely verbal agreements with their supervisor. Further, this study excluded those employees who were dissatisfied with their employment arrangements but did not make a request for a change, a group Skinner, Hutchinson and Pocock (2013) identified as discontented non-requesters.

---

## **Flexible work arrangements – key findings**

### **The most common flexibility request: reduced working time to accommodate childcare**

Reduced work hours (0.9FTE – 0.6FTE) was the most common flexibility arrangement sought by employee participants, and this was the case for all male participants. There was more variation in women's requests, including to reduce hours more substantially (e.g. to 0.2FTE or to 0.6FTE), change scheduled work days and vary start and finish times. Most employee participants requested a flexible work arrangement so that they could care for their pre-school aged children in their home. As with unpaid parental leave, it was common for parents to prefer home care be provided by themselves (or partner) to formal childcare.

Employer participants concurred: part-time work was one of the most commonly received requests, along with telecommuting and flexible start and finish times. Employer participants consistently demonstrated their understanding of employees' needs to ensure suitable childcare. Most of these employers received flexibility requests from female employees, with very few or no requests from male employees.

### **Knowledge and impact of the Right to Request under the Fair Work Act**

Employees' awareness of the legal entitlement of the Right to Request (RTR) a flexible work arrangement was mixed, with most participants either having a general awareness of the RTR without knowledge of the details, or having no awareness.

There was a consistent perception amongst employer participants that the introduction of the RTR had resulted in more careful and considered decision-making with regard to flexibility requests, including the acceptance of requests that were likely to have been rejected prior to 1 January 2010.

Some employer participants perceived an increase in requests from (female) employees, which they attributed to an increase in staff confidence in asking for flexibility. Other employers who had not noticed a change in request-making explained that their company was already actively supporting flexible work arrangements prior to the introduction of the RTR.

### Request-making processes are straightforward, transparent, timely and mostly successful

The most common process for request-making reported by employees was to start with a verbal discussion with immediate supervisors/ managers followed by a formal written request, most often by email. Most participants included an explanation of the reason for their request in their communication. Around half of the employees reported that their flexibility arrangements were subject to periodic internal review within their organisation, although the formality, nature and timing of this varied considerably.

Employer participants reported similar processes of requesting, starting with a personal conversation with an employee followed by a formal written request from the worker.

The majority of employees reported receiving their employers' response to their request within 21 days, usually by email. The majority of employees also had their request accepted in full by their employer. Further, most employee participants were confident that their flexible work arrangement would be maintained for as long as needed, often identified as up until their youngest child was of school age.

Employer participants also reported that they accepted the majority of requests. They understood and respected employees' need to care for children, and recognised their key role in enabling individuals to both engage in paid work and provide (or organise) childcare. Employer participants attributed the rare occasions of request refusals to organisational or business factors that could not be overcome, such as staff shortages. In these circumstances, many of these employers spoke of their attempts to negotiate alternative options to at least partially meet employees' requests. Whilst these observations indicate employer participants' willingness to support flexible work arrangements, as discussed below, employees are also strategic with regard to their request-making: many only proceed to make a request when they are confident it will be acceptable to their employer.

### Employers and employees both aim to meet organisational and individual needs

A common theme in both studies was the respect and understanding that employees had for their employers' business needs, and that employers had for their employees' caring responsibilities and family life.

Employees indicated that they gave careful consideration to the type of flexible work arrangement they requested and made their requests in the context of the organisation's operational needs and culture. Some participants requested a flexible work arrangement that did not fully meet their needs, but instead represented a compromise that they felt would be acceptable and workable for their employer. For example, some participants requested a change to their work schedule rather than an overall reduction in hours which would have been their ideal arrangement.

Employer participants also emphasised the importance of meeting both organisational and employee needs when considering request to change work arrangements. Many employers took a win-win perspective to flexibility requests – the organisation retains valued and productive employees and the individual worker has the capacity to engage in paid work and care for their children. Whilst employer participants reported that a refusal of a direct request was rare, it was clear that many employers' support of requests varied with the job and personal characteristics of the requesting employee. Employer participants indicated that they were more likely to accept flexibility requests where the employee was highly valued, perceived to be trustworthy and could be expected to maintain their performance and productivity when working flexibly. Trust was particularly raised as a concern with regard to telecommuting.

#### A supportive organisational culture gives employees confidence to make requests

A strong theme in the employee interviews was the influence of organisational culture in general, and a supportive line manager or supervisor in particular. Having a 'good boss' was highlighted as an important part of a supportive organisational culture. Managers and supervisors were recognised by employees and employers as 'gatekeepers' with strong influence on access to flexible work arrangements. Employee participants also emphasised other factors that supported their confidence in making a request in the first place, and also that a flexible work arrangement would be stable and secure into the future. Two key cultural factors were the prevalence of flexible working practices in the organisation and the attitudes of colleagues. Participants were more confident to request flexibility if others were already working flexibly, in other words where flexible work arrangements were the norm in a workplace. A small number of participants reflected that their uptake of a flexible work arrangement had led to a cultural change in their organisation, acting as a catalyst for co-workers to make flexibility requests. The second prominent theme across the employee interviews was the importance of co-workers. The cooperation of colleagues was seen by employees as crucial to the management of work activities and workload to support flexible work arrangements, for example the organisation and distribution of tasks and responsibilities and the scheduling of meetings. A lack of support from co-workers was identified as a major strain on flexible working.

Employers also recognised that flexibility or extended unpaid parental leave arrangements may impact on the requesting individual's co-workers. This was discussed by employers as a factor that needed to be managed in addition to the employee's own work arrangements.

#### Work arrangements may change, but roles, responsibilities and workloads often do not, especially for senior staff

Whilst many employee participants spoke of voluntarily striving to maintain and increase their productivity whilst working flexibly, some workers felt compelled to intensify their work effort as their workload was not adjusted to reflect their reduced work hours. The partnering of flexibility with work intensification was mainly reported by participants in senior and managerial roles. For this group, flexibility was a matter of 'surviving not thriving' as they struggled to manage high workloads (that often required substantial amounts of unpaid overtime) with providing care to young children.

#### Employers' view is that work roles and responsibilities often do not change, although supervisory roles can be an exception

Similar to employees, employer participants identified difficulties in incorporating flexible work arrangements into supervisory or management positions. Indeed, supervisory responsibilities were



seen by some employer participants as a legitimate reason to refuse a flexibility request, or they agreed to flexibility only with the removal of supervisory responsibilities from the worker's role.

Employer participants' approach to adapting work roles and responsibilities to incorporate flexibility depended on the type of request. Major alterations were seen as required only with requests to reduce working hours. In these circumstances most employers were of the view that workloads were adjusted accordingly. It was a common expectation from employer participants, however, that workers would contribute extra time and effort when required, for example responding to work-related communications outside of work hours. Employers commonly viewed these behaviours as demonstrating employees' professionalism and commitment to their work. There was also some indication that such out of hours work was expected in roles involving a lot of client or customer contact.

### Employees reciprocate with productivity and commitment when granted flexibility

Not only do workers carefully consider their flexibility requests to take into account the requirements of their job and the organisation as a whole, many also report a strong motivation to reciprocate with high levels of productivity, effort and commitment.

Rather than viewing access to flexible work arrangements as their right, employee participants tended to rely more on having a 'good boss' or 'good employer'. A good boss was often described as a person who understood the challenges of the 'struggle to juggle' paid work and parenting, and hence was supportive of workers' needs to work flexibly.

Further, it was common for employees to draw on forms of 'soft power' as valued and productive employees which they saw as increasing the likelihood that a request would be accepted, and also as an important strategy to ensure that a flexible work arrangement would be continued. Participants also perceived that having an established employment history with the organisation was an important and positive factor with regard to having a request accepted. Workers in managerial or professional roles were particularly likely to emphasise the importance of demonstrating high levels of productivity and commitment, including working after-hours or attending meetings on non-work days, to ensure their flexible work arrangement was continued.

### Employers' views on benefits to productivity were mixed, but most view the advantages of offering flexibility as outweighing disadvantages or difficulties

Many employer participants recognised there were benefits to performance and productivity that resulted from employees' motivation to reciprocate extra effort and commitment in return for access to flexible work arrangements. Views differed, with some employers relating difficulties or disadvantages associated with flexible work arrangements. Negative impacts on productivity were mainly attributed to job requirements for communication or contact between workers and their customers, clients or co-workers that were compromised by particular forms of flexible work arrangements. A small number of employers also expressed reservations and doubts regarding the capacity of some employees to maintain productivity under limited supervision such as when working from home. Nevertheless, on balance, most employer participants viewed the benefits of flexibility as outweighing the disadvantages. As discussed below, employers consistently cited retention of valued staff as an important benefit of providing access to flexibility.

### Benefits of flexibility for family life, health and finances

Three major outcomes were emphasised by employee participants when discussing the benefits of working flexibly. First, flexibility enabled workers to provide care for their children. Second, many

participants reflected on benefits to their personal wellbeing, especially with regard to mental health in general and stress reduction in particular. Third, access to flexible work arrangements had a financial benefit, enabling dual-earner households to manage both paid work and care.

Employer participants agreed that access to flexibility benefits employees' wellbeing, with most highlighting reductions in stress and increases in job satisfaction and happiness at work. Many employers also observed that happy and satisfied workers were more likely to work to the best of their capacity and remain committed to staying with an organisation.

### Flexibility affects employment participation, especially by women

In the employee study a lack of access to flexibility was clearly linked with a withdrawal of engagement in paid work. This was the case for those granted flexibility who were asked to consider the implications of a lack of access to flexibility, and also for the small group of participants who had their flexibility request rejected. A strong theme emerged regarding employees' prioritisation of care for children over paid work. For women, this was most commonly expressed in terms of relinquishing paid work per se, or seeking a position that accommodated the flexibility they needed to combine work and care. For men, their own lack of access to flexibility was linked to their female partner's withdrawal from work in order to provide childcare.

Employers were also aware of this strong link between access to flexibility and employee retention. Indeed, retaining staff was one of the main drivers of employers' willingness to support flexible work arrangements, particularly with regard to the retention of employees valued for their skills, knowledge and productivity.

In the employee study it was clear that men and women were requesting flexibility to support women's employment participation. For women their flexible work arrangement enabled them to combine work and childcare. In this study all the male participants' flexibility requests were to reduce their work hours, and in doing so this enabled their partner to either increase their work hours or return to paid work per se. The flexible work arrangement sought by all of the male participants was to work 0.8FTE in order to have one day of providing childcare at home. Whilst this pattern is a positive indicator of a move away from the traditional male breadwinner/female caregiver household arrangements, it represents only a modest degree of movement towards greater gender equality in the sharing of both paid work and childcare. Consistent with this interpretation, female participants emphasised the importance of flexible work arrangements to enable them to meet childcare requirements, with no mention of their partner's contribution (all female participants were partnered). This is consistent with the well-established observation that women tend to take primary responsibility for the care of children and are more likely to fit their engagement in paid work around childcare, prioritising their family over their career. Similarly, employer participants reported that most requests for flexibility were from female employees.

---

## ***Extended unpaid parental leave – key findings***

### Considerable variation in the nature of requests and timing

Employee participants requested an extension to their unpaid parental leave from one month to an additional 12 months. Most participants requested either three or six additional months, and made their request for an extension whilst they were on their initial 12 months of unpaid parental leave.

A range of reasons were identified for employees requesting extended unpaid parental leave. The primary reasons related to needs and preferences to care for self and children. Self-care related to having more time free of the demands and stresses of work. Many employee participants also emphasised the importance they placed on providing care for their infants and young children themselves, in preference to formal childcare with a non-family member. As was observed with regard to flexibility requests, male employees who requested extended unpaid leave reported doing so to support their female partner's return to work.

Employer participants' accounts of these requests were very similar. Around half of employers had received requests for an additional 12 months unpaid parental leave, with other requests commonly for between three and six months additional unpaid parental leave.

### Knowledge and impact of the Right to Request under the Fair Work Act

Similarly to those employees requesting flexibility, those who had requested extended unpaid parental leave varied in their awareness of their legal entitlements. Just over half of employee participants were either aware of their rights under the *Fair Work Act*, or had a general awareness that an entitlement existed but were not familiar with the details.

### Employers receive only a small number of requests for extended unpaid parental leave

Consistent with these observations, only a small number of employers reported receiving requests to extend unpaid parental leave beyond 12 months of unpaid leave. These employer participants reported receiving only one or two such requests. This low rate of requests may also reflect the long time frames involved, hence frequent requests of this type would not be expected.

### Request-making processes are straightforward, transparent, timely and mostly successful

Similar to those employees requesting flexibility, those who requested extensions to unpaid parental leave started the requesting process with an informal verbal discussion with their supervisor or manager, followed by the submission of a formal written request. All of the employees interviewed had their requests accepted, and had been informed of the outcome by their employer within one to three weeks of submitting their written request.

There was some indication that female requesters were more likely to receive a supportive reception from their supervisor/manager when they first communicated their request. Male employees reported their requests were not well received by their employer. This observation should be treated with caution, as only two male requesters were interviewed with regard to extensions of unpaid parental leave.

Employer participants reported that all requests for extended unpaid parental leave were accepted, with no alterations or negotiations. Employers consistently supported these requests, and demonstrated their understanding that some workers needed more time before they were ready to return to work and/or arrange suitable childcare.

### A supportive organisational culture gives employees confidence to make requests

Similar to those employees requesting flexibility, those requesting extensions to unpaid parental leave emphasised the importance of a supportive organisational culture, particularly having a 'good boss'. A positive culture both encouraged request-making in the first place, and increased the likelihood of requests being accepted.

### Unpaid parental leave enables parents to have their preferred childcare arrangement

The majority of employee participants emphasised the importance and value they placed in providing care to young children themselves, especially with young pre-school aged children. Providing care themselves was seen to benefit their own wellbeing by reducing stress, improving the quality of family life and benefitting children's health and wellbeing.

Employer participants consistently recognised and respected the role of extended unpaid parental leave in enabling parents to ensure their preferred care arrangements were in place for young children.

### Unpaid parental leave affects employment participation especially by women

Similarly to the motivations for men's uptake of flexibility, male employee participants who took extended unpaid parental leave did so to support their female partner's employment participation, with benefits to both household income and their partner's career.

Similar to those employees requesting flexibility, many of those seeking leave extensions, prioritised their preferred care arrangements (i.e. caring for children themselves) over paid work. Employee participants anticipated that if their request was rejected, they or their partner would cease paid work to provide childcare. One employee participant reported only having his request accepted after he indicated his intention to resign should it be refused.

Employers also understood that providing access to extended unpaid parental leave was often crucial to the retention of valued staff. Whilst some employers observed that extended unpaid leave could create challenges with regard to backfilling a temporarily vacant position, the benefits of having a valued and experienced staff member return to the organisation was consistently emphasised.

### Most leave takers return to their original work roles

Employee participants who had returned to work at the time of interview reported a smooth transition into their original work roles and duties that they performed prior to taking extended unpaid parental leave. It was common for participants to return with reduced work hours, or to plan this arrangement on return to work. There were exceptions: a minority of employees reported more difficult transitions back to their jobs. Some employee participants expressed concern about the impact of taking such extended leave on their career prospects. A small number of employees reported they either voluntarily returned to a different position or were obliged to do so by their employer.

Without exception, employers reported that employees returning from extended unpaid parental leave returned to the same job, with no change in roles or responsibilities. Most employers reported that employees returning from extended unpaid parental leave often requested to return with part-time hours, and it was also common for flexible scheduling to be requested around these part-time hours, to accommodate childcare responsibilities.

---

## **Conclusion**

Flexible work practices and extended unpaid parental leave were seen by the majority of employees and employers as necessary and beneficial arrangements to support a modern workforce in which many employees, men and women, combine work and care. There is still a degree of disconnect

between organisational cultures and expectations and the reality of flexible work or extended unpaid parental leave that introduces a different working arrangement to the 'standard' of working seven to eight hours a day for five days a week in one geographic location. This was especially the case for those in supervisory or management positions. These senior staff working flexibly or taking extended unpaid parental leave to provide care are essentially 'early adopters' of these alternative working arrangements that are necessary to support a modern and diverse workforce, including those in senior and managerial positions.

There is clearly a continuing role for strong and effective regulation to support workers' access to the flexible work arrangements and parental leave necessary to support their employment participation, and this is especially the case for women. In this study employers and employees were in agreement that such arrangements progress the dual-agenda of productive organisations and healthy employees.

## Method

The research described in this report involved in-depth telephone interviews with employees (n = 25) and employers (n = 15) regarding their views and experiences of requests for flexible work arrangements or extensions to unpaid parental leave beyond 12 months' of unpaid parental leave. Employees were interviewed about their own experiences of making such requests. Employers were interviewed regarding the decision-making processes and outcomes of such requests in their organisations. Interview length ranged from 20 to 45 minutes, with an average of 30 minutes.

The interview schedules for employees and employers are provided in the Appendix. In sum, the interview questions for employees explored reasons for requesting a flexible work arrangement, the process they followed, the outcomes of their request and how their flexible work arrangement (or not getting their flexible work arrangement) impacted on their family, work-life balance and their ability to continue to participate in paid employment. The interview questions for employers addressed a similar set of issues from an employers' perspective. Key topics included employers' experience of the impact of the *Fair Work Act* on employee requests, the number and type of requests received, organisational processes for responding to requests, request outcomes (full/partial acceptance or refusal) and the perceived impact of request acceptance or refusal on workers and organisational outcomes.

It is important to acknowledge that the study sample represents a particular group of employees and employers. Both groups were from organisations that did not have enterprise agreements or organisational policy that provided rights to request flexibility or extended unpaid parental leave that went beyond the entitlements as provided by the National Employment Standards (NES). The employees interviewed in the study had made a formal written request to their employer under the NES. Excluded from this study were employees who made more informal requests, for example by relying on solely verbal agreements with their supervisor. Further, this study excluded those employees who were dissatisfied with their employment arrangements but had not made a request for a change, a group Skinner, Hutchinson and Pocock (2013) identified as discontented non-requesters.

### Recruitment of employee sample

#### *Recruitment and selection of participants*

Two methods were used to recruit employee participants:

- (1) Selection of eligible participants from the Australian Work and Life Index (AWALI) 2012 survey sample (only used for employees requesting flexibility, n = 9);
- (2) Selection of participants from the Online Research Unit (ORU) database of potential research participants (used for employees requesting flexibility (n = 6) or an extension to unpaid parental leave) (n = 10).

The first employee recruitment method started with a cohort of 93 potential interviewees identified through the AWALI 2012 survey database. AWALI 2012 was a nationally representative telephone survey of 2887 employed Australians. In 2012, participants were asked if they would be willing to be interviewed in more depth on issues addressed in the 2012 survey, including requesting a flexible work arrangement. The 93 potential AWALI participants had reported that they had requested flexibility in the last 12 months and had pre-school aged children. Basic demographic factors were identified through the participants' responses to the AWALI survey. Of the 93 potential participants,

10 applied for flexibility in writing under the NES provisions. Nine of these participants were successfully contacted for interview (one respondent could not be contacted after multiple attempts). None of the potential participants in the AWALI database were eligible to be interviewed regarding extensions to unpaid parental leave.

The second method of recruitment used a database of potential research participants provided by the Online Research Unit (ORU) company. The ORU has two panels, individual and business, of research participants available for recruitment. The panel of individuals contains 200 000 potential research participants who are Australian residents.

The ORU recruitment process involved two steps. Step 1 involved an online survey of potential study participants within the ORU database. Potential participants completed a series of questions to determine their eligibility to be interviewed, using the eligibility criteria outlined above. Eligible survey respondents were then contacted for a telephone interview.

For the interviews of employees, 120 potential participants were identified from the online survey, which was conducted in November 2012. Following a telephone interview to confirm online survey data, six survey respondents were eligible to be interviewed regarding flexible work arrangements (to make a total of 15 participants, with nine participants sourced from the AWALI 2012 database). Eight survey respondents were eligible to be interviewed regarding extensions to unpaid parental leave. A second online survey was conducted in March 2013 to recruit additional participants for interview on extensions to unpaid parental leave. Fifteen participants were identified as potentially eligible, of which two were confirmed as eligible following a telephone conversation to confirm online survey data. The employee interviews were conducted in August and September 2012/2013.

On completion of the 15 flexibility interviews and 10 extended unpaid leave interviews it was clear that no new information or themes were emerging from the data. This outcome is termed 'data saturation' (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Morse, 1995). It is established and accepted practice within qualitative research to cease the collection of new data when data saturation is reached. The point at which data saturation is reached is influenced by a range of factors, including the nature of the research questions, the depth and complexity of the research topic and the diversity of the participant sample and their views and experiences (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Morse, 1995). There is empirical evidence that data saturation can be expected to be reached within the first six to twelve interviews (Guest, Bunce and Johnson, 2006).

The low rate of identification of employee participants eligible for the study is to be expected, based on Fair Work Australia's estimates of the proportion of employees making these requests under the NES provisions. The 2012 General Managers' report indicated that around 1.5 per cent of employees had made a request for a flexible work arrangement and less than one quarter of one per cent had made a request for an extension to unpaid parental leave, under the NES provisions (O'Neill, 2012, p. 41, 56).

### ***Eligibility criteria for inclusion in the study***

In order to be eligible to be interviewed, participants had to have made their request for a flexible work arrangement or an extension to unpaid parental leave under the NES. Specifically, the following criteria were agreed to identify employee participants for interview (1) was the request made under any kind of employment entitlement in their contract or EBA? ('no' to be eligible), (2) was the request made in writing? ('yes' to be eligible), and (3) was the request related to care responsibilities for a pre-school aged child or a child aged under 18 years with a disability ('yes' to be eligible).

### **Employee sample characteristics**

As Table 1 shows, the majority of employee participants were women. This is consistent with national trends. As observed in AWALI 2012 (Skinner, Hutchinson & Pocock, 2012), women are more likely to request flexibility than men (24.2 per cent and 17.3 per cent, respectively). Further, women with pre-school aged children are the group most likely to make a request for flexibility (43.0 per cent; 19.8 per cent of men in similar situations) (Skinner et al. 2012).

Table 1 also shows that the employee sample was predominately well educated (most participants had a university qualification), worked in managerial or professional positions in the private sector, and reported household income of \$100k or above. Therefore, it is important to acknowledge that the employee sample reflects relatively affluent and well-educated workers, with less representation from workers with lower incomes or from non-professional occupations.

Table 1 Overview of employee sample, (number of participants)

	Flexible work arrangement	Extended unpaid parental leave
Total	15	10
Gender		
Male	5	3
Female	10	7
State		
NSW	4	
VIC	6	4
ACT	1	
QLD	1	3
SA	2	2
WA	1	
NT		1
Location		
Metropolitan	10	10
Rural/regional	5	
Age		
18-24 years	3	
25-34 years	5	4
35-44 years	3	5
45-54 years	3	1
55-64 years	1	
65+ years	0	
Marital status		
Married/partnered	15	10
Highest level of education		
Year 12	1	2
TAFE	2	1
Degree/diploma	11	4
Postgraduate degree	1	3
Household income		
Under \$30 000	0	



\$30,000 to \$39,999	0
----------------------	---

Table 1. Cont.

	Flexible work arrangement	Extended unpaid parental leave
Household income (cont.)		
\$40,000 to \$59,999	1	
\$60,000 to \$79,999	1	1
\$80,000 to \$99,999	1	1
\$100,000 to \$149,999	9	4
\$150,000 or above	2	1
Prefer not to say	1	3
CALD status		
CALD	2	
Not CALD	13	10
Occupation		
Manager	6	
Professional	5	7
Technician/trades worker	1	
Community/personal services worker	2	
Clerical/administrative worker	1	3
Sales worker	0	
Machinery operator/driver	0	
Labourer	0	
Industry		
Agriculture \ forestry and fishing	0	
Mining	0	
Manufacturing	0	2
Electricity \ gas \ water and waste services	0	
Construction	0	
Wholesale trade	0	
Retail trade	2	
Accommodation and food services	1	
Transport \ postal and warehousing	0	
Information media and telecommunications	1	
Financial and insurance services	2	1
Rental \ hiring and real estate services	0	
Professional \ scientific and technical services	1	1
Administrative and support services	0	1
Public administration and safety	1	1
Education and training	3	2
Health care and social assistance	4	2
Arts and recreation services	0	
Other services	0	
Sector		
Public	1	1
Private	14	9
Work hours (at time of interview)		

Part-time	6
Full-time	9

## Recruitment of employer sample

### *Recruitment and selection of participants*

The ORU company was also used to recruit employer participants. Fifteen employers were identified through the ORU's small and medium business panel. This panel comprises around 30 000 business owners and managers who are in decision-making roles in their organisation. In this study participants were in senior supervisory, management, Director and human resource roles. Interviews were conducted in August and September 2013. The recruitment process involved two steps:

- (1) Identification of potential participants using a filter question included at the end of an ORU survey for an unrelated study (132 respondents completed the filter question). The question addressed participants' awareness of, or involvement in, decision-making processes regarding requests for flexibility or extensions to unpaid parental leave since 1 January 2010. Participants proceeded to the second stage of recruitment if they answered 'yes' to the filter question and indicated they would be willing to participate in a 15 minute telephone interview (n = 69).
- (2) In the second stage of selection, participants completed a short online survey comprising demographic information and a set of questions addressing their knowledge and experience with employee requests (see eligibility criteria below). On the basis of the survey responses 25 participants were identified as eligible. On commencement of interviews six of these 25 participants were deemed ineligible to participate for the following reasons (small business owner with no employees x 2; no formal requests received x 3; no knowledge of Right to Request under the *Fair Work Act* x 1). Four participants could not be contacted after four attempts, including voicemail and text message. A total of 15 employer participants were interviewed for the study.

### *Eligibility criteria for inclusion in the study*

In order to be eligible to be interviewed employer participants had to have knowledge of the NES entitlement (flexibility or unpaid parental leave extension) about which they were being interviewed; either have no workplace policy with regard to requesting a flexible work arrangement or extended unpaid parental leave, or a policy that does not exceed the NES entitlements; and have knowledge and experience with the decision-making processes related to these requests in their organisation.

### *Employer sample characteristics*

As detailed in Table 2 below, nine employers had received a request for a flexible work arrangement (no requests for extended unpaid parental leave since 1 January 2010 for this group). Fewer employers had received requests for an extension to unpaid parental leave beyond 12 months of unpaid leave. Six employer participants had received such requests, five of whom had also received at least one request for a flexible work arrangement under the NES provisions.

That flexibility requests are more commonly received by employers, rather than requests for extended unpaid parental leave, is consistent with the rates of requesting observed in the 2012 Fair

Work Australia General Managers' report; 4.6 per cent of employers in this survey had received a written request for a flexible work arrangement and 1.5 per cent had received a request for an extension of unpaid parental leave (O'Neill, 2012, p. 36, 56).

As Table 2 shows, a range of industries were represented by employer participants, although there were some industries which were not represented in the sample such as mining, manufacturing and construction. As detailed above, only a small proportion of employers, less than five per cent, are estimated to receive requests under the NES. Therefore, the industries represented in the employer sample reflects the employer respondents that could be identified through the recruitment process, rather than an indication of the industries in which employers are more or less likely to receive requests under the NES. It is also worth noting that the majority of employers were from medium and larger-sized business, with very few respondents working in small businesses.

Table 2 Overview of employer sample

	Number of participants
Total	15
Work arrangement	
Flexibility	9
Extended unpaid parental leave only	1
Flexibility and unpaid parental leave	5
Gender	
Male	8
Female	7
State	
NSW	3
VIC	4
ACT	1
QLD	5
SA	2
WA	
NT	
Location	
Metropolitan	11
Rural/regional	4
Industry	
Agriculture \ forestry and fishing	2
Mining	
Manufacturing	
Electricity \ gas \ water and waste services	
Construction	
Wholesale trade	
Retail trade	1
Accommodation and food services	1
Transport \ postal and warehousing	2
Information media and telecommunications	1
Financial and insurance services	3
Rental \ hiring and real estate services	
Professional \ scientific and technical	3

services	
Administrative and support services	
Public administration and safety	0

Table 2. Cont.

	Number of participants
Industry (cont.)	
Education and training	2
Health care and social assistance	2
Arts and recreation services	
Other services	
Number of employees	
Less than 10	2
10 – 19	
20 - 99	6
100 or more	7
Sector	
Public	1
Private	14

## Data analysis

Content analysis was used to code and analyse the data to identify salient themes and issues, and develop an understanding of the meanings and processes surrounding them (Krippendorff, 2004). This approach to analysis can be described as qualitative descriptive analysis (Sandelowski, 2000, p. 339), in which the purpose is to describe the ‘who, what, and where of events’. This approach is particularly useful for applied research, such as the current study, where the aim is to identify policy and practice implications from the research observations.

Although the employer sample was drawn from a range of industries, on the completion of 15 interviews it was evident that there was substantial degree of commonality and consistency in their accounts of the circumstances, processes and outcomes of request making. As detailed with regard to the employee interviews, this indicated that data saturation was reached, whereby further interviews were not anticipated to provide any new or unique information. Therefore, recruitment of employer participants ceased with 15 participants.

## Australian Work + Life Index (AWALI) survey 2012 / 2014

Included in this report is a summary of relevant findings from the AWALI 2012 and 2014 national surveys, which addressed Australian workers’ requests for flexibility. The 2014 survey contained a subset of flexibility questions from the 2012 survey. The 2012 survey did contain questions on unpaid parental leave, however none of the respondents took more than 52 weeks of unpaid leave, hence they were not within the scope of the current study which focused on extended unpaid leave beyond 52 weeks.

This quantitative data is compared and contrasted with the findings from the employee qualitative interviews conducted as part of the current study. The AWALI survey addresses flexibility requests that were made under any of the available employment provisions, including the NES and other

industrial instruments such as EB agreements or organisational policy. It is important to note this distinction with regard to the broader focus of AWALI, compared to the qualitative interviews in the current study which focused exclusively on requests made under the provisions of the NES.

AWALI data on flexibility requests addresses respondents' awareness of the NES Right to Request a flexible work arrangement (2012, 2014) and extended unpaid parental leave (2012), whether they made a flexibility request (2012, 2014), what change to work arrangements they requested and why (2012), the outcome of the flexibility request (2012, 2014), reasons why a flexibility request had not been made (2012, 2014), and the association between flexibility request outcomes and work-life interference (2012, 2014).

AWALI is a survey of a randomly selected cross-section of the adult Australian employed population by means of computer-assisted telephone interviews (CATI). Respondents are selected by means of a random sample process which includes a quota set for each capital city and non-capital city area, and within these areas a quota set for statistical divisions or subdivisions. Household telephone numbers were selected using random digit dialling, and there was a random selection of an individual in each household by means of a 'last birthday' screening question. The survey samples for 2012/2014 comprise 2,500/2279 employees. Further information on the 2012 and 2014 surveys are available from the AWALI national reports from the Centre for Work + Life website (<http://www.unisa.edu.au/Research/Centre-for-Work-Life/>).

## Flexible work arrangements – employee study

This section describes employees' experiences of requesting flexible work arrangements. The section starts with participants' awareness of their rights under the NES, followed by a description of the types of requests they made, the circumstances under which they were made and the request-making processes they underwent in their organisation. The second part of this section examines employees' experience of the outcomes of requests – both at work and in their home/personal life. Outcomes experienced by employees who had their request accepted, partially accepted and rejected are discussed.

### Knowledge of the Right to Request a flexible work arrangement under the NES

Participants varied in their awareness and knowledge of the Right to Request (RTR) flexibility as provided by the *Fair Work Act* (2009). A small number of participants reported a general awareness that they had a right to flexibility, but were not sure of the details. Only one participant reported detailed knowledge of the RTR as she worked in human resources. She was also one of the few participants to put their request in writing in the first instance, rather than start with an informal verbal discussion with her supervisor. The majority of participants were not aware of the RTR. One participant had his right to request explained to him by his manager, who then provided suggestions about how he might arrange his work to meet the childcare needs of his pre-school aged son. Similarly, two female workers indicated:

I didn't really know about any legislation. I just knew they [the organisation] were good about work-life balance. *(female, community services worker, 0.9 FTE reduced from full-time)*

I heard about similar types of arrangements. So I thought I've got nothing to lose by asking, I might as well give it a go. *(female, administrative assistant, vary start and finish times and work from home within a part-time role)*

One participant who had a 'vague awareness' that he had legal entitlements in this area explained that he would have pursued the matter further by seeking out more information regarding his legal rights if his request had been denied:

If I got the answer 'no' then I would have put more effort into finding out what the rules were. *(male, professional, 0.8 FTE)*

### AWALI 2012/2014

Consistent with the employee interviews, the AWALI 2012 survey found that the majority of respondents (69.8 per cent) were unaware of the Right to Request (RTR) 26 months after its introduction. Women with children aged four years or younger were less likely to report awareness of this right (23.5 per cent) compared to similar men (34.0 per cent).

There was evidence of a substantial increase in levels of awareness of the RTR in the AWALI 2014 survey; 42.6 per cent of respondents indicated they were aware of the RTR, with higher awareness amongst mid-aged and older workers (50.3 per cent of those aged 45 or older) and women with preschool aged children (49.0 per cent) or other types of caring responsibilities for an elder or a person with a disability or chronic illness (48.9 per cent). Young workers continue to have poor awareness of their rights in this area (23.3 per cent in 2014).

## Type of change to work arrangement requested

Participants had requested a range of flexible work options, with the majority of requests made to reduce work hours. This pattern reflects national trends observed in AWALI 2012; the majority (57 per cent) of requests related to reducing hours or working part-time. Specifically, the employee participants' flexibility requests were to:

- Work 0.8 FTE reduced from full-time (4 participants)
- Work 0.6 FTE (daytime hours, no shift work) reduced from full-time (2 participants)
- Work 0.6 FTE reduced from 0.8 FTE (1 participant)
- Work 0.9 FTE reduced from full-time (1 participant)
- Work 0.6 FTE reduced from full-time (1 participant)
- Return from parenting leave on 0.2 FTE, moving up to 0.6 FTE over time (1 participant)
- Work part-time (three shifts per week) (1 participant)
- Vary start and finish times and work from home within a part-time role (1 participant)
- Vary scheduled work days within a part-time position (1 participant)
- Change scheduled work days with no change in part-time hours (1 participant)
- Change scheduled work days with no change in full-time hours (1 participant).

There was a clear gender difference in the type of flexibility requested. All five of the male participants requested a change from full-time hours to 0.8 FTE in order to have one day of providing childcare at home:

I had my third child and my wife wanted to return to work for a couple of days a week. My mother was minding them one day and I wanted to look after them another day. *(male, professional, 0.8FTE)*

There was more variation in women's requests, which included reducing hours more substantially (to 0.2 or 0.6fte) and changing scheduled work days and varying start and finish times.

### *Ideal flexible work arrangement*

The majority of participants (who had their request accepted) reported that their flexible work arrangements were satisfactory and met their needs. When asked to reflect on what would be their ideal flexible work arrangement, a number of participants indicated that they would prefer to work fewer hours, but did not feel that this was possible in their current job. The main barriers cited to reducing work hours were financial, and the perception that reduced hours would be difficult to accommodate in the participants' particular work role:

I knew that within my workplace that if I wanted to change the number of hours that would have been a headache. *(female, manager, change scheduled work days with no change in part-time hours)*

I'm content with the arrangements that I have in place. I would be reluctant to push it any further. I feel that I would be in a slightly better position back at work in a

year's time when I have less flexible arrangements. I think that will be more acceptable for my peers and my colleagues. *(male, manager, full-time hours, work from home two days per week)*

Other participants spoke about a desire to access flexibility that was not supported by the management culture in their organisation, such as working from home. This was discussed as a culture of 'face time', where physical presence in the workplace was taken as an indication of productivity by supervisors:

That's one of the things that I would have liked in the four-day-a week job [participant's previous job], maybe work one day a week at home or maybe one day a fortnight. But my boss, she's very anti [flexibility] ..... to her if you are not there 'in her face' you are not at work. *(female, HR professional, request to change from 0.8 fte to 0.6 fte rejected)*

### **AWALI 2012**

Similarly, requests for reduced hours were the most common type of change to work arrangements requested by AWALI 2012 respondents (this question was not included in AWALI 2014). Around one third (32.0 per cent) of AWALI respondents who made a request asked for part-time hours, with one quarter (25.1 per cent) requesting reduced hours for a limited period of time. In the AWALI 2012 survey women were more likely to request part-time hours than men.

There was no gender difference in requests for other types of flexible work arrangements in the AWALI survey, which varies from the gender differences in the type of change requested observed in the interviews. As the qualitative interview study was not designed to be representative of the population, but rather to provide in-depth insight into employees' experiences of requesting, it is to be expected that some patterns observed in the qualitative interviews differ from observations in the nationally representative AWALI survey.

### **Reasons for requesting flexibility**

The majority of employee participants requested a change to their work arrangement to care for their own pre-school aged children. Examples include reducing hours to provide care to children at home, and changing scheduled work days and start/finish times to fit in with kindergarten schedule. One participant had primary care responsibility for her pre-school aged grandchildren. No employee participants made a request for flexibility to care for a disabled child.

Although all participants reported requesting flexibility to care for pre-school aged children, there was a clear difference in the way in which men's and women's flexible work practices contributed to their household's approach to managing care and paid work. Specifically, a common theme for male participants was that they wanted to change their availability to provide care for their children to enable their partner to return to work or increase her work hours on return to work:

I work from home on certain days and times of the week. Really allowing me to fit in with my wife and her work arrangements to look after our four year old son. *(male, manager, full-time hours, work from home two days per week)*

Female participants rarely mentioned their partners' work arrangements or contribution to care. Rather, they emphasised the need for their work to fit around their caring responsibilities for their children.



## **AWALI 2012**

AWALI survey respondents reported a range of reasons for requesting flexibility, which was expected as the survey addressed requests that were made outside of the NES provisions, as well as those made under the NES. Childcare was one of the most common reasons why AWALI 2012 respondents requested a flexible work arrangement, and this was particular the case for requests made by mothers (34.1 per cent) and fathers (20.7 per cent). This question was not included in the AWALI 2014 survey.

### **Length of time requested for flexible work arrangement**

There was substantial variation in the time frame requested for a flexible work arrangement. For most participants the time frame was open-ended with no specified end date. Some participants agreed to a formal review after a period of time, for example three years. The most common arrangement reported by participants was for the requested flexible work arrangements to remain in place for the duration of the time their children required care during core work hours (i.e. until their youngest child reached school age):

As my son becomes of school age I think that these arrangements will probably come to their natural conclusion. It was fairly open-ended [the agreement to work flexibly] but it was always with the understanding that it was to meet the childcare needs of my family, and that was always going to change as my son grew up and eventually went to school. Whilst I always hope to have some flexibility in terms of dropping off and picking up from school to fit in with what my wife can and can't do. The more formal work from home days I think will slowly diminish and then stop completely. *(male, manager, full-time hours, work from home two days per week)*

### **Request making processes and outcomes**

#### ***Person to whom request was made***

Most employees initially approached their line manager with a verbal conversation to convey their request. The majority of participants received a positive and supportive response to their initial approach. A written request was then submitted following this conversation. It was common for written requests to be submitted to participants' line manager and then to the human resources unit or manager. Whilst for most participants their request was considered by their line manager with the involvement of HR, around half of the participants had their request considered by senior management such as the partners of a private medical practice, a section Director or the company Director or CEO.

#### ***Procedure for making the request***

The majority of participants started the process of making their request by informally approaching their line supervisor or manager to discuss their request verbally. After this initial discussion, they then proceeded to make a formal request in writing, usually by email as requested by their supervisor/manager. A small number of participants made their request using the organisation's standardised paperwork, whereas most reported that they detailed their request in an email.

A small number of participants put their request in writing (email) in the first instance. One of these participants was a HR professional, who was familiar with the RTR legislation and the required

processes for making a request. After she emailed her request, her manager requested a meeting to discuss her request.

It is noteworthy that those participants who did make their request in writing in the first instance (by email) were more likely to describe their organisational culture as family friendly, where they were confident that such requests were seen as acceptable and would be received positively.

It's been a big benefit I suppose....it's a lot less stressful, I know that I can pretty much ask for something and I would be very surprised if it wasn't approved. They are very willing to see various options. *(female, professional, 9-day fortnight)*

With regard to the content of their requests, most participants stated the reason for their request in their application. Only one participant described the requested change to their work arrangements without providing a reason.

Most participants did not change the nature of their request as a result of the discussion and negotiation process with their supervisor or manager. One exception was a male manager, who through the process of negotiating a flexible work arrangement agreed to specify set days that he would work from home (Monday, Thursday), rather than his current 'piecemeal' approach in which he worked various days or half-days at home. Another male professional was encouraged by his manager to undertake a formal flexible work arrangement (0.8 FTE) so that he and his wife (who worked full-time) could manage the care of their two year old son. In his initial discussion with his manager this participant had requested either taking one to two months of leave from work, or working three days a week. His manager suggested the alternative arrangement (0.8 FTE), which the participant accepted.

### ***Time elapsed between submission of request and response***

Most participants received a response to their request by email or writing within 21 days. The most common response time was within one to two weeks. There were exceptions, two participants waited five to six months for a response, with one participant still waiting for a response at the time of interview. In contrast, one participant received immediate verbal approval of her request, followed by written confirmation. For the majority of participants a response to their request was provided in writing, either by email or letter. There was one exception, with one participant receiving a verbal response approving her request without any written confirmation.

### **Accepted requests**

The majority of participants had their request granted in full, and were confident that their request would be accepted. There were exceptions, as detailed below with regard to participants who had their request rejected or partially granted. As we explore below, there was also a great deal of variation in participants' experiences of working flexibly, particularly with regard to organisational culture and the management of workloads.

### ***AWALI 2012/2014***

Similarly, the majority of AWALI respondents who made a request reported their request was fully accepted, and this was the case in 2012 (61.9 per cent) and 2014 (64.3 per cent). A small proportion of respondents also reported their request was partially accepted (13.2 per cent in 2012; 16.9 per cent in 2014). Women were more likely to have their request fully accepted (65.6 per cent) than men (57.1 per cent) in the AWALI 2012 survey. This gender difference was no longer apparent in the

2014 AWALI survey, with 62.6 per cent of men and 65.4 per cent of women reporting their request was fully accepted.

### ***Factors perceived to facilitate a positive response to a flexibility request***

The factors that participants perceived as contributing positively to acceptance of their request for a flexible work arrangement can be categorised into three main themes: a supportive supervisor and organisational culture; their value as an employee; and the deliberate shaping of their request to maximise the likelihood of acceptance.

Starting with supportive supervisors and organisational culture, a common theme in interviews of participants who had a request approved was the positive and supportive personal relationship that they had with their supervisor or manager. Managers and supervisors were recognised by employees as 'gatekeepers' with strong influence on access to flexible work arrangements. In this context participants spoke about their managers' and supervisors' recognition and understanding of the 'struggle to juggle' work and care that many parents experience, and respected the importance of workers' care responsibilities outside of work.

He [supervisor] was supportive. He actually works four days a week himself as he looks after his grandchild. *(male, professional, 0.8FTE)*

The support and understanding demonstrated by their managers/supervisors gave participants confidence to make a request in the first place, and enhanced their confidence that their new flexible arrangement would be stable and secure into the future. Indeed, one participant who was a middle level manager deliberately designed her flexibility request to seek a change to the schedule of her work days but not her hours, as a request to reduce hours would be sent to the CEO who she felt was not supportive of employees' work-life balance. Rather she felt the CEO had 'old fashioned ideas' about work. Instead, she asked to change her work schedule, a request her line supervisor could approve, a person she felt was much more supportive and understanding of the challenges of working and taking care of young children:

My line manager is pretty supportive. Her children have grown up now, but I think she realises the importance of getting that balance right. Unfortunately the CEO has got some really old-fashioned ideas. Because I wasn't changing my hours he didn't need to know about it, so it was sort of OK. *(female manager, change scheduled work days with no change in part-time hours)*

Similarly, a supportive organisational culture was a common theme with regard to participants' decision to make a flexibility request, and their experience of the process of requesting. This included factors such as others working flexibly in the organisation:

Ninety per cent of the people in the office work flexibly .... most of the people that work in the office are women and they all have families. The partners of the firm understand that we have more responsibilities than just work, we have children and households to run. *(female, professional, return from parenting leave on 0.2 fte, moving up to 0.6FTE over time)*

Some participants also reported a positive effect of their flexible work arrangement on co-workers' working arrangements. Specifically, their flexible work arrangement acted as the catalyst for a change in the workplace. Where they were the first person in their particular role to work flexibly, this often led, over time, to others in their workplace taking up a flexible work arrangement. Similarly, in organisations where flexible work arrangements were the norm, participants felt much more confident that their particular request would be accepted and supported.

We are a fairly good employer, generally. We recognise that people work in different ways and have different requirements. I think that they [his manager and the CEO] were willing to test it. I think I was one of the earlier test cases. There are others in the organisation now with similar arrangements. I was certainly one of the first. Especially being at management level, that was something a little bit different. *(male, manager, full-time hours, work from home two days per week)*

The second major theme concerned participants' individual attributes as a worker that they felt contributed to the likelihood that their request would be accepted. These mainly related to workers' track record in the organisation and their capacity to maintain high levels of productivity and performance. In addition, having an established employment relationship/history with the organisation and management was perceived by participants to positively impact on how their flexibility request would be received by management.

The fact that I had been there for so long [12 years] and that I had a good relationship anyway. If I had been a new employee or somebody who didn't look like they would stay long it wouldn't have come up as an option for me. *(female, administrative assistant, vary start and finish times and work from home within a part-time role)*

A strong track record of performance and productivity, both before and after the flexibility request, was seen by participants in professional or managerial roles as important leverage to both justify their flexibility request, and also to support their status as a valued employee whom their employer would wish to retain. These participants also perceived that maintaining a high level of performance whilst working flexibly was important to ensure that the arrangement was allowed to continue. For some participants, this meant taking work home and working unpaid overtime in personal time to maintain productivity.

I had to be prepared to take calls on Friday. *(female, manager, change of scheduled work days with Friday as a non-work day)*

The third major theme with regard to factors facilitating request acceptance was the nature of the request itself. There was evidence that participants considered the context of the organisation, both the operational needs and the prevailing culture, when deciding what type of change to their work arrangement they would request. Some participants explained that they deliberately requested a flexible work arrangement that was not their ideal, but that they felt would be sufficient to enable them to meet their caring responsibilities and would be acceptable to their employer. For example, one participant explained that she was flexible on the days that she could work, which she thought had a positive effect on her request. Another participant thought that she received a positive response to her request because she did not ask to reduce her hours, but rather to change her scheduled days and start/finish times. Other participants spoke of their decision not to request reduced hours, but rather to seek flexibility around the location and scheduling of their current work hours, as they perceived a request to reduce hours would not be accepted.

I knew, within the workplace that if I wanted to change the number of hours that would have been a headache, so I tried to make it so that it fitted...that I could still do the same number of hours *(female, manager, change scheduled work days)*

If I was part-time I might not have kept the job...you have to be around when you're a manager. *(female, manager, change of scheduled work days)*

A male participant also discussed the challenges of working flexibly (two days a week at home) in a senior management role. He did not feel that his co-workers or the Board of Directors were

particularly supportive of this arrangement, which was seen as unusual for a person in a senior management role. He expected that the arrangement would cease once his son reached school age, as this was the understanding he had with his manager.

The expectation is work first and I accept that, especially at management level, you need to take on that understanding. *(male, manager, works from home 2 days per week)*

### ***Permanency of arrangement***

Most participants were confident that their flexible work arrangement would be continued for as long as it was required. For most of the female participants, and all of the male participants, they indicated they would like to retain their flexible work arrangements until their youngest child started school.

### ***Organisational review of existing flexible work arrangements over time***

Procedures for internal organisational review of ongoing flexible work arrangements varied amongst participants. Of those employees who were working in a flexible work arrangement at the time of interview, around half had not discussed a formal review process of these arrangements with their supervisor or manager. Of those that had a review process in place, these arrangements varied considerably.

A male professional in the education sector who had been working 0.8FTE for two years had his arrangement reviewed by his manager on an annual basis. Management then asked him to formally confirm that he would like to continue his reduced hours work arrangement. Other participants reported an annual review process was in place, with one participant reporting his arrangement would be reviewed every six months.

Some participants did not report having a formal review or assessment process in place, rather they had a more informal processes.

Occasionally we'll have little chats. It's a very informal situation. We'll just make sure that everybody is happy and that the work is getting done. *(female, administrative assistant, vary start and finish times and work from home within a part-time role)*

For two participants, having an informal review process made them feel their flexibility arrangement was less secure, and relied on mutual agreement and satisfaction between them and their manager.

I discussed it [the request] verbally then with my boss, and came to a mutual agreement and it was put in writing that this would be the provision going forward, subject to ongoing mutual agreement. I guess it could be cancelled at any time. *(male, manager, full-time hours, work from home two days per week)*

### ***Change to work arrangements – workload, duties and responsibilities***

#### ***Workload***

Whether participants' workload was changed to accommodate a flexible work arrangement depended to a large extent on the type of flexibility that was requested. For those participants who requested a change to the scheduling of work (e.g. days worked) or the location of work (i.e. work at home), most did not report any changes to the nature of their work, including responsibilities and workload.

Participants who had requested reduced hours were more likely to report a change to their work arrangements and workload to account for their reduced hours and that they were satisfied with this arrangement. A small number of participants who had reduced their work hours were in roles providing a direct service to clients (e.g. special needs students or clients in a medical practice). They explained that their workload remained the same for each work day, with other workers providing services to clients on their non-work days.

There were exceptions, and this tended to be the case for those participants in managerial or other senior roles in their organisation. For example, one professional working 0.8FTE did not have his workload adjusted; rather, he found that when he returned to work after his non-work day there was a build-up of work to be dealt with.

Just trying to juggle it. Nothing [workload] was taken away. You just have to manage it as best you can. Sometimes you work a bit extra, probably unpaid to compensate. *(male, professional, 0.8FTE)*

Some participants discussed the challenges of managing expectations around workload after reducing their hours. In many cases, hours were reduced but workloads were not adjusted to fully reflect their reduced working time.

It's not great for me from a workload perspective because I finish work on Tuesday. I'm not there on Wednesday, so when I get to work on Thursday there's a lot to do. It doesn't work well for me from a managing that work-life balance stuff. But it fits in with the family so that's what is important. *(female manager, change scheduled work days with no change in part-time hours)*

Indeed, one participant in a management role did substantial amounts of unpaid overtime at home, and felt that in doing so she worked the equivalent of a full-time job without being paid for the extra hours.

I do a lot of reading at home, because I just don't have the time when I'm there. That's why I said part-time in inverted commas, as my sense is I do the same job as other managers [who work full-time]. *(female manager, change scheduled work days with no change in part-time hours)*

Similar comments were made by a male participant working in a professional role.

But that's the way it goes if you want that flexibility .... If I have to I work a bit later on a Thursday. You tend to do a little bit extra afterwards [next few days after a Wednesday non-work day], even if though unpaid. You have to do it [unpaid work] really. If they are good enough to give it to you, I want that arrangement, I want to look after my third child and my wife she wanted to go back to work two days a week. You have to sort of do it. *(male, professional, 0.8FTE)*

Another participant working in a professional education role explained that he needed to be proactive in reminding his co-workers of his reduced workload.

Every now and then I need to remind people that I am on a 0.8 appointment so I should getting less of a particular task than those that work full-time. *(male, professional, working 0.8FTE)*

Whilst some participants felt confident in raising issues of workload with their supervisor and co-workers and ensuring a manageable workload, others felt that if they raised issues of work overload then they would be told that the solution would be to resume full-time work.

I'm the only person at my level that works part-time. I tend to try and not rock the boat too much particularly about workload. Because I feel that if I complain too much about having too much work, the solution will be to work full-time. *(female manager, change scheduled work days with no change in part-time hours)*

It is also important to note that the accommodation of work around the flexible work arrangements was not a one-sided process. There was reciprocity in the accommodations around flexibility. Some participants spoke of their willingness to make a temporary change to arrangements, where possible, to meet particular work needs or demands. One participant after reflecting on her colleagues' willingness to change regular meetings to fit in with her scheduled work days emphasised her own flexibility in attending meetings on her non-work days if absolutely essential.

That's the flexibility that I will do too. If something is very important and is on my day that I'm not at work then I will often find care for my child so I can attend. So there is a bit of that reciprocal flexibility. *(female manager, change scheduled work days with no change in part-time hours)*

Another indicated a similar response.

Often I'll need to just drop everything at home, put my son in day-care and then get to the office for something urgent that has happened. Certainly that's happened quite a few times. *(male, manager, full-time hours, work from home two days per week)*

#### *Duties and roles – the importance of co-workers*

A common observation from participants was that in order for a flexible work arrangement to be successful it requires more than just the approval of the line manager/supervisor. Co-workers' support is also crucial, for example in regard to the organisation and distribution of tasks and responsibilities and the scheduling of meetings.

The people in my office are very supportive about making sure that the Friday looked like it was seamless, and I've got a good team around me [co-workers and employees]. *(female manager, change of scheduled work days with Friday as a non-work day)*

The people in the office are aware of what's going on. They know now that I'll be off on a certain day. When they can they try and arrange staff meetings and various other team meetings for when I'm there. *(male, professional, 0.8FTE)*

Whilst many participants found their co-workers supportive of their flexible work arrangement, others found that reduced hours or working from home were not accepted and supported by their co-workers. For example, one participant who worked as a manager and telecommuted for two days per week believed that a common perception in his office was that those who work from home are not really working.

I probably disadvantage myself in some ways at the office. I still think there is a bit of an underlying perception there that if you are working from home you're not really working, or you're not putting in 100 per cent. It's still a topic of conversation with lots of colleagues ..... they think that's it's a great perk to have [working two days at home], rather than an effective solution to a problem for both my employer and myself. *(male, manager, full-time hours, work from home two days per week)*

Examples of unsupportive co-worker behaviour included the scheduling of meetings at times when the flexible worker was not able to attend, and workplace cultures in which flexible workers felt stigmatised.

You do get tired of saying “please don’t have it [the meeting] on a Wednesday”, “please don’t have it on a Wednesday”, please don’t have it on a Wednesday”.  
*(female manager, change scheduled work days with no change in part-time hours)*

We’ll just have the meeting at 8 o’clock and someone will fill her in...and then it becomes Chinese whispers....no one sees her, she doesn’t have a face, doesn’t have a profile. *(female, professional, request in process for 0.8 FTE)*

#### *Changes to job role and future opportunities*

Whilst most participants remained in their original job role, two participants reported that they felt obliged to accept a different role with lower status and responsibility. Both were in professional roles, and were told by management that their previous role could not be performed effectively under the new flexible work arrangement.

One participant also reflected on the implications of working flexibly for her career development, which she perceived would be disadvantaged in her organisation.

I’m really realistic. I’ve had a career first and then had children so I’m at a good point in my career. If you had done it the other way around and wanted to get up the ladder a bit and being part-time, particularly in my organisation, it just doesn’t happen. *(female, professional, additional twelve months’ leave)*

### **Impact of flexible work arrangement on personal and family well being**

Three major themes emerged with regard to the impact of flexible work arrangements on personal and family wellbeing. First, not surprisingly, participants emphasised the importance of flexibility to enable them to provide care for their children. Second, many participants also reflected on benefits to their personal wellbeing. Third, access to flexible work arrangements had a financial benefit, enabling dual-earner households to manage both paid work and care.

You know that the child will remember that you haven’t attended the grandparents’ mass, but the workplace won’t remember that you didn’t attend the service coordination meeting. It’s just trying to get that balance between feeling like you’re actually involved and available to your children. *(female manager, change scheduled work days with no change in part-time hours)*

All of the participants emphasised that their flexible work arrangement enabled them to provide the care for their children that was needed. The challenges of combining work and care, especially when children are not yet of school age is well established. It was clear that access to flexibility was crucial for participants to provide the necessary care for their children:

Having that day off so that I can spend time with my children .... having that time where it’s been just me and the kids [whilst his wife is at work] has been really good. *(male, professional, 0.8 FTE)*

I have a three year old and a four year old. The four year old is at an early learning centre for four days a week at a private school. If I start at 9, I can drop my daughter at school on the way. Starting at 8:30 she can’t be dropped off that early. They don’t have before-school care at my child’s school. *(female, HR professional,*



*request to change from 0.8FTE to 0.6FTE rejected, changed to new 0.6FTE job with 9am start time)*

A second major positive impact of working flexibly related to participants' mental health, wellbeing and quality of life. A HR manager who changed to a new flexible job after having her request rejected described working in her new family-friendly and flexible workplace:

*..a huge weight off...I think our whole family will be much better off...enable me to have a lot more contact with the school .... I am sure I will be a better employee as well, because I think I'll be a lot less stressed. (female HR professional, request to change from 0.8FTE to 0.6FTE rejected, changed to new 0.6FTE job with 9am start time)*

Similarly, other participants reported that working flexibly had a major impact on reducing stress, both for themselves and their family.

*It's not so much stress. We don't want to put them in childcare because we don't like that idea, so we'd rather have family members looking after them. (male professional, 0.8FTE care of three children shared between the respondent, his wife and his mother)*

*It's been a big benefit. It's a lot less stressful. I know that I can just ask for something and I would be very surprised if it wasn't approved. They are very willing to see various options (female community services worker, 0.9FTE reduced from full-time)*

Flexible work practices were clearly essential for most participants to combine work with paid care. It is important to note that flexible work arrangements did not necessarily provide the 'silver bullet' for work-life balance. Many participants reported that they led very time pressured and busy lives, but could manage to 'fit it all in' due to the flexible work arrangement.

*I am grateful that I have been able to have this working arrangement in place ..... it hasn't reduced my stress levels at all. As a couple with our work and home life in general it certainly hasn't reduced our stress levels or given us the so called true work-life balance, I don't think we have achieved that. (male manager, works from home 2 days per week)*

Working flexibly still meant, for many participants, that daily life and household routines were busy and required careful organisation and planning, particularly with regard to children's care arrangements and other needs, to fit around their paid work commitments. With dual-earner couples, household routines have to be carefully planned and negotiated to manage work commutes, childcare drop-offs and pick-ups and household chores such as meal preparation.

*My wife was returning to work. We had to juggle between us what days each of us would work around, and how we would fit in with each other's work hours. Her workplace is also quite flexible, but she does travel quite considerably so she is often away on an overnight basis. We also have a flexible childcare arrangement which we can use if required. (male manager, full-time hours, work from home two days per week)*

Often, informal flexibility (e.g. unofficial arrangements to vary working hours or scheduling to meet a particular need or circumstance) by arrangement with a line supervisor was still necessary for many participants to meet their family responsibilities.

The other thing that I'm fortunate that I can do is attend school or kindergarten events like reading or school masses during the day ..... that's a bit of an arrangement between myself and my line manager. *(female manager, change scheduled work days with no change in part-time hours)*

The third major benefit of flexibility that was mentioned only by male participants was the positive effect on household finances. Specifically, for male participants, a major benefit of their flexible work arrangement (all male participants worked 0.8FTE) was that it enabled their partner to either return to work or increase her hours, hence increasing the household income.

I'm taking that day off so that my wife can work that day (male, professional, 0.8 FTE)

I love my flexibility. It allows my wife to go back full-time to her career, and we can juggle everything effectively between the two of us. *(male manager, full-time hours, work from home two days per week)*

### **Impact of a lack of access to flexibility**

When participants were asked about the impact of a lack of flexibility there were two areas that were consistently identified: increased difficulties managing childcare and withdrawal from paid work, either for themselves or their partners. The majority of participants did not consider that they would pursue their request for flexibility if it had been rejected. Only one participant said that if her request had been rejected she would have pursued her request, with a view to negotiating an alternative mutually acceptable arrangement with her employer.

[Employers need to] look at what they are....losing incredibly skilled people they spent huge amounts of money training because they will not make these concessions *(female, professional, request in process for 0.8FTE)*

Most participants stated that if they did not have access to flexibility it would increase the difficulties of combining paid work and care. For example, organising after school care and pick-ups from school would be much more difficult. One participant stated that he and his wife would employ a nanny to care for their two year old son, which would place considerable strain on their household finances.

I would still work, but it would mean that the pressure and the stress would be much greater [if didn't have access to flexibility]. *(female manager, change scheduled work days with no change in part-time hours)*

Many of the female participants said that they would still engage in paid work if flexibility was not available, most likely with reduced hours to ensure they could still meet family and care responsibilities which were considered to be the priority.

I probably would have looked at resigning and becoming a casual staff member. My family is more important than my job. *(female, special education assistant, 1.0FTE reduced to 0.6FTE)*

I probably wouldn't be working in an office full-time. I probably would have had to stay at home and look for something part-time later [when children are older]. *(female administrative assistant, vary start and finish times and work from home within a part-time role)*

Other female participants reported that without access to flexibility they would most likely withdraw from paid employment all together, a decision motivated by their prioritisation of ensuring their preferred care arrangement for their children over career and financial outcomes.

I wouldn't go back to work at all..... if I had to go to work full time or not at all, I would choose not at all. Even if it meant we had to move to a smaller house, or give up our car, I would not go back full-time ... up until the kids were school age. *(female professional, return from parenting leave on 0.2 fte, moving up to 0.6FTE over time)*

One male participant indicated that he would change employers or become self-employed if his flexibility request has been rejected.

We've got a mortgage, I would have to go full-time .... [or] I could become a contractor.....I probably would have sought another employer [if the request was refused]. *(male professional, working 0.8FTE)*

Male participants also observed that without their flexible work arrangement it was less likely that their female partner would return to paid work. For some participants the lack of a flexible work arrangement would mean that they would have to place their young children in childcare which they did not wish to do. Hence in the absence of a flexible work arrangement, the way that their household managed paid work and care would have changed. For most men, this meant that their partners would have cared for their children, instead of returning to work or increasing her paid work hours.

It probably would have meant that my wife wouldn't have gone back to work full-time, or wouldn't have been able to until next year [when their son starts school]. Or we would have had to make the awkward decision of putting our child in full-time day-care. I don't think we would have been willing to do that, especially in the earlier years. It would have meant that we would have stayed on the single income. *(male manager, full-time hours, work from home two days per week)*

I'd just have to accept that [request for 0.8FTE refused]. But maybe my wife wouldn't have been able to go back to work, because her boss required her to be there a minimum of two days a week. *(male professional, 0.8FTE)*

Other participants who had their request partially or fully granted were clear that they would have sought alternative employment if their request had been refused.

## **Refusal of requests**

The majority of participants had their flexibility request approved in full. Only one participant had her request rejected outright. One participant had her request partially approved and one participant was waiting for a response at the time of interview and was expecting a rejection. In this section we describe the experiences of these three participants.

### ***Response from employer***

The participant who had her request refused was a HR professional who had requested a reduction in her hours from 0.8FTE to 0.6FTE. She submitted her request in writing (email). The response from her employer was communicated first in a face-to-face meeting with her line supervisor, followed by a formal response in writing (email). This process was undertaken relatively quickly, with a gap of

approximately one week between the initial request and the meeting with the participant's manager.

The explanation given by her employer was that the HR unit in which she was employed could not function effectively with fewer staff than it currently had, and that the participant's supervisor (also head of HR) was not confident that a job share arrangement would be suitable or effective for the participant's particular position.

It's a pretty small team, there was only four of us in the team. I knew that that was going to be the response anyway, but I thought that I would just try it. (female HR professional, request to reduce hours rejected)

This participant also believed that because her supervisor did not have children, it was difficult for her to understand the difficulties of managing work and care 'she just doesn't get it, she just doesn't understand how hard it is'.

A second participant who had her flexibility request partially accepted was also told by her employer that the nature of her job role did not allow for the flexibility that she had requested to be fully implemented. This participant worked in a medium-sized business in the hospitality industry (~ 570 staff). She initially made her request verbally to her supervisor, followed by a written request (email). Her request was then sent on to the company Director for consideration. She waited 12 weeks to receive partial agreement to her request (same full-time hours on a 7-day work schedule, agreed for one day of work to be changed, but not two days as requested). This response from her employer was provided in writing (email). She was told that management was willing to trial one change to her work days, and then would consider her request to change two of her scheduled work days. This participant explained that she accepted senior management's view that her request to work Saturdays and have Mondays and Fridays as non-work days could not be fully met as she was in a senior role supervising staff and the business was not large enough to accommodate her absence for two days during the week. However, she also reported that she intended to make her request again after she had demonstrated the current flexible work arrangement was successful and did not detract from her productivity or effectiveness.

Similar to the two participants who had their request rejected or partially accepted, a third participant, who was waiting for a response to her request at the time of the interview, expected this would be rejected on the basis of the operational requirements of the organisation. Through informal conversations with her manager this participant felt that her request to work 0.8FTE was likely to be rejected as a number of her colleagues were already working part-time and her supervisor did not think that the work unit could operate effectively with another part-time staff member.

I have not been given a formal 'we won't support you', but I have been given a very clear indication....from the response of my manager, that the hours I wanted to work and how I wanted to work didn't fit in with the rest of the workplace....they want me back full time or...in a different area (female professional, request in process for 0.8FTE)

#### *Offers of alternative work arrangements*

None of the participants who had, or anticipated, their request to be rejected or partially accepted were offered a suitable alternative work arrangement. The HR professional who had her request refused had suggested to her manager that her role could be done as a job share. This arrangement was rejected on the grounds that it was not a viable and workable option for her role.

The participant who had received informal communications from her supervisor that her request was not supported (although no official response had been provided) understood that if she wanted to return to work part-time (from maternity leave) then she would have to accept a different role at the same level of pay, which she expected would involve less interesting work and fewer opportunities for promotion.

#### *Appeal process*

Not only were these three participants not offered alternative options by their employer, but there was no process of appeal available to them. One participant felt that a right of appeal would not have made a difference to her request, rather it would have 'just prolonged the agony and upset our [supervisor-employee] working relationship'.

#### ***Impact of request refusal***

The impact of request refusal was clear – participants were prepared to, or had actually, left their jobs. For the participant whose request was formally refused, her response was to leave her job and seek alternative employment that better suited her needs. This was not her preferred outcome. Whether they had a request refused or accepted, participants made it very clear that their priority was their children and being able to provide the care that they needed. As a consequence, their paid employment had to fit in with their parental responsibilities.

The HR professional whose request to work 0.6FTE was refused outright responded by starting a search for another suitable position in a different organisation. In the meantime, she was required to place her daughter in a childcare arrangement with which the child was very unhappy. These arrangements created considerable stress for herself and her family. After two months of job searching she found a new [equivalent] role in another organisation that embraced flexible work arrangements for their employees, including job share and the part-time hours (0.6FTE) that she needed.

It was just very stressful, it created stress at home. My three year old daughter was going to childcare and she didn't want to go. She was crying. It was pretty grim actually. (*female HR professional, request to change from 0.8FTE to 0.6FTE rejected*)

Similarly, the participant who was waiting for a decision on her request, which she anticipated being negative, also spoke about high levels of stress for herself, partner and family created by work arrangements that did not fit with her caring responsibilities.

#### ***AWALI 2012/2014***

In the AWALI surveys access to flexibility was also observed to be positively associated with wellbeing, measured by work-life interference. Specifically, AWALI respondents who had their request fully accepted reported lower work-life interference than those who had their request partially accepted or completely rejected. This was observed in the 2012 and 2014 surveys.

## Extended unpaid parental leave – employee study

This section describes employees' experiences of requesting an extension to unpaid parental leave beyond an initial period of 12 months unpaid parental leave. Participants' reasons for, and experiences of, requesting extended unpaid parental leave are described below. Their views on the factors that facilitated a positive response to their request are explored (only one participant had their request refused), and associated outcomes described. The section finishes with an exploration of participants' views of the implications of not having access to extended unpaid parental leave.

### Duration of extended unpaid parental leave

Most participants requested a relatively short duration of extended leave, ranging from two weeks (1 participant), one month (1 participant), three months (2 participants) to six months (4 participants). Only one participant requested a full 12 additional months of unpaid parental leave.

### Reason for requesting extended unpaid parental leave

Participants offered a range of reasons for wanting to extend their unpaid parental leave beyond 12 months. These included wanting to spend more time with their young children, needing some more time that was free of work-related stress and demands, and providing more opportunities for participants to organise their home life and mentally prepare for a return to work. The latter theme was particularly prevalent for female participants, who felt they needed more time to prepare for the challenges of juggling paid work and the care of a young child(ren).

Just to have a bit more of a break, a bit more time at home before going back to work. (*female administrative assistant, additional four weeks' unpaid parental leave*)

One participant wanted to resume work in the next financial year, and did not have annual leave available to cover the additional two weeks she required, hence she requested an extension to her unpaid leave. This participant also needed to extend her leave as a childcare place was not available until the start of the new financial year. Similarly, other participants requested an extension to cover the period in which childcare was not available.

I wanted to spend as much time with him as I could. It's about maximising the time, but then facing the reality that in the inner suburbs there is not a lot of childcare available when you want it. So just working in with that. (*female professional, extra three months' leave sought*)

Requested additional leave because of not being able] to get into day-care. Being my last baby I just wanted to spend more time at home. My plan is to stay home for the 18 month period and then get care after that (*female professional, additional six months' leave sought*)

Other participants preferred to continue to care for their children in their own home, rather than place them in childcare. This preference was particularly common for participants with very young children aged around 12 months or younger. For some participants organising childcare was challenging as they did not have family members living in close proximity (i.e. they were either overseas or at a considerable distance from them). Therefore, the additional periods of leave were essential for them to provide care for their young children.

It felt like it was too early for us to be separated, for her [infant daughter] to go into care with a non-family member. I didn't feel like I was ready to juggle two roles, to be in the workforce as well as being a parent. (*female professional, extra three months' leave*)

I'm the one taking care of the children, and they are both too small [two children aged under 4 years] for both of us to go back [to work]. (*male professional, additional six months' leave*)

Similar to the participants who requested flexibility, there was a clear gender difference in the reasons for requesting additional unpaid parental leave. A common theme for men was that they requested extended unpaid parental leave in order to support and enable their partner's return to work. However, one sole father requested leave to take care of his young son as he was ill.

## **Awareness of entitlements to unpaid parental leave under the National Employment Standards**

Most participants reported feeling comfortable requesting extended unpaid parental leave, and were confident their request would be accepted. Just over half of participants were also aware of their rights with regard to extending unpaid parental leave. Two of these informed participants reported doing their own investigation into their rights as an employee, including their rights to this type of leave and the National Employment Standards in general. Participants accessed this information through their workplace (internal intranet), literature provided in the workplace, their union website, internal information sessions for parents at their workplace or direct communications with the Human Resources Unit of their organisation or line manager. Some participants reported their line manager was very supportive and helpful in directing them to information about their rights to parental leave, for example directing them to a company HR consultant who could give advice in this regard. Of those participants who were aware of their legal entitlements, most said that this knowledge did not affect their request-making.

There were some participants who were not aware of their right to request extended unpaid parental leave, or had a 'vague' awareness. One participant felt that awareness of this right to extended unpaid parental leave would have changed the way he went about his application, specifically it would have increased his confidence in making the application. As he explained, it would have been more of a case of 'instead of going in on your knees, going in on your feet'.

Another participant had some awareness that she could request extended unpaid parental leave, but did not know that she had a legal entitlement to make such a request, and had not received any information or advice from her employer regarding her rights in this regard. She also thought that knowing she had a legal entitlement would "probably" have changed her request, and she may have requested a longer extension beyond the two weeks that she had requested:

I just thought that [leave extension request] was an optional thing. I didn't realise that was a legal thing. I don't think they told me it was a legal thing. I just thought they were allowing me to just come back a couple of weeks later. I was unaware [of legal entitlement].

[Interviewer: If you had been aware that you could have requested another 52 weeks in total, would that have changed what you asked for?]

I think so, probably. I would say six months [additional leave] (*female clerical worker, extra two weeks' leave*)

## Process of requesting an extension to unpaid parental leave

Similar to participants who made a flexibility request, most workers requesting an extension to unpaid parental leave initially approached their line manager or supervisor informally to discuss their request, and followed up with a formal written request. Most participants reported that their request was also considered by the Human Resources Unit in their organisation, following the recommendation of their immediate manager/line supervisor as to whether the request should be accepted. Other participants reported that their request was sent to their supervisor's manager (e.g. state manager, Director) or the national office. A small number of participants initiated their request in writing in the first instance, following established administrative procedures in their organisation.

### *Supervisors' responses to request*

Participants reported both positive and negative responses from their supervisors/managers in response to their request to extend their unpaid parental leave. Most of the female participants reported that their supervisor/manager was supportive of their request. In contrast, the two male participants who requested extended unpaid parental leave received a negative response to their request, and in one case their request was initially rejected by management.

Most participants did not change their request based on discussions with their line manager, and there was no negotiations about adjusting or modifying the request for extended unpaid parental leave.

### *Timing of leave request*

The majority of participants made their request for extended unpaid parental leave while they were already on this leave. These participants made their request around two to three months before their first 12 month period of unpaid parental leave ended. For example, some participants kept in touch with their manager/supervisor during the initial unpaid parental leave period, and discussed their preference to extend their leave as part of these regular catch-ups. Others organised their entire unpaid parental leave including the extension in the weeks or months prior to starting the leave period.

### *Timing of employer response to request*

Most participants received a response to their request within a few weeks, usually ranging between one week to two or three weeks. One participant could not recollect the employer's response time. Most participants received a verbal response confirming their request, followed by email or written correspondence. A small number of participants received the approval in writing in the first instance. One participant, at the time of the interview, had received verbal approval of her request for extended unpaid parental leave, but had not yet received written confirmation.

## Factors impacting on request outcome

Similar to participants who requested flexibility, workers who successfully requested extended unpaid parental leave emphasised the importance of having a good working relationship with their employer and their immediate line manager/supervisor.

I think my experience is quite good. I think that comes down to my direct manager and the team that I work directly with currently. I don't think that would apply across the whole organisation. (*female professional, extra three months' leave*)



Just having good rapport with him [manager] and letting him know in advance what my plans were, that helped I think. So he had time to plan staffing and get someone in to fill my position. That kept him happy and me happy. (*female professional, additional twelve months' leave*)

As with flexibility requesters, leave requesters also discussed the importance of having a good track record of employment with the organisation. Some participants expressed doubts that new employees would be as likely to have an extended unpaid parental leave request granted.

[Interviewer – what helped bring about that positive response from your employer?]

Some people they [management] will look after more than other people....if they want to keep you around, they will do what they can to accommodate you.... if they are not so fussed .... then [they] may be less accommodating (*female professional, extra three months' leave*)

Our positive long term working relationship [12 years]. I wouldn't have been confident asking if I hadn't been there long (*female administrative assistant, extra four weeks' leave*)

A positive organisational culture was also identified as an important factor that supported the likelihood of a request for extended unpaid parental leave being accepted.

They [management] are trying to support a more diverse workplace .... people working in different ways. Not all of that is in practice. It's like that big cultural change that you can talk about and say that you offer it, but it's just changing the dynamics and it's how the organisation works (*female, professional, extra three months' leave*)

A number of participants observed that a central part of a supportive culture in their organisation was that it was considered normal and acceptable to take unpaid parental leave as needed, and that many workers (mainly women) did so.

At our workplace they are quite comfortable with you taking up to the two years' off. The one criteria that my workplace asks us to do is give them as much notice as possible, and not to be changing it multiple times (*female professional, extra three months' leave*)

Other people prior to me had asked for it (*female professional, additional twelve months' leave*)

One participant thought that his request for an additional six months' unpaid parental leave was accepted because he worked for a large employer 'if it was someone smaller you would never get it'.

There were also examples of organisational cultures that were not supportive of participants' requests for extended unpaid parental leave. For example, one male participant felt that his request, although accepted, was not viewed favourably by management as he was the first male employee to ask for an extension to unpaid parental leave. Another male participant also reported that his manager was not particularly supportive or positive about his request to take an additional six months unpaid parental leave to care for his sick son as a sole father. Some female participants also emphasised the key role of workplace culture on how requests for extended unpaid parental leave are received in the organisation.

It's easy for an organisation to have a policy, and it's easy to give lip service to the policy...to say this is what we support. But to actually put it into place and to live it a bit more is a bit more difficult...Whilst no one had any issues with my requesting more time, they would certainly be people who would go, why would you do that, because that's not good for your career. Or that's a bit difficult, we don't know how to do that (*female professional, extra three months' leave*)

## **Outcomes associated with having a request for extended leave accepted**

A common theme across all interviews was that having their request for extended unpaid parental leave accepted enabled participants to provide the care for their children in the way that they preferred (i.e. to provide this themselves to their young children).

It's taken some pressure [off] around childcare. It's meant that we can synchronise our family holiday over the Christmas period. My partner's company has compulsory Christmas leave for two weeks, whereas my organisation doesn't have that so I'd have to be negotiating for it (*female professional, extra three months' leave*)

Just the fact that I can stay at home and have my input on bringing up the children when they are young. I can look after their dietary requirements, they both have food allergies. So it's a little bit risky putting them into day-care (*female professional, additional six months' leave*)

It's been fantastic. Not only knowing that I have the time, but also that I have a job to go back to have meant that I don't even have to think about it. It's not a stress. It's there when I want it and I just go back [to work] and start (*female professional, additional twelve months' leave*)

This capacity to provide the care for their young children that participants felt was needed, in turn, had a positive impact on their wellbeing, such as reducing stress, and improving their overall quality of family life. In some cases this additional time also had a positive effect on their children's health and wellbeing.

[The leave was] excellent for my daughter...she's a lot more grounded and stable...she was a little bit older so happier to go off to family day care (*female professional, additional six months' leave*)

It's just that the massive stress is just not there. You're not up at night thinking about it (*male professional, additional six months' leave*)

As observed with regard to flexibility requests, it was also common for male participants to state that their access to extended unpaid parental leave enabled their partner to return to paid work, which had a positive effect on household income and their partner's employment/career.

Financial considerations were also mentioned by a number of participants when discussing their decision to return from unpaid parental leave. Their decision to return to paid work from unpaid parental leave was driven by financial need rather than personal preference with regard to both paid work and the care of their children. One participant reflected that having the request accepted provided his family with economic security.

Certainty of going back to work and having that second income. Certainty of having a job, really. (*male professional, additional six months' leave*)

## Work arrangements on return from extended unpaid parental leave

Most participants returned to their original role following their extended unpaid parental leave, with some returning to shorter hours, such as, a reduction from full-time to part-time hours. Two participants had not returned to work at the time of the interview. Both participants were hoping to return to work part-time in the first instance. One participant, a male professional, had not yet started negotiations about return to work at the time of interview. His preference was to return to work part-time for 12 months, and then return to full-time work. He anticipated returning to the same job role as he held prior to his extended unpaid parental leave. The second participant who was still on leave had raised her return with reduced hours informally with her manager whilst still on leave, and intended to formalise these arrangements (including job placement) two to three months before returning. This participant was concerned about the implications of returning to work with reduced hours, and clearly felt that part-time work could potentially damage her career prospects:

..hoping to go back part-time. Ideally I'd love to work only work three days. But I think financially and professionally four days is a bit easier. Whilst it shouldn't be the case [with] three days, it becomes a little bit of a stigma, it becomes difficult to place you. I work in projects, we are always moving around doing different projects and different things. Part-time is available, but you've just got to balance it between what your needs are and what will give you the most opportunities at work (*female professional, extra three months' leave*)

Another participant also expressed concern about the consequences of taking extended unpaid parental leave with regard to career prospects and opportunities.

You're less likely to get a promotion or be considered for acting duties because you're part-time or you've been on leave for a long time (*female professional, additional twelve months' leave*)

Whilst most participants were able to return to the same job role, with reduced hours if needed, this experience of a supported return to work was not experienced by all participants. Some participants were not able to return to the same role after they returned from extended unpaid parental leave. For example, one participant returned to work to find that her original role was no longer available, and that she may have to accept a redundancy.

The position that I had in [the organisation] was made redundant. So I wasn't really coming back to anything. So I couldn't be what my original [work]load was. They pretty much left it open, but they did mention redundancy. I was pretty shocked, and a bit negative about that. It wasn't a threat, it was more just that they had given the position away as a result of negligence on their part, just hiring too many people. They then offered a 0.4 position that I felt I should take as there was this query about coming back full-time or part-time. Because I preferred to come back part-time I felt I should take the 0.4 when I could (*female professional, additional twelve months' leave*)

Another participant made the decision to nominate not to return to her work team which performed administrative functions in the organisation, as she felt that her extended period of unpaid parental leave would be difficult to manage for the small team in which she previously worked.

I contacted my supervisor and explained what I wanted to do [take extended unpaid leave]. I also said that I would be giving up my position in that work unit. Being a small work unit I didn't think that it would be fair that they were left in limbo with what I wanted to do (*female administrative assistant, extra 6 months' leave*)

This participant had not yet returned to work, but planned to return to a part-time role (she had formerly been full-time) and anticipated that she would return to a different role on the basis of discussion that she had started with her supervisor (seven months prior to returning from extended unpaid parental leave at time of interview).

### **Impact of a lack of access to extended unpaid parental leave**

Participants gave two clear, and divergent, responses to the question of what they would have done if they were not able to access extended unpaid parental leave. One group of participants stated that they would have returned to work, and organised alternative childcare arrangements for their children until they could put in place their preferred care arrangements.

I would have gone back [to work]. But it just makes it harder when you don't want your children dragged in and out of day-care every day when they are so young. That's the big thing. (*male professional, extra six months' leave*)

I wouldn't have jeopardised my job, I would have gone back to work. It would be less time spent with my children. Hard to try and get them into day-care. I would have had to put them into a day-care that I'm not happy with. There's not too many [childcare centres] without travelling 15 – 20 minutes to the next one (*female professional, additional six months' leave*)

These parents anticipated that having to return to work earlier than preferred would have placed considerable strain on their own wellbeing in terms of increased stress, as well as on the household finances as it may have meant that their partner would be required to withdraw their participation in paid work in order to care for their child(ren):

[not having the extra leave] would have made me more stressed, [I] would have felt more guilty as well for leaving my child so early, I was still breast feeding...would have felt more stressed about that as well....would have made me feel like I couldn't fulfil my role as a mum but would have had to go back to work. (*female professional, additional six months' leave*)

Because it's really about childcare, if they said no then I would have had to put my child into childcare a lot earlier than I was comfortable with in order to get him a place. Or it might be that one of us might not be able to work, and that would be him [husband]. That would be harder for him, as he wants to work as well. (*female professional, extra three months' leave*)

Other participants stated that a refusal to extend their unpaid leave would have most likely resulted in their resignation from the job, and where possible seeking alternative employment where their flexibility needs could be met.

Well, I would have been unemployed. (*male professional, extra one month leave*)

I think I would have been quite disgruntled. Potentially started to explore looking at other work arrangements (*female professional, extra three months' leave*)

## Impact of having a request for extended unpaid parental leave rejected

One participant who had his request rejected was a sole father in a professional role seeking an extension to his unpaid parental leave as his child had developed a serious illness during the initial period of unpaid parental leave. After he received official notification that his request for an additional six months unpaid parental leave was rejected he advised that he would be offering his resignation.

They [management] said they couldn't stretch to that length of time. So I basically said 'well you can accept my resignation then'. At that stage I had asked for six months' [leave] (male sole parent, professional, extra one month leave)

In response, his manager took time to reconsider his request and after three weeks had passed he offered the participant an additional month of unpaid parental leave with a formal written offer. This offer came with the proviso that the participant's position may not be available when he returned from leave and that he may have to move to a different position. The participant made it very clear that he prioritised the care of his children over his work, and that he would have left the organisation if the leave was not approved, as his son needed 24-hour care at that time (his son subsequently recovered full health). As he explains below, a change of management ensured that he was able to retain his original position on return to work.

He [supervisor] did say that my position might not be open when I come back and I might have another position. I said I wasn't too fussed about that. My children come first. (*male, sole parent, professional, extra one month leave*)

[Interviewer: What happened when you went back to work, did they change your job?]

No, I went back basically to the same job. Both managers have changed. My manager and the state manager – so there is now new people in that position. They are lot more worker friendly .... They [new management] have actually put out a policy on such things like family leave and extended sick leave. (*male professional, extra one month leave*)

## Employer study

This section describes employers' views and experiences of requests for flexible work arrangements or extensions to unpaid parental leave beyond 12 months of unpaid leave. We canvassed employers' experiences of both the process of requesting, and the management of employees working flexibly or employees who were currently on or recently returned from extended unpaid parental leave.

Participants in this study comprised managers, supervisors and human resource professionals who either directly received these requests from their employees, or in the case of HR professionals were involved in the decision-making processes and organisation of ongoing work arrangements with respect to these requests.

Each section below starts with a discussion of flexibility requests, followed by separate commentary on employers' experiences with requests to extend unpaid parental leave beyond 12 months of unpaid parental leave.

As detailed in the method section, employer representatives in this study were aware of the *Fair Work Act 2009* entitlements with regard to requesting flexibility and extensions of unpaid parental leave, and had received at least one request for either or both of these arrangements under the NES provisions.

The first part of this section describes employers' engagement with these provisions, specifically how they became aware of the Right to Request, and what effect this change in employee entitlements had on request-making in their organisation. Subsequent sections address the request-making process, employers' experience with managing employees who requested these alternative work arrangements and their views on how these arrangements impact on both organisational outcomes and employees' health and wellbeing.

Note that whilst the employer interviews were conducted after the 1 July 2013 amendment to the eligibility criteria for the right to request a flexible work arrangement, most employer participants reported on requests received prior to this date from parents requiring a change to their work arrangements to care for pre-school aged children. One employer had approved a flexibility arrangement for an employee to care for a disabled child. This latter arrangement was in place prior to 1 January 2010.

It's a good thing. It makes the organisation more competitive. It's part of the modern day working environment (*female manager, education and training, NSW*)

### How employer participants became aware of the Right to Request

The majority of employer participants indicated that they were informed of the NES Right to Request through internal communications from their human resources unit, or in smaller organisations by communication from their manager. This was the case for both the Right to Request both flexibility and extensions to unpaid parental leave. The most common method by which participants were informed of NES entitlements was by internal organisational emails from a HR department or equivalent.

Through our Accounts office. What normally happens is that they give notification that there has been a change, and the information is sent out to all the regional managers. (*male manager, information media and telecommunications, NSW*)

Just through the HR department emailing everyone about what the changes were. *(female senior service supervisor, retail trade, SA)*

As a HR manager I'm just aware, it's just my job. Internally within the department we get notified by corporate HR about anything that changes. *(female HR manager, financial and insurance services, QLD)*

Managers and supervisors did not rely solely on human resources and other corporate units, they also investigated employee rights and entitlements themselves, utilising the information provided by government websites. As the supervisor below explains, he engaged in this information search to ensure that the request making processes and outcomes in his organisation conformed to the legal requirements:

If a staff member comes to us with a request we often just jump on a government website and see what the baseline rules are, make sure we don't cross over that, that we at least work within that range. *(male supervisor, financial and insurance services, VIC)*

### **Perceived impact of the Right to Request on employee requesting**

Employers' observations regarding the impact of the NES on employee requesting were varied. A common perception was that a small increase in the frequency of requests for flexibility had been observed since January 2010, and that these requests were more likely to be accepted. Some employers also perceived an increase in employees' confidence in asking for changes in work arrangements as a result of having a formal legal entitlement for such requests to be considered by employers.

Yes, more [flexibility] requests are more coming through, and I'm also noticing that the requests are getting adopted more. *(male site manager, transport/postal/warehousing, NSW)*

I don't think it has been a dramatic increase, but I do think that it [request for flexibility] have increased. People are more aware now. Because we always notify of any change, so people are more aware of their rights than they ever were before. So we're getting that through our emails at work. So that's made people more comfortable because they know what they're allowed to have and they're not frightened to come and ask now. *(female clinical nurse manager, health care and social assistance, QLD)*

Many participants observed that their organisations were supportive of flexible work arrangements prior to January 2010, hence the change in legislation was not observed to have a particularly strong impact on their employees' requesting behaviour.

Our workplace is very flexible anyway. The rules that came in place, we were doing them anyway. *(male supervisor, financial and insurance services, VIC)*

Around one third of employer participants had not noticed a change in the frequency of requests. There was some perception that the introduction of a legal entitlement to make a request had positively impacted on organisational culture so that flexibility requests are given more careful consideration by management, and in some cases this was perceived to have resulted in acceptance of requests that may have been rejected prior to the introduction of the NES Right to Request.

In theory at least there does seem to have been an attitudinal shift in the culture and the philosophy. Not so much [difference] in actual requests. We've always tried to be flexible in that way. That's often been just at the higher level. But now it's been pushed down to the lower managerial levels a bit more. That it's more serious, that the effort has to be made (*female HR consultant, professional, scientific and technical services, QLD*)

We do always follow the procedures that are set out [in the *Fair Work Act*]. But previously we always tried to accommodate requests as well. So it's difficult for me to say that we've definitely changed. We probably have been more flexible because there have been a couple of instances previously [to the change in employment law] where we didn't accommodate the request. (*male manager, information media and telecommunications, NSW*)

An example of this change in attitude and responsiveness to employee requests given by an IT manager highlights the impact of these legislated entitlements, particularly with regard to women's opportunity to return to work after having a child. This IT manager describes how prior to the introduction of the NES his firm had not supported a mother to return to work part-time after having a baby. After the NES came into effect, the company has supported two such requests.

Previously we had a sales rep returning from maternity leave who wanted to come back on a part-time basis. We actually declined that opportunity, we said you either need to come back full-time or not at all. Since then we've had two sales people who have initially indicated that they wanted to come back full-time and then requested part-time and we've accommodated those requests. (*male manager, information media and telecommunications, NSW*)

Part-time work is a common strategy used by Australian mothers in order to maintain their participation in paid work and manage care responsibilities. As observed in the employee study, a lack of access to this type of flexibility presents a major barrier to women's participation in paid work. Clearly, the Right to Request strengthened these IT employees' access to flexibility, this is especially significant given the IT industry is characterised by long hours and high work demands and is not an industry known to be particularly accommodating of reduced work hours.

One of the most common types of requests that employers mentioned, were from women requesting to work part-time after maternity leave. This type of request was observed to have increased most noticeably since the introduction of the Right to Request. This pattern was observed across various industries, for example the two employers below represent female-dominated (health) and male-dominated (information media) sectors.

More the flexibility when they come back [from maternity leave] they can do two days a week and have the rest of the time at home with their baby. That happens quite a lot for the first four or five years of the child's life until they start going to pre-school. And then they come back into the workforce, back into the position they had before. (*female clinical nurse manager, health care and social assistance, QLD*).

People returning from maternity leave generally are asking to come back on a part-time basis. Because we work shiftwork, the announcers have to work to a roster and we tend to move those rosters around depending on what our requirements are, but also depending on personal circumstances as well. (*male manager, information media and telecommunications, NSW*)



With regard to who was making requests, all employers consistently reported that the overwhelming majority, or indeed all, of the requests were made by women. There was little evidence that men's requesting behaviour has been affected by the NES. There was one exception to this pattern. One employer participant from the health sector observed that the change in legislation had resulted in more men requesting flexibility and extended unpaid parental leave, which she attributed to an influx of younger men into the workforce who have young families.

Men are requesting as well. In my area we don't have a lot of young men. We have older men who have established families. So we're just starting to get a lot of graduate young guys, and they're the ones who are asking. That's happening more, but only because of the age of the male nurses that I'm working with, we're starting to get a lot of younger grads come through. *(female clinical nurse manager, health care and social assistance, QLD)*

#### *Extensions to unpaid parental leave*

Requests for extensions of unpaid parental leave beyond 12 months of unpaid leave were not common, with most participants reporting only one or two of these requests (details below). Given that these requests appear to be infrequent, and involve longer periods of time, it is not surprising that those employers who had received at least one of these requests since January 2010 did not report noticing a significant increase in the frequency of such requests. All requests for extended unpaid parental leave received by employer participants were made by female employees.

### **Request-making processes**

Most employer participants did not report that the request making processes had changed substantively since the introduction of the Right to Request. This was the case for requests for flexibility and extensions of unpaid parental leave. A small number of participants indicated that their procedures had become more formalised.

The notification of people about what they are allowed to have, and the processing, it's all done by email now. It's all really clear and concise about what they are having and how much they can have. And it's all very well documented. *(female clinical nurse manager, health care and social assistance, QLD)*

As observed with the employee interviews, the majority of employer participants described the request making process as starting with an informal conversation between an employee and their manager or supervisor, followed by a formal application in writing or email. Depending on the size of the organisation, these formal applications were sent to a human resources unit or a senior manager.

Initially people have an informal chat with their manager. Then when everything is worked out they move forward in consultation with their manager to ask for formal approval from HR in writing. *(male manager, financial and insurance services, VIC)*

Normally we start with the informal discussion, and then move on to the formal process of applying in writing, there is an employee [online] portal that they can put the request through. It goes first to their supervisor and then onto the higher level management *(male operations manager, accommodation and food services, VIC)*

Consistent with the observations from the employee study, managers identified themselves as influential 'gatekeepers' in the process of request making. This was the case with regard to the initial response that an employee receives on making a request, usually in the form of a conversation with

their manager. It was also clear that line supervisors and managers exerted influence in the decision-making process in circumstances when the final approval of the request rests with more senior management. These observations are consistent with a major theme emerging from the employee interviews regarding the key role of a supportive manager in terms of employees both making requests and working in a flexible arrangement.

I am the manager so the request comes to me. Then I have to assess the situation and what can be done in the circumstances and then I will advise the Director and others in the Directorate and then the final decision will be made. I will give advice about how we feel about this particular person, as I have more direct contact with these people than the Directors. *(female manager, education and training, NSW)*

When a request comes my way I will sit down with that person and go through the reasons for that request, how many hours have you got, and that sort of stuff. If there is availability for them to do that in terms of there's nothing major that needs to be done around that time then that's fine *(female regional liaison manager, education and training, QLD)*

Although most employers recognised that the interpersonal relationship between a manager and their staff has a significant influence on employees' requesting, very few employers had directly addressed this dynamic. One exception was a manager in a warehousing business. His organisation was proactive in training managers to encourage and support flexibility requests, recognising that an approachable and supportive manager was crucial to increasing employees' willingness to make flexibility requests, with confidence that there would not be negative consequences.

We have meetings and workshops about it. About how to deal with those requests and also how we can encourage them, the staff members, to feel comfortable about approaching and asking for those requests. So they are not going to feel that it is going to be frowned upon or that they are going to be pushed out of their job. *(male manager, transport/postal/warehousing, NSW)*

Similar to the request making process, employer responses to requests usually comprised a verbal response followed by a more formal written response by letter or email.

You put in a request form, then you receive verbal notification that's backed up by a letter *(Female, manager, transport/postal/warehousing, SA)*

## **Number of requests in the previous 12 months**

Employer participants were asked how many requests that had received in the preceding 12 months. Most participants indicated that they had received between one and three flexibility requests. A small number of employer participants reported more requests, ranging from four to ten requests in the past 12 months.

Two factors should be taken into account when interpreting these reports on rates of requesting. First, a number of employer participants observed that they were only aware of requests from their particular area of the organisation, for example, in one hospital ward, a single supermarket or one division in a large organisation. Second, during the course of the interviews it was common for participants to observe that many requests to change work arrangements were handled informally on a short-term 'as needs' basis, or were managed by negotiation with a manager or supervisor without a formal request being made. This was often the case for arrangements where there was no

change to the actual number of hours worked, but rather changes were made to the scheduling and location of work such as to vary start and finish times or work from home.

#### *Extension to unpaid parental leave*

Requests for extensions to unpaid parental leave were less common. Of the six employer participants who had received such requests, they had received only one or two requests in the previous 12 months.

### **Reasons for employee requests**

Under the NES regulations at the time of the study, all requests that were the focus of this study were made to accommodate childcare needs. Here we explore in greater depth employers' understanding of employees' particular childcare needs and requirements that led to their request making.

As observed previously, one of the most common circumstances for seeking flexibility described by employers was women requesting part-time hours on return to work from maternity leave. Employers observed that whilst these women wanted to return to paid work, part-time hours were needed to accommodate their caring responsibilities.

Because they've got young children they're not wanting to work five days a week. They're cutting back and working two days a week, job sharing with someone else. So someone steps up into the other days. *(female clinical nurse manager, health care and social assistance, QLD)*

It's usually the pressures that they face with a new child and having to juggle work as well. It's particularly with coming back from maternity leave. The requests that we've had so far [for part-time work], all of them have ended up full-time when they've got a routine that actually works for them. *(male manager, information media and telecommunications, NSW)*

In general, employers recognised that juggling paid work and care of infants and young children presented many challenges for parents, and recognised the important role that a supportive employer can play to assist working parents. For example, a manager in a company that developed educational resources demonstrated her clear understanding of her female employees' motivation to return to paid work after maternity leave, and also the challenges they often faced when doing so.

The flexibility is to keep the work and life balance, and they want to be more around their children, or maybe their partner is not flexible and they cannot provide enough support. At the same time a lot of women would like to return to the workforce [after maternity leave] because they would like to engage in their job role rather than staying home and spending all their time at home. They don't want to stay out of the workforce for more than 12 months. Especially if they are in a good working environment. *(female manager, education and training, NSW)*

Indeed, many employer participants demonstrated an awareness of the challenges of organising care for pre-school aged children, with some employees juggling different types of care such as care in the home by them, care from a relative such as a grandparent, and formal childcare. Flexible work arrangements were recognised by employer participants as essential support that enables employees to manage care arrangements and continue to engage in paid work.

It's about childcare arrangements. One [employee] has a child who has just started school so to fit in with school hours, and the other is to share the care either with their partner or other family members (*female HR consultant, professional, scientific and technical services, QLD*)

The day care is only available between certain times. They want to pick up their child and finish their work from home. Or they want to have a day off a week so they can take care of their child at home. When they work from home it is also easier for them to take care of their children (*male manager, financial and insurance services, VIC*)

#### *Extension to unpaid parental leave*

Similar to the employee interviews, employers reported that the reasons given for extending unpaid parental leave were most commonly related to workers' preparedness to return to work especially if they were caring for their first child. Other common reasons were workers' preference not to place young children in the care of others and difficulties organising suitable childcare arrangements.

One had a child who wasn't well and wanted to spend more time at home before putting her into childcare. The other just didn't want to come back to work, she felt the child was a bit too young to leave. (*female HR consultant, professional, scientific and technical services, QLD*)

My colleague has taken up opportunity. That was her third child. With her first two children prior to 2010 that hadn't occurred. She took that [extended unpaid leave] up. Because having two younger children as well as the baby she took that opportunity to spend that time with younger one as well as getting the other two up and running in terms of getting a childcare routine happening, and other things ready for when she did come back to work. (*female regional liaison manager, education and training, QLD*)

As the above quotes demonstrate, employer participants consistently indicated their support and understanding of workers' preferences to spend more time caring for their children, and appreciated the importance of enabling employees to move back into paid work at a time when they felt ready to manage the responsibilities of both paid work and care.

## **Types of arrangements requested**

The most common types of flexible work arrangements requested of employers were to work part-time, have flexible start and finish times and to work from home usually for one day or part of a day a week. Other arrangements such as job sharing or working split shifts were rare, with only one employer participant describing a job share arrangement. Around half of employer participants reported requests for more than one type of flexibility arrangement, whereas the remainder only reported one type of flexibility was requested by their employees (to their knowledge).

In addition to the requests for part-time work from female employees returning from maternity leave, part-time work was also requested by employees in order to meet childcare needs for pre-school aged children, and in one case to accommodate care of a disabled child.

It's mainly about reduced hours, and if necessary take time off to look after the kids if they are sick or have special requirements. We also have another employee who has a disabled son, and we modify his work days and hours depending on the requirements that he has because of his son. But we were doing that prior to the

new regulations. (*male manager, information media and telecommunications, NSW*).

Requests for other types of flexibility such as working from home or changing start and finish times were often received by employers from full-time workers who needed to adjust their working arrangements without changing their work hours. Flexible start and finish times were commonly requested to accommodate childcare drop off and pick up times.

We've got several staff who finish work early, go and pick their kids up from childcare, and do a couple of hours from home in the evening. (*male supervisor, financial and insurance services, VIC*)

I work with people who have negotiated working from home. They take home their computer and they take home a Next G device and that sort of thing, so they are in the office during the day but then they can do the children, pick-up and drop-off to childcare, and then they can log on after hours when the kids are in bed or eating dinner. So they can still work their seven and a half hour day, but not necessarily in the office (*female regional liaison manager, education and training, QLD*)

There was also evidence that employer participants were willing to accommodate employees' unique life circumstances. For example, one employer describes a tailored flexible work arrangement that was designed to accommodate an employee with a partner who worked on a remote mining site.

Another example is a lady whose partner works in the mines. So he's home then he's not, then he's home then he's not. So she has requested that on the days that he is not home that she do a three-quarter day, and then on the days that he is home then he can look after the children or take them to childcare and back. That way she's still working full-time, but every now and then she does a short day, and when he is home she'll do an extended day to make up the hours that way. (*female regional liaison manager, education and training, QLD*)

Another employer from the retail sector described a substantial change in work scheduling, in which an employee requested to change shift schedules from night-time to day-time work to enable her to care for her young child on return from maternity leave.

There was one girl who before she had a baby was working on nights, then she went on maternity leave and came back to go on daytime work (*female senior service supervisor, retail trade, SA*)

In sum, although most requests received by employer participants were to work part-time, telecommute or vary start and finish times, there were also examples of employers willing to accommodate an employee's unique life circumstances by creating a more tailored flexibility arrangement.

### *Extension to unpaid parental leave*

Of those employers who had received requests for extended unpaid parental leave, three had received requests for the maximum additional 12 months' unpaid parental leave, one had received requests for an additional 12 months and an additional three months (two separate requests), and two employer participants had received requests for between three and six months' additional unpaid parental leave.

## **Request-making outcomes**

The majority of employer participants reported that all requests for a flexible work arrangement or an extension to unpaid parental leave were accepted, without negotiation or alteration to the employee's request.

Everything that has happened so far, the staff have been granted their request at the time. *(female regional liaison manager, education and training, QLD)*

It's very rare that any [requests] would be declined. Very rare. Everything is taken into perspective, obviously. But when it involves people having issues with childcare, very rarely would it be declined. *(male supervisor, financial and insurance services, VIC)*

In the small number of instances in which requests were subject to further negotiation or were declined, employers attributed this to difficulties associated with the nature and scheduling of the work. For example, one respondent explained the difficulties of meeting requests for flexibility in a hospital where day, evening and night shifts had to be organised.

The only reason it would be declined, and it would only be for a set period, would be if we've got a full quota of our staff on holiday. So then we wouldn't have the flexibility to be able to. But that might only be for a week here or a week there. It wouldn't be that they would be denied to have the change [in work arrangements], it might need to be delayed but that would only depend. If we have a full quota of staff on holidays or long service leave then there may be a small period of time where we say no we can't start it that week but we can start it that week. *(female clinical nurse manager, health care and social assistance, QLD)*

### *Extension to unpaid parental leave*

Five of the six employers who had received a request for extended unpaid parental leave accepted the requests without negotiation or alterations. Only one employer reported a refusal, which is described in more detail below.

## **Reasons for accepting requests**

When reflecting on the reasons why requests are accepted, many employer participants explained that requests for flexibility to accommodate childcare needs were seen as a legitimate and a valid reason to change work arrangements. Employers recognised and respected the importance of parenting and family responsibilities, and that work arrangements would need to be adjusted to support parents' capacity to work and care for children.

I take into account people's circumstances as to what's happened. For example one of my co-workers went off to adopt a couple of kids. Well you can't do that after-hours, and it's something they've been wanting to do for ages. I'll look in to what

reasoning they have for it and how much lead time opportunity there is. *(female regional liaison manager, education and training, QLD)*

It's a genuine issue. It's not that they are out doing work for somebody else. It's their own family and kin who need them. They need time for their work-life balance, and that's very important for a person to be more focused in their work as well. Because if you force them to come to work in the office their mind would be somewhere else, and that's definitely not good for their productivity either. *(male Director, professional, scientific and technical services, VIC)*

Many employers recognised that supporting flexible work arrangements would be beneficial to employees' wellbeing and happiness in the workplace. Employers' views on retention, wellbeing and productivity outcomes are described in greater detail below.

We encourage it, people working flexibly. You get people who are happier, and less stressed and they can be happy in their work environment. Rather than someone who is working, but they are not as happy as they would like to be. Generally people are happier. *(male site manager, transport/postal/warehousing, NSW)*

Employers also recognised that the organisation benefited from accepting requests for flexibility, particularly in retaining valued employees. This was a common response from employers when asked why they accepted employees' requests for flexibility. Whilst this is discussed in further detail below, the following quotes demonstrate that employers recognised that accepting requests for flexibility was necessary to ensure the retention of valued workers.

Usually if someone is a good employee you want to secure their services whatever way you can. If they are only able to give us part-time and they are a good employee then it's better to have them part-time than not at all. *(male manager, information media and telecommunications, NSW)*

To keep our employees happy and to keep the experienced staff in the workplace. *(male IT manager, health care and social assistance, QLD)*

Some employers explained that they carefully considered the circumstances under which they were willing to accept a flexibility request. Two factors were emphasised, the job requirements and the extent to which a flexibility arrangement would fit with these requirements, and the value of the individual employee to the organisation given their skills and experience. These themes are explored further in the section below on organisational outcomes.

Most of the requests are accepted. Because we want all our employees to be happy, and a declined request is a potential loss of the employee. We do realise that. Obviously a lot of things have to be taken into account. How long the employee has worked in the organisation, how experienced they are. Sometimes it's much easier to give flexibility to one employee than take two new ones and the time it takes in training them. If the employee has been there for a while and they are very knowledgeable then they are a valuable employee and their request will be met usually. *(female manager, education and training, NSW)*

Employers indicated that they were more likely to accept flexibility requests if the employee was perceived to be trustworthy and can be expected to maintain their performance and productivity when working flexibly. Trust was particularly raised as a concern with regard to telecommuting.

We are fine to be understanding and accommodate. It depends on how good the person is with the job as well. Not somebody who is always late or somebody who

is really lazy. We have to be cautious about whom we are giving it [flexibility] to. Whether it is really worthwhile to do that. (*male Director, professional, scientific and technical services, VIC*)

As a manager I know the person who is working under me. That way I can think 'OK that person is a very serious and diligent worker, I can trust them'. It's not automatically accepted that you can work from home. It depends on the staff member. We have to know that they will do the work and that they will complete the work. It's a trust issue. If somebody had just started, a new employee and they request straight away that might be not be accepted. (*male test manager, professional, scientific and technical services, ACT*)

A second consideration with regard to the context of the request was the requesting employee's job role and responsibilities. A number of employers explained that the nature of an employee's job or role may make accepting a flexibility request more difficult, for example if they have a particular skill set or a customer service or sales role that requires in-person or telephone contact.

I work for a school and we have two types of employees. The teaching staff and the non-teaching staff. Obviously with the teaching staff it's much easier because of the flexible nature of their employment. They can request flexible hours and we can actually provide that very easily. While the non-teaching staff it's much more difficult because they do require greater engagement during the peak semester periods..... we want as many people present as possible. Flexibility is not always desirable. Especially if a person has been fully trained they have specific duties and their request for flexibility is not always desirable at that particular time. (*female manager, education and training, NSW*)

#### *Extension to unpaid parental leave*

There was one reported instance of an employer refusing a request for extended unpaid parental leave. The HR consultant explained that the request was refused due to staffing difficulties at that particular time in the organisation. However it is important to note that the employer did offer an alternative arrangement for the employee to return from maternity leave to part-time hours which was accepted.

One was not met, it wasn't my decision, it was a decision from higher up given we are going through some specific issues in our organisation at the moment in terms of employment. One request for additional time [extended unpaid leave] wasn't met, so an agreement was to come back part-time instead. (*female HR consultant, professional, scientific and technical services, QLD*)

## **Reasons for refusing requests**

Only four employer participants had experience or knowledge of a request being refused or declined. When asked about whether requests had been refused, most employers indicated that they had not refused a request, and many explained why this was the case. Explanations as to why requests are not usually refused highlighted employers' recognition that supporting flexibility benefitted the organisation as well as employees.

We haven't refused any requests. We don't want to break the morale of the person. We don't want them to have Monday morning blues. We want to give them



a positive work environment. And that brings out the best outcomes for our business as well. *(male Director, professional, scientific and technical services, VIC)*

You can't decline, you'd have to have a very good reason. I've got children, I obviously have to take a bit of time off here and there for children, things like that. That [childcare] takes precedence over why they need to make a change [to work arrangements]. It would be very tough to decline a request like that. If a staff member is a very poor worker then that's another issue that you'd have to look at. You'd have to really follow the rules, the 'I's dotted and the 'T' crossed. But if staff are usually good operators, good workers, we bend over backwards to come at their request. *(male supervisor, financial and insurance services, VIC)*

When describing circumstances under which flexibility requests had been refused, employers identified organisational or business factors that prevented requests being accepted. The most common reason was staff shortages, due to factors such as organisational downsizing or a lack of employees available to fill particular shifts.

It just depends. If there is too many people wanting that [flexibility] at the same time then it gets a bit tricky. For example if we only have seven people on during the day, and say there are 10 people who want to work during the day. The budget just wouldn't allow that. *(female senior service supervisor, retail trade, SA)*

Well, there are certain jobs where it is difficult. It's not that we are being deliberately obstructive. But there are a lot of jobs that can't be done on a part-time basis for various reasons. Or it's extremely difficult to fill the other part, particularly a lot of the requests are for things like 0.8 [FTE]. It's very, very difficult to find somebody who can do the other 0.2 [FTE]. A lot of roles need that continuity of service, because they are in service provision. So that's usually the reason. *(female HR consultant, professional, scientific and technical services, QLD)*

There was clear evidence that most employers were motivated to accommodate flexibility requests wherever possible, even when business circumstances made this request challenging to meet. Indeed, rather than refuse a request outright, many employers spoke of their attempts to negotiate alternative options or to at least partially meet an employee's request.

We haven't had a request 100% declined. We will always try and find a solution that is beneficial to the employee and the organisation. *(female manager, education and training, NSW)*

Not really refused, but if there is not enough rostering space then they might use a couple of hours a week. If someone wants to move we can ask somebody else to rearrange their roster, but if they don't want to do that then it's a bit hard to fit them in. We do the best we can. *(female senior service supervisor, retail trade, SA)*

This willingness to try and accommodate employees' needs and preferences was not shared by all employers. As a HR consultant observed, some managers make very little effort to accommodate employee requests, taking the rather narrow view that the only requirement is to consider a request.

It's the way the legislation is worded. It says that you have to consider a request, it doesn't say you have to grant [it], it just says you have to consider it. So people consider it and just say well I can't do it. *(female HR consultant, professional, scientific and technical services, QLD)*

Although many employers cited work-related demands or constraints as a valid reason to refuse requests, this was not a universal view. One manager in a warehousing company described how his whole organisation has an ethos and practice of making flexibility available to all workers, whether senior or junior.

We have managers and people who are quite high up in the firm where they actually work part-time as well. It is unusual. The company prides itself on the fact that it doesn't matter at what level you work at, it does apply to everyone. And that it can work, no matter if you have a lot of responsibility or a very busy or a very demanding job it doesn't mean that you can't have that flexibility. (*male site manager, transport/postal/warehousing, NSW*).

## **Management of workers with flexibility or extended unpaid leave**

This section describes employers' experiences of managing workers on flexible work arrangements or those who take extended unpaid parental leave. Two topics were canvassed with employers: how job roles and responsibilities are managed, including any changes to these aspects of work, and the internal organisational processes (if any) for the review of flexible work arrangements and extended unpaid parental leave.

### ***Job roles and responsibilities***

Employers were asked to reflect on whether the take-up of flexible work arrangements, or an extension of unpaid parental leave, resulted in changes to employees' work roles, responsibilities and workload. As discussed below, most employers indicated that very little change occurred following the acceptance of a flexible work arrangement or on employees' return from extended unpaid parental leave. A common view expressed by employer participants was that flexible work arrangements were acceptable on the proviso that the individual can still perform their work roles and responsibilities.

That's one of the things that has to be discussed. If it's going to be flexible it still has to work in with their job description, and they still have to be able to do their job (*male site manager, transport/postal/warehousing, NSW*)

As described below, there were exceptions, which employer participants attributed to the requirements of a particular role which was not compatible with a specific flexibility arrangement.

The extent to which work roles and responsibilities were adjusted with a flexible work arrangement was closely related to the type of flexibility requested. As observed earlier, many employer participants reported receiving requests to alter the scheduling or location of work (e.g. earlier or later start/finish times, work from home), without a change to the number of hours. This commonly occurred with full-time workers requesting adjustments to accommodate childcare responsibilities. In these circumstances, employers did not expect or require a change to employees' roles and responsibilities.

In most cases people are employed on a full-time basis, so the workload is not adjusted. The expectation is that whether they start at 7 o'clock in the morning, 8 o'clock in the morning, 9'clock or 10 o'clock they are still expected to do a seven and a half hour day. So the workload would still be the same. Obviously those people who have negotiated to start early would not be making phone calls to businesses because there would be nobody there. So they obviously need to re-arrange their work schedule to get other work done in that time so they can still

make those necessary calls or implement what they need to do during standard business hours. (*female regional liaison manager, education and training, QLD*)

It was also common for employers to distinguish between different types of roles and responsibilities, explaining that flexibility was more easily accommodated for particular roles. For example, working reduced hours or at home was seen to be more difficult to accommodate for employees in roles that required initiating and receiving customer contact. In these roles a number of employers observed that employees usually contribute additional time and effort to ensure that work requirements were met. This additional effort, often outside work hours, was seen by employers as a reflection of employees' professionalism and commitment to their work.

Generally we will adjust the amount of work they have to complete to make it fit within the time frame [of part-time hours]. But we find that our employees are willing, particularly in the sales area, are actually willing to take some of the contacts from clients on days when they are not working. So if it's an urgent request then they are copied in on their ipads, so they keep abreast of what's going on. Most of them where they can, choose to respond to that even on their days saying 'yes it's under control or no I'll get somebody to do that'. If it's something urgent they'll contact someone in the office and get it done. (*male manager, information media and telecommunications, NSW*)

They recognise that, particularly in the sales area, we call them account managers and they manage that account. They still feel responsible for a particular advertising account whether they are at work or not. And they don't want to see the level of the service to the client drop. So they are prepared to make some response as long as it doesn't encroach on their day too much. (*male Director, professional, scientific and technical services, VIC*).

Employers also reflected on the impact of flexible work arrangements for co-workers or work teams. There was recognition that adjustments and extra efforts sometimes had to be made by co-workers, as well as the flexible worker themselves, to ensure that work was accomplished efficiently and successfully.

You have to have people who are up to it. It is harder than just doing the role yourself when you have to share it. It's a lot of communication and it's a lot of working together. Obviously when you're job sharing it's never as good as one person doing it because there are occasional things that slip through. (*female clinical nurse manager, health care and social assistance, QLD*)

The people around [the telecommuter], their responsibilities change because the person is not present in the office. So they have to take messages, to pass on information and discussion in the office. So that's more overload and work for the organisation. (*male Director, professional, scientific and technical services, VIC*)

In other cases, employers explained that the nature of the job role of a requesting employee meant that changes in work arrangements could easily be accommodated. For example, in some job roles a reduction in hours was easily accommodated by reducing performance targets to match the reduced hours, or by re-distributing tasks amongst other employees in a work unit or team.

If it's just a registered nurse there is no need [to job share] because in their role they get a different patient care each day. So you're going in new anyway, so it makes no difference then. It's only if you are in a specialised area that you need someone who is equal to that task to do the job sharing with them. That's more for

the manager to ensure that they're replacing them with an adequate person, then there's no problem. *(female, clinical nurse manager, health care and social assistance, QLD)*.

We attempt not to [change roles, responsibilities, tasks]. We're fortunate in a way that given that we work in an advice area, we're not responsible for specific projects, responsibility sharing is fairly easy to do. A lot of the queries we get can be answered by somebody in a very similar position. So it is relatively simple to reduce people's hours. *(female HR consultant, professional, scientific and technical services, QLD)*

A small number of employers explained that under particular circumstances they were not able to accommodate an employee's flexibility request whilst retaining that worker's roles and responsibilities. This was particularly the case for employees who had supervisory responsibilities and requested to reduce their hours.

Mainly things stay the same. But they might have had a supervision shift at night-time that they probably wouldn't receive any more during the day because the other managers are there. *(female senior service supervisor, retail trade, SA)*

It depends on the role of the person. Sometimes it's not always possible to keep the same role when this person requests flexible work arrangements. Most of the time, unfortunately, if they are supervisory or management positions they will probably have to take another position. *(female, manager, education and training, NSW)*

#### *Extension to unpaid parental leave*

Without exception, employers reported that employees returning from extended unpaid parental leave returned to the same job, with no change in roles or responsibilities. Most employers reported that employees returning from extended unpaid parental leave often requested to work part-time hours on their return, and it was also common for flexible scheduling to be requested around these hours.

We've made flexible working hours so they can come in early some days and late other days. We've also allowed them to compress their hours, so they can work a nine day fortnight as long as they do the 72.5 hours within that fortnight. *(female HR manager, financial and insurance services, QLD)*

It depends if the opening is still available. If not, then we put them onto another project or something, but their profile in the organisation would be the same. *(male manager, financial and insurance services, VIC)*

There was also evidence that employers made efforts to support and accommodate employees' changed family circumstances which occurred with care responsibilities for babies and young children. Examples include adjusting travel requirements in order to reduce employees' commuting time, and ensuring the returning employee is fully briefed on changes that have occurred whilst they were on unpaid leave.

Only that they work between two physical locations, one in the region and one in the city. They used to do three days in the region and two in the city. Now they've just come back to do the three days in the region. *(female, regional liaison manager, education and training, QLD)*.

Not necessarily the job role, but what we do is a bit of a catch-up as to what's been happening in their world, in particular IT changes. We give them a briefing as to any

programs or projects that they were working on, and let them know the outcome of that so they have that sense of closure. We also let them know of any new projects that the person who had replaced them was working on. If possible we try to do a handover from the person who was doing their job. *(female manager, education and training, NSW)*

Employers were consistently supportive of employees' requests to extend their unpaid parental leave, and requests to return from this leave to part-time or more flexible work. Nevertheless, managing the move back to work from extended unpaid leave is not without challenges for employers. The quote from a HR manager in a financial services company captures a common view, recognising the importance of supporting unpaid parental leave and flexibility and acknowledging the challenges that changes to 'standard' employment arrangements can create for job design in some circumstances:

It can be a bit of a pain in the neck at times. But you need to put that aside and understand why the provision [for extended unpaid leave] is there in the first place. It's a bit of a juggling act bringing people back part-time, trying to find appropriate roles for them that they can undertake on a part-time basis. That I do find difficult. *(female HR manager, financial and insurance services, QLD)*

### ***Internal review of arrangements***

Around one third of employers indicated that they did not conduct any formal review of flexibility arrangements on an ongoing basis. As one employer explained, formal review processes were not seen as necessary provided that there were no problems or difficulties with the arrangements.

No reviews, as long as the work is getting done then that is fine. *(male manager, financial and insurance services, VIC)*

For those employers who did conduct regular reviews, the most common approach was to incorporate these discussions into employees' performance reviews. A small number of employers reported conducting stand-alone reviews of these arrangements, ranging from every three to six months.

Absolutely. As part of the performance plan we do a review of their work every six months, that's one of things that we look into with that flexibility arrangement. Is it working, the dynamics for the rest of team, we check to make sure that is OK *(female, regional liaison manager, education and training, QLD)*

Within our professional development plans that is one thing that we do review. So if there is flexible working arrangements we would review if that is working for us, and not against us. *(female HR manager, financial and insurance services, QLD)*

Employers consistently described this review process as supportive, with a focus on ensuring that the flexibility arrangements were working successfully, and where necessary identifying any issues and working with the employee to overcome any difficulties. In these review processes it was common for employers to emphasise that a central purpose of the review as to ensure that both employee and organisational needs and requirements were being met by the flexible arrangement.

So I sit down and say 'so you have requested this. How is it working for you, how has it benefited you. Do you think you need to continue it that way'. And then I will turn around and say how it has benefited us, and how it could continue. And then I say is there anything negative in this arrangement for you. And then I will input,

well this is the negative for us. And then we say, well OK is it a case that we continue doing what we are doing. Or do we redefine, say for example that you can leave at 3 o'clock every second day or once a week or something like that. Or do we have to re-negotiate what those flexible arrangements are. (*female manager, education and training, NSW*)

Some employers also explained that more frequent reviews were conducted at the start of a new flexibility arrangement to ensure that the transition to the new arrangement was successful. This was done to ensure that the employee and the organisation's needs were being met, and to identify and address any potential problems early on in the new arrangement.

Sometimes in the earlier stages we say we'll try it for three months and see how you're going, or for six months something like that. It generally gets a formal review after a set period of time, a year is the absolute maximum. The year is more for people who have older children, maybe 4, and they know they don't want to come back full-time while the children are not yet at school. Maybe a younger baby we might do it at a three or six month interval to see how the child is settling into childcare, that sort of thing. It's done on an informal basis at any time during that period of time. We work closely together, so it's always 'hey, how are things going'. If they've got a problem they'll come talk about it. (*female HR consultant, professional, scientific and technical services, QLD*).

#### *Extension to unpaid parental leave*

Extensions to unpaid parental leave were not reviewed by employers. Once the extended leave was approved, this decision was not further reviewed. Rather, on return from extended unpaid parental leave employees' work arrangements were reviewed on a regular basis by most employers if the worker had requested a flexible work arrangement on return.

### **Circumstances under which a flexibility arrangement ends**

Whilst the primary focus of this study was on the process of applying for, and working with, flexibility it was also of interest to investigate the cessation of flexible work arrangements (no arrangements for extended unpaid parental leave were reported to have ceased earlier than originally requested). Five employers reported at least one experience of having a flexible work arrangement finish, and in each of these instances it was at the employee's request.

The staff member that I work with, she's in a similar role as myself. She was on four days a week because she had a young family, young children. Now has returned to five days a week by her request. (*male supervisor, financial and insurance services, VIC*)

The main reason employer participants report that flexible work arrangements cease is due to a change in the employees' family circumstances. The most common reason was a reduction in childcare needs as children got older at which time parents felt more comfortable placing their child in formal care. One employer described a change in household financial circumstances that necessitated an employee's request to resume full time hours. As the quotes below show, most employers were willing to support an employee's flexible work arrangement for as long as needed by that individual. It is also clear from these quotes that these employers understood and respected employees' personal and family circumstances, and recognised their role in supporting workers to manage both work and family responsibilities.

With flexibility usually we are able to accommodate people until there is a time when they are really quite ready to come back. Often we can accommodate people until children are at school. Even when people come back to work full-time they are able to have a level of flexibility in their daily hours. Particularly people who are not in a front role position, they are able to be very flexible in those hours. (*female HR consultant, professional, scientific and technical services, QLD*).

When she came back from maternity leave she requested that rather than stepping into a full-time role because she had two children, she wanted to work only half a week which we agreed to. Then her husband lost his job, she needed to generate more money for the household and asked if she could go to full-time and we agreed to that. (*male manager, information media and telecommunications, NSW*)

There was only one instance of an employer reporting that they had initiated the cessation of a flexible work arrangement. In this case, a HR manager in a financial services company indicated that the agreement to work part-time hours would remain in place only up to the time that the employee's children reached school age. It is worth emphasising that this was not the common response from employers, most of whom indicated a willingness for the flexibility arrangement to continue for as long as required by the employee.

The arrangements [on return from unpaid leave] are in place until the child reaches school age. We will need to bring them back full-time then, and we could issue that directive to them. (*female HR manager, financial and insurance services, QLD*).

One employer discussed their experience of having to manage flexible workers who are not performing to expectations in the arrangement. Consistent with employers' approach to reviewing arrangements, it is clear that this employer was aware of the potential for significant disruption to employees' family and care arrangements if access to flexibility was removed. Rather, the organisation's response was to place the employee on a probationary period of more regular reviews with a focus on supporting that employee to be able to continue with their flexible work arrangement.

We don't tend to cancel arrangements that aren't working out as it puts that person in a difficult situation. But if it gets really bad and it's not working then we have to have the one-on-one discussion, a review and a discussion about that. Then they might be put on a probation and say 'let's just see how that goes for three months as a probation period'. If it still doesn't work then come back and review it again and then there might be some changes. I've never seen it that somebody actually has to stop that [flexibility] arrangement or been fired or anything like that (*Male, manager, financial and insurance services, VIC*)

## **Impact on organisational outcomes**

Employers were asked to reflect on how flexible work arrangements and extensions to unpaid parental leave have impacted on the key organisational outcomes of productivity and staff retention. As described earlier with regard to the reasons employers accepted requests, most employers recognised the benefits for the retention of valued staff. Similarly, as described below, many employers also recognised benefits for productivity and performance.

### ***Productivity and performance***

Employers' views on the impact of flexibility on performance and productivity were mixed. Employers were fairly evenly divided between those who perceived positive effects, those who observed a neutral impact, and those who argued that under some circumstances there can be a negative effect.

Of those employers who perceived a positive impact, the two most common explanations for this were increased employee motivation and efficiency and employees reciprocating effort and higher performance to the employer in response to access to flexible work arrangements.

A number of employer participants observed that employees working part-time were often more efficient and focused than those working longer hours, which in some cases, was perceived as resulting in equivalent productivity to a full-time worker.

They have a lot more focus, particularly when they are on a reduced capacity. They are like 'right I've got X number of hours I've got to get all of these things done today because I'm leaving early to do whatever with my family. And they do get in, get it done, short sharp impact. They are like I've only got five hours, so I'm going to do this, and this and this. And they get the same amount of work done in that five hours as say someone doing eight hours. *(female regional liaison manager, education and training, QLD)*

Other employers observed that workers often strive to reciprocate an employer's support by increasing their effort, work hours and quality of their work. There was also consensus that these employees often go 'beyond the call of duty' during emergencies or other periods of high demand. Many employers discussed this reciprocation of support.

I think that staff gravitate to the area that I work in because of the flexibility. They are possibly a little bit happier in the workplace. Their morale is a lot better. They want to go that extra mile. If you ask them a favour they'll return the favour because we've been so good to them. *(male supervisor, financial and insurance services, VIC)*

It's a good thing. As a whole staff are happier, which then means that the working environment is a happier environment. Also people, when they have that balance, produce more work and work more effectively. It just seems to be a win-win. *(male, site manager, transport/postal/warehousing, NSW)*

Related to this dynamic of reciprocity, some employers observed that providing access to flexibility makes employees feel valued by employers, which increases their job satisfaction, happiness and performance.

My theory is that if I can therefore give them that flexibility, the time that they are at work, they are wanting to be at work, they are settled into work, they are feeling valued, they are feeling like they want to be there. And I'm going to get more production out of them. *(female regional liaison manager, education and training, QLD)*

Absolutely, it's of huge significance. If people feel valued and respected and wanted in the workplace and they are given that flexibility they have a greater contribution not only with their productivity by they want to stay where they are. *(female, manager, education and training, NSW)*

One employer argued that having access to flexibility made employees feel more empowered and in control of their working lives, which made them more satisfied and productive at work.



I want them to feel that they are taking that responsibility and that ownership. And then they will feel more comfortable in coming to see me to say 'hey look I need to change my hours because...'. Rather than just being a non-productive worker because they are stuck in a job they don't want to do or doing hours they don't want to do. *(female regional liaison manager, education and training, QLD)*

A small number of employers reported that flexible work arrangements did not affect performance or productivity in a positive or negative way.

It shouldn't [have an impact]. For the people who are job sharing it should be a team and that team needs to communicate with each other and then it has no impact at all. *(female clinical nurse manager, health care and social assistance, QLD)*.

I don't think it affects it at all. Maybe more positive for them as they are able to work during the day and still do what they need to do afterwards. *(female senior service supervisor, retail trade, SA)*

Around one third of employers argued that under some circumstances flexible working had negative effects on performance or productivity. This negative effect was attributed to two factors, either the requirements of the work role that were difficult to meet effectively when working flexibly, or the personal characteristics of workers themselves with regard to their capacity to work effectively, especially when under limited supervision such as when working at home.

Sometimes it's OK and sometimes it's a darn nuisance. Sometimes you need them there full-time. Because you've allowed it [part-time hours] it makes things a bit longer and harder and more expensive for the company. *(female manager, transport/postal/warehousing, SA)*

Employers observed that some job roles are more difficult to perform productively and effectively when a team member is not physically present in the office. These concerns centred around interruptions to communication and work flow between co-workers. Managers who expressed these concerns were mostly working in companies or work units involving sales and other client-centred roles such as providing IT services.

As an organisation we do feel that a lot more can be achieved if they are in office rather than working from home. It does lead to a few things stacking up. We can't have corridor meetings. A lot of things have to be processed by emails, whereas it could just be popping up from a cubicle and asking someone. There's definitely a drop in productivity. *(male Director, professional, scientific and technical services, VIC)*

It depends on the job. So if you are in sales and you are not there to take calls, then it affects productivity a lot. For other jobs it doesn't matter so much if you are working from home, say if you are doing coding or software development. *(male operations manager, accommodation and food services, VIC)*

In addition to the nature of the job role, a small number of employers also expressed doubt that some workers would have the commitment and personal discipline or work ethic to maintain productivity whilst working at home. These concerns are related to the observations made earlier regarding the importance of trust, with employers most comfortable supporting flexible work arrangements such as telecommuting when they had a high degree of trust and confidence in the individual employee's commitment and professionalism.

Sometimes when people work from home they are more productive because they can work anytime and get things done. Sometimes people take advantage, they just don't do it. They only work for one hour or two hours. It really depends on the person and how seriously they take their job. *(male manager, financial and insurance services, VIC)*

It depends on the person. I've seen it work well with some, and with others it hasn't worked out at all. It's not so much the job, it comes down to the person and their level of experience. And I definitely think it does work. It comes down to the person's commitment. If you are going to have that flexibility, then when you do work then you have to be productive and do what was agreed. Sometimes people want to work flexibly, but then they don't stand up and do what they agreed to do [in the job]. *(male site manager, transport/postal/warehousing, NSW)*

In sum, a common view was that offering flexible work arrangements may cause some disruption or extra arrangements in the short-term, but there are benefits in the longer term that outweigh short-term challenges with regard to adjusting and re-organising aspects of the work.

There are benefits. If employees are happy they are more productive, so the organisation will benefit in the long run. Sometimes in the short run the organisation has to accept the changes and deal with the changes. The employee who has been given the flexible work arrangement always benefits more than the organisation, to some extent. *(female manager, education and training, NSW)*

Absolutely positive. We do have some negatives. It doesn't matter what you are doing, you are still going to have negatives. But the negatives are minimal compared to the productivity that we get, the people's respect, their sense of wellbeing even outside of work. They feel like they do have a life, they do feel like they do have that quality of life and work balance. Definitely positive. *(female regional liaison manager, education and training, QLD)*

#### *Extension to unpaid parental leave*

Similar to flexibility, employers' views on the impact of extended unpaid parental leave on productivity were mixed. Some employers reflected on benefits for other staff, for example providing opportunities for individuals to act in more senior positions and gain valuable experience.

It's good in one way as it allows other people to relieve at a higher level. So if someone is on leave and somebody needs to backfill into that position. So it opens opportunities for staff. *(female HR manager, financial and insurance services, QLD)*

It's good because when you've got a specific date you know when that person is going to vacate the position. So you've got time to build the skill set in other people that are going to backfill the position. You do have time to prepare. *(female manager, education and training, NSW)*

Others did not perceive a positive or negative effect on performance or productivity. For example, one employer explained that one employee's move back from extended unpaid parental leave was smooth and unproblematic with the provision of some additional training and updates.

No, when they returned they just had to have some training, a refresher, and then no problem. *(male site manager, transport/postal/warehousing, NSW)*

Around half of employers observed that extended unpaid parental leave could create challenges with regard to backfilling the temporarily vacant position. Similar to the situation regarding

flexibility, employers reflected that the nature of the job influenced how easy or difficult it was to organise a replacement for the duration of the extended unpaid parental leave. Difficulties finding a suitable replacement were related to negative productivity impacts. In the absence of a replacement it was common for work to be shared amongst co-workers, which some employers observed could negatively impact on co-workers' productivity as a result of work overload and reduced morale.

In some areas it has a very high impact. Some of the work that we do is very difficult to fill on a part-time basis or to have to replace people. *(male test manager, professional, scientific and technical services, ACT)*

It is very difficult to replace people. So if something can be done where the existing team members can cover for them and it can just be done by shuffling people around then that's not too bad. When we need to replace people it's very, very difficult. And that has a big negative impact on productivity. *(female HR consultant, professional, scientific and technical services, QLD)*

..the person who was already on 12 months leave without pay, we had employed someone to be in that position. Therefore, since the extension [beyond 12 months] was granted we had a person doing that job and hopefully they will be able to stay for that extra time. We have to set up some form of formal process, so not only is your job being done but the other people in the group aren't feeling like 'oh, another thing on my desk, another thing I have to do because X is away'. *(female regional liaison manager, education and training, QLD)*

One employer also observed mixed outcomes for employees on return from extended unpaid leave. This HR manager related that two employees had very different experiences, with one worker having difficulties managing paid work and care, whereas the other employee's return was smooth and successful. The employer was unable to explain why this was the case, not having detailed knowledge of each person's work or personal circumstances, she surmised that it depended on the individual.

We had one that came back very laid back, and she did find it hard to get going again. And even to the day that she resigned, she was struggling. But then we've had another one come back that was all 'gung-ho' and right into it. *(female HR manager, financial and insurance services, QLD)*

### **Retention and turnover**

Employers' views were consistently positive with respect to the impact of flexibility on retention and turnover. A common observation was that supporting access to flexible work arrangements enabled retention of employees valued for their skills, knowledge and productivity. For example, some employers observed that they would prefer to retain a valued employee at reduced hours than risk having them leave the company.

Our approach in our sales team, particularly if you've got a good sales person, that it's better to retain their services even on a part-time basis than to say 'no, go away'. *(male manager, information media and telecommunications, NSW)*

Other employers observed that the costs of recruiting and replacing employees is high, therefore they preferred to offer access to flexible work arrangements to support staff retention.

If they [employees] are happy to stay we are happy to keep them. Because we think that it takes much longer to take somebody new on board and train them, rather

than meet the needs of the current staff. (*female manager, education and training, NSW*)

Another manager in the health sector, reflected on the benefits of offering flexibility at a workforce level. As she explains below, she viewed flexible work arrangements as a central support to maintaining adequate staffing levels in a multi-generational workforce.

In health the average age of a nurse is in their 50s. That's going to gradually change over the next ten years. I can see the flexibility as being absolutely vital in the future, both for men and women as they have children and as they age. It maintains your workforce. It keeps the workforce happier and healthier. It certainly keeps our staff in good spirits. If they had to work full-time I'm sure we'd lose a lot more people, and we'd be struggling to get staff. By allowing them to work part-time, that's what maintains our staffing levels, otherwise we'd be in big trouble. (*female clinical nurse manager, health care and social assistance, QLD*)

Only two employers commented that they did not perceive flexible work arrangements had an impact on turnover or retention. The state of the labour market was offered as one major reason why employees may remain in a job that did not offer them the flexibility they preferred. As the HR manager describes below, the current tight labour market in her industry has reduced workers' capacity to change jobs, and increased their motivation to retain their current positions whether or not they have access to flexible work arrangements.

Given the state of the Queensland economy, the majority of people who have a job with us won't give up that position, they'll accommodate. Even if their requests [for flexibility] are refused, they won't leave because of this particular time - times are tough. Whereas a few years ago it was very different, a request being refused would have had quite a big impact on retention. But people don't really have so much choice now. (*female HR consultant, professional, scientific and technical services, QLD*)

#### *Extension to unpaid parental leave*

Employers were also consistently positive about the effects of supporting extended unpaid parental leave on employee retention. Employers observed that employees highly valued their support for extended unpaid parental leave and reciprocated with loyalty and commitment to the organisation.

The couple of people who have requested it and then come back have just been so grateful for that extra time on so many levels. (*female regional liaison manager, education and training, QLD*)

I think it's a good thing. You do get loyalty back from them [employees] as well. I there's some personal appreciation there as well. They appreciate that you are considering what is a new life for them, so they can have that quality time with their new family. (*female HR manager, financial and insurance services, QLD*)

As with flexibility, employers observed that allowing extended unpaid parental leave also resulted in the return of valued employees to the workplace. For example, several employer participants discussed the benefits of having more senior staff return to the workplace with their valuable experience and capacity to mentor less experienced workers.

Because I'm in a technical area we don't want that technical skill walking out the door. To know that it's going to come back is a bonus for us. (*male test manager, professional, scientific and technical services, ACT*)

They are more likely to stay. That means you can retain your staff who have the experience who can help with the new younger grads who are coming out. *(female, clinical nurse manager, health care and social assistance, QLD)*

In general, employers respected workers' family lives and recognised the value of supporting workers' capacity to provide care. They also understood that the birth or adoption of a child was a major life event that would be a priority for workers.

I think it depends on the reasoning behind why they want the unpaid leave. One gentleman went off to adopt a couple of kids from overseas, so whether or not he got given that extra unpaid leave was going to have a big impact on his life. So it's like 'if they're not letting me do this and I'm taking on the responsibility of children, what's going to happen?' *(female regional liaison manager, education and training, QLD)*

## **Impact on employees' health and wellbeing**

Most employers reported that access to flexibility benefitted the mental health of workers, with some employers also noting benefits for employees' physical health. The most commonly observed benefits were a reduction in stress and an increase in workers' happiness. Only two employers had the view that flexibility did not affect workers' health and wellbeing. As observed earlier, many employers observed that workers' commitment and productivity was enhanced when they were feeling happy and satisfied in their jobs.

I think it has a positive effect. They feel more valuable to the organisation as the organisation is coming forward to meet their needs. They feel more appreciated, they feel happier like they are more fulfilled. *(female manager, education and training, NSW)*

Employers attributed this improvement in psychological wellbeing to flexible workers' capacity to meet important caring responsibilities, for example providing direct care to their children or transporting their children to and from childcare. Another benefit observed by employers was a reduction in sick leave, as parents were able to establish work-care routines that were stable and sustainable over the longer term.

It's more positive for them, it's a lot more stress free. They don't have to organise a whole lot of other stuff like having other people pick up their kids. *(female senior service supervisor, retail trade, SA)*

It allows people who have family issues, have little kids, they want to spend more time with them. They work three to four days a week only, not a full-time job. It does have an enormous effect on their health. The amount of sick leave and stress leave does drop. *(female clinical nurse manager, health care and social assistance, QLD)*

One employer related an experience that highlights the amount of strain that some parents of young children can experience when trying to manage both paid work and care. For this employee, the flexible work arrangement (reduced hours), has ensured that her working environment supported rather than strained her mental health.

The impact is huge, absolutely huge. To the point where I've had one person particularly who was off on stress leave for a while because she wasn't coping well with some of the demands around having a pre-school child. We are able to adjust

her hours so she could do more childcare drop-offs. That was absolutely essential to her health. She was experiencing quite severe psychological distress until we could do that. *(female HR consultant, professional, scientific and technical services, QLD)*

Benefits to physical health and family life were also recognised by employers. These included having more time for exercise and other healthy activities, and having more time for important family and parenting activities.

I've got one co-worker who has said to me 'I now have time to go for a walk for half an hour every day. I now have time to just have that half an hour of me time' *(female, clinical nurse manager, health care and social assistance, QLD)*

An employee has said to me 'I now have time to just sit down and listen to the children do their homework and read. And that has significantly changed not only how the child is, not only at school but also their general confidence levels. And then the parent does feel that not only are they parenting, but they are boosting their child and helping them to do well. *(female, regional liaison manager, education and training, QLD)*

#### *Extension to unpaid parental leave*

As with flexibility, employers recognised the benefits that extensions to unpaid parental leave had for those employees who felt the need for additional time. In general, employers respected parents' differing needs with regard to the amount of leave that they needed, and were prepared to support employees' decision to decide when they felt most ready to return to work. Many employers also recognised and sympathised with the difficulties that some parents felt in leaving their young children in the care of others, and were willing to support their employees who needed additional time to ensure the readiness of their child and themselves to move to a new care arrangement that fitted with paid work.

They get far more time to bond with their child. It does give them great work-life balance at a time when they really need a lot more home balance rather than worrying about work. And knowing that their job is here when they are ready to come back. *(female, HR manager, financial and insurance services, QLD)*

When they do come back, obviously they do feel torn 'I'm leaving my child at daycare, that sort of stuff'. But it's amazing that additional two, five or six months how much older the child is, and therefore they do feel that they can leave their child with another person. *(female, regional liaison manager, education and training, QLD)*

## Conclusion

There was substantial overlap in employers' and employees' views of both flexible work arrangements and extensions to unpaid parental leave. Both groups took a 'dual agenda' approach in which the aim was to achieve work arrangements that meet employees' needs as caregivers and employers' need to maintain a functioning and productive workforce. There was also strong consensus between employers and employees with regard to the significant positive impact that access to these work arrangements has on staff retention. Most employees were clear in their prioritisation of ensuring satisfactory care arrangements for their children; a lack of access to flexibility or extended unpaid parental leave was clearly linked to a withdrawal of women's participation in paid work. Employers understood and respected the importance of workers' caring responsibilities, and also recognised that providing access to flexibility and extended unpaid parental leave was central to workers' capacity to manage both paid work and care.

Consistent with this dual-agenda approach, a common theme emerging from both studies was the dynamic of reciprocity that existed between supportive employers and employees who worked flexibly or had extended unpaid parental leave. Both groups recognised that employees often reciprocate with extra effort, commitment and productivity in return for an employer's support for a flexible work arrangement or extended unpaid parental leave. Furthermore, workers were also aware of employers' views regarding the types of employees most likely to be supported in their flexibility requests. 'Good workers' who were known to be trustworthy and committed to their jobs were more likely to be supported in their requests. This criteria was common in employers' description of their decision-making, and was accepted by employees as a requirement they had to demonstrate to ensure both the success of their request for flexibility and to maintain ongoing access to flexible work arrangements.

Employers' and employees' accounts of the processes involved with requesting these work arrangements, and arrangements for ongoing review, were also consistent and positive. As would be expected, there were some issues on which employers and employees views and experiences differed. Two main areas of difference emerged: organisational culture and the management of job roles and responsibilities under changed working arrangements. Employees were more likely to recognise and emphasise the importance of a supportive organisational culture in general, and a supportive supervisor or manager in particular. Employers and employees recognised the challenges of managing flexible work arrangements for individuals in senior or supervisory positions, where work intensification and working outside of designated work hours/days was a common experience.

## Implications for policy and practice

There are many factors that augment or diminish the impact of government legislation on the work-life balance of its citizens, including prevailing economic conditions and socio-cultural values (Pocock, Charlesworth and Chapman, 2013). Nevertheless, legislation that provides workers with rights and entitlements to access essential resources, such as paid and unpaid parental leave, flexible work arrangements and good quality childcare, have been shown to positively impact fundamental aspects of gender equality which underpin work-life balance, such as women's participation in paid work and capacity to combine paid employment with care-giving, and also men's participation in the care of their children (Hegewisch and Gornick, 2011). Further, Baird (2011) argues that legislative change such as that introduced by the *Fair Work Act* (2009) also impacts on social norms related to work and employment, reflected for example in the emphasis on employee-

centered flexible work practices by organisations identifying as ‘best practice’ or an ‘employer of choice’.

The *Fair Work Amendment Bill 2013* extended the right to request a flexible work arrangement to all carers, that is all parents or guardians, of a school aged or younger child, those with a disability, those 55 years or older, those experiencing family or domestic violence, or caring for someone experiencing such violence (Fair Work Ombudsman, 2013). This extended inclusion criteria is an important step in supporting all workers with care responsibilities towards children or adults. For instance, Kossek et al (2010) argue that for work-life policies to be truly effective these policies and practices must be integrated into the mainstream of everyday work practices, rather than seen as issues of special consideration for a certain group of workers. There is, however, scope to extend the RTR entitlement further. As in the Netherlands and Germany, in June 2014 the UK Government extended this right to all employees. There is a case for extending the right to request flexible work arrangements to include all workers regardless of their circumstances. This would be a significant initiative to improve the quality of Australians’ working lives.

In the academic literature the work-family policy reform provided by the *Fair Work Act (2009)* has been recognised as an important, but modest, step towards both gender equality and decent quality work in Australia (Pocock, Charlesworth and Chapman, 2013). The Australian approach follows the UK ‘soft’ approach, given that it lacks any effective enforcement or appeal mechanisms, providing little protection or support to the most vulnerable in the workforce such as the low paid or those in non-unionised workplaces (Pocock et al., 2013). For example, in their review research on one type of flexible work arrangement, teleworking, van den Broek and Keating (2011) observe that organisational cultures and management practices that treat teleworking as a privilege for a select few, rather than a universal right or entitlement, is a major barrier to broader access to this type of flexible work, particularly for those workers in weaker bargaining positions (e.g. those in lower paid or insecure jobs).

The current qualitative study highlighted the importance of a supportive organisational culture on employees’ willingness to request a flexible work arrangement or extended unpaid parental leave, the likelihood that such requests would be accepted and the extent to which flexible work arrangements are enabled by co-worker support and appropriate adjustments to workload when hours are reduced.

The importance of a supportive culture for workers’ access to work-life policies such as flexible work arrangements has been widely observed in both Australasian and international literature (Skinner & Chapman, 2013). Further, meta-analyses have consistently observed that unsupportive organisational culture is one of the strongest and most consistent predictors of work-life conflict (Kossek et al., 2011; Michel et al., 2011).

With regard to organisational culture, it has been argued that perceived economic, social or career penalties associated with accessing work-life policy are a key aspect of culture likely to influence decisions to request flexible work arrangements (or other work-life arrangements) (Brough and O’Driscoll 2010; McDonald et al. 2007; Pocock et al. 2013). Recent developments in work-life theory and practice have highlighted the risk that certain practices that are designed to improve work-life interaction can in some circumstances have the opposite effect. Specifically, flexible work practices can lead to an intensification of work, as workloads are not adjusted to suit shorter hours or flexi-time and place are translated into cultural expectations of ‘working anywhere, anytime’ to ‘everywhere, all the time’ (Kossek, Lewis, & Hammer, 2010; Kelliher & Anderson, 2010; Mazmanian, Orlikowski, & Yates, 2013, p. 2). This current study, and related research overviewed above, indicates that work-family policies and practices that change working arrangements, such as



flexibility and work hours, should be developed and implemented in combination with assessments and adjustments to workload. In their recent review, Skinner and Chapman (2013) also concluded that workload and expectations of long hours are significant impediments to the uptake and/or beneficial impact of flexible work arrangements.

Further, recent research has also highlighted a group of workers often overlooked in policy initiatives. Labelled 'discontent non-requesters' by Skinner et al (2013), this group comprises an estimated 23.4 per cent of the Australian workforce who have not made a flexibility request but are also not satisfied with their current work arrangements. In their qualitative study, Pocock et al highlighted cultural and systemic barriers that discouraged or prevented these discontent non-requesters from seeking the alternative work arrangements that they needed. Specifically, Pocock et al observed that employees chose not to request flexibility as they experienced the workplace culture as unsupportive, and many feared reprisals from managers or supervisors in response to asking for an alternative work arrangement. There is clearly a need for further research on these discontent non-requesters, whose silence makes them to a large extent invisible to the policy initiatives that are designed to assist them, such as the NES Right to Request.

As the participants of the current study observed, supervisors and managers have a central role in promulgating organisational culture, and act as 'gatekeepers' to accessing policies such as flexible work arrangements (Kossek et al. 2011; Brough and O'Driscoll, 2010). With regard to practical strategies to change organisational culture, studies from the U.S emphasise the importance of communication regarding policy availability and uptake (including encouragements to take up policies not being well utilised), procedural fairness and transparency with regard to the process of applying to use a policy and the decision-making processes in response to requests, supervisor training with regard to managing flexible workers and integration of policy use and uptake into performance reviews (Ryan & Kossek 2008).

Supporting and strengthening both policy and practice in this area is worthwhile, as significant benefits for employee and employers are likely to result from effective and accessible policies that support workers' access to flexible work arrangements and extended unpaid parental leave. There is a substantial research literature, including Australian studies, which demonstrate the beneficial effects of flexible work practices, and low work-family conflict in general, on physical and mental health (Skinner & Chapman, 2013). The employee and employer participants in this study concur with this research regarding the positive effects on individual and family wellbeing.

Most of the participants in the current study, employees and employers, recognised the benefits of flexibility and access to extended unpaid parental leave on important organisational outcomes. Their observations are also supported by Australasian and international research. For example, a multi-industry study of New Zealand workers found that perceived organisational support for work-life balance was associated with increased (self-reported) job performance and reduced leaving intention (via effects on increased job satisfaction) (Forsyth & Polzer-Debruyne, 2007). An Australian study of private and public sector workers found positive work-family spillover was associated with reduced psychological distress and turnover intentions (Haar & Bardoel, 2008). Also worth a mention is a large Australian study (Holden et al 2010; N = 78,587) of workers from 58 companies. Clear associations were observed between longer work hours (40+ per week) and both absenteeism and reduced performance effectiveness. As Holden et al. (2010, p. 288) conclude: "employers striving to increase productivity by expecting employees to work long hours may not increase performance at all as the employees work less effectively and absenteeism increases." This is an

important observation, a requests to reduce hours are one of the most common types of flexibility requests.

The international research evidence also supports the benefits to employers from enabling and supporting employees' access to flexible work arrangements and other work-family policies such as extended unpaid parental leave. In their narrative review Beauregard and Henry (2009) observe evidence for a positive effect of organisational work-life balance practices on recruitment, retention, attendance (including turnover intention) and productivity. The authors suggest that one of the major mechanisms accounting for these observations is that employees reciprocate increased loyalty, effort and productivity in exchange for the organisation's practical assistance with managing work-life demands, and in appreciation for the organisation's indication of care and concern as demonstrated by work-life policies and practices. The current study supports this conclusion; participants emphasised their willingness to reciprocate with additional productivity and commitment to their jobs when employers support their needs for alternative work arrangements. Indeed, a German study estimated a productivity gain of 0.1 per cent per hour per employee from work-family benefits, attributed to the positive effects of greater motivation and commitment, reduced illness and chronic health problems and increased time for education and training (Prognos, 2005, cited in Hegewisch, 2009, p. 45).

As the current study has highlighted, the right to request flexibility and extended unpaid parental leave represent substantive progress with regard to legislative reforms to better support and sustain a modern diverse workforce, which includes women and men with caring responsibilities. The current study also observes that there is significant room for further progress in this area. In their recent review, Pocock et al (2013) highlight strong undercurrents of traditional values, observing that the gender culture in Australia has proven particularly resilient, with contradictory norms that support women's increased employment participation yet insist that mothers' primary responsibilities are to their families. This norm can be described as the expectation and cultural assumption that workers are willing and able to prioritise work over other life activities and commitments such as care for children or elders. For policies such as the NES Right to Request to be truly effective they must be accepted and integrated into the mainstream for all workers – not simply as a special consideration for working mothers. Multifaceted policy approaches are needed that set the foundation for change. More inclusive employment regulation, better quality part-time work and a greater policy focus on men's uptake of flexible work are likely to alleviate some of the burden and causes of work-life conflict across industries, alongside cultural shifts in workplace gender norms.

## References

- Baird, M. (2011). The state, work and family in Australia. *The International Journal of Human Resource Management*, 22(18), 3742-3754.
- Beauregard, T. A., & Henry, L. C. (2009). Making the link between work-life balance practices and organizational performance. *Human Resource Management Review*, 19(1), 9-22.
- Brough P and O'Driscoll MP (2010) Organizational interventions for balancing work and home demands: An overview. *Work & Stress* 24(3): 280-297.
- Fair Work Ombudsman (2013) Flexible working arrangements. Canberra: Australian Government.
- Fletcher, J. K., and Bailyn, L. (2005). The equity imperative: Redesigning work for work-family integration. In E. Kossek & S. Lambert (Eds.), *Work and life integration: Cultural and individual perspectives*. Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Forsyth, S., & Polzer-Debruyne, A. (2007). The organisational pay-offs for perceived work-life balance support. *Asia Pacific Journal of Human Resources*, 45(1), 113-123.
- Guest, G., Bunce, A. and Johnson, L. (2006). How many interviews are enough? An experiment with data saturation and variability. *Field Methods*, 18(1), 59-82.
- Haar, J. M., & Bardoel, E. A. (2008). Positive spillover from the work—family interface: A study of Australian employees. *Asia Pacific Journal of Human Resources*, 46(3), 275-287.
- Hegewisch, A. (2009). *Flexible working policies: A comparative review*. Manchester, UK: Equality and Human Rights Commission Research Report Series.
- Hegewisch, A., & Gornick, J. C. (2011). The impact of work-family policies on women's employment: a review of research from OECD countries. *Community, Work & Family*, 14(2), 119-138.
- Kelliher, C., & Anderson, D. (2010). Doing more with less? Flexible working practices and the intensification of work. *Human Relations*, 63(1), 83-106.
- Kossek, EE, Lewis, S and Hammer, LB (2010). Work—life initiatives and organizational change: Overcoming mixed messages to move from the margin to the mainstream. *Human Relations*, 63(1): 3-19.
- Kossek EE, Pichler S, Bodner T and Hammer LB (2011) Workplace social support and work-family conflict: A meta-analysis clarifying the influence of general work-family-specific supervisor and organizational support. *Personnel Psychology* 64(2): 289-313.
- Krippendorff, K. (2004) *Content Analysis: An Introduction to its Methodology*. Sage, Thousand Oaks, CA.
- Mazmanian, M., Orlikowski, W., & Yates, J. (2013). The autonomy paradox: The implications of mobile email devices for knowledge professionals. *Organization Science, Printed in Articles in Advance*, 1-21. Retrieved from [http://www.ics.uci.edu/~mmazmani/Site/Publications\\_files/Mazmanian\\_Orlikowski\\_Yates\\_Autonomy%20Paper%20Final.pdf](http://www.ics.uci.edu/~mmazmani/Site/Publications_files/Mazmanian_Orlikowski_Yates_Autonomy%20Paper%20Final.pdf) 4th April 2013.

McDonald P, Pini B and Bradley L (2007) Freedom or fallout in local government? How work-life culture impacts employees using flexible work practices. *International Journal of Human Resource Management* 18(4): 602-622.

Michel JS, Kotrba LM, Mitchelson JK, Clark, MA and Baltes BB (2011) Antecedents of work-family conflict: A meta-analytic review. *Journal of Organizational Behavior* 32(5): 689-725.

Miles, M. B. and Huberman, M. A. (1994). *Qualitative data analysis: An expanded sourcebook*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Morse, J. (1995). The significance of saturation. *Qualitative Research*, 5, 147-149.

O'Neill, B (2012). General Manager's report into the operation of the provisions of the National Employment Standards relating to requests for flexible working arrangements and extensions of unpaid parental leave. Commonwealth of Australia: Canberra.

Pocock B, Charlesworth S and Chapman J (2013) Work-family and work-life pressures in Australia: Advancing gender equality in 'good times'? *International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy* 33(9/10): 594-612.

Ryan, A. M., & Kossek, E. E. (2008). Work-life policy implementation: Breaking down or creating barriers to inclusiveness? *Human Resource Management*, 47(2), 295-310.

Sandelowski M (2000) Whatever happened to qualitative description? *Research in Nursing and Health* 23(4), 334-340.

Skinner, N. & Chapman, J. (2013). Work-life balance and family friendly policies. *Evidence Base*, 4, 1 - 25.

Skinner, N., Hutchinson, C. and Pocock, B. (2012) *The big squeeze. Work, home and care in 2012. Australian Work and Life Index 2012*. Adelaide, Australia: Centre for Work + Life, University of South Australia.

Skinner, N., Hutchinson, C., & Pocock, B. (February 2013). 'Flexibility request-making in the post-Right to Request (RTR) environment'. Paper presented at the *27th AIRAANZ Conference Work, employment and employment relations in an uneven patchwork world*, Freemantle, Western Australia.

van den Broek, D., & Keating, E. (2011). Rights to a process for the masses or select privileges for the few? Telework policy and labour market inequality in Australia. *Policy Studies*, 32(1), 21-33.

## Appendix

### ***Employee interview schedule – flexible work arrangements***

#### Interviewer to record demographic information:

- Gender
  - Age
  - State, metro/regional/rural
  - Occupational category
  - Employment Status – permanent/fixed term/casual
  - Size of Employer
  - Tenure
  - Usual hours of work/contracted hours
  - CALD status
  - Household type.
  - Care type – childcare, eldercare, other
1. What type of change/flexibility to your work arrangements did you request?
    - When did you make this request?
    - Did you specify how long the work arrangement was for?
  2. What prompted you to make this request?
  3. Who did you make your request to? (Manager/Director/HR)?
  4. How did you make your request?
    - Did you make your request in writing/verbally/both written & verbally?
    - If verbal – at what stage in the negotiation/discussion did you put your request in writing? (before/after you had raised the request verbally?)
    - If before – how did the discussion influence what you requested in writing? Did the discussion lead you to request less/more/different flexibility than you originally planned?
    - Why did you put your request in writing?
    - Did you feel this process considered the issues fully?
  5. Was your request granted? Who made this decision?
  6. If the request was granted: what do you think helped bring about the positive response?
    - What reasons were given by your employer?
    - Were there any conditions/trade-offs attached to granting your request?
    - Was there a period after which the arrangement would be reviewed? Was it accepted as an arrangement for a fixed time period or is it ongoing?

7. Was there any change to your workload / range of duties / responsibilities required to accommodate your flexible work arrangement?
  - Who organised this?
8. Are you still working under this arrangement now?
9. Has there been a review / assessment of how it's operating? What was the assessment?
10. If it is still operating, how confident are you that the arrangement will continue for as long as you need it? Why?
11. If no longer operating:
  - Why has the arrangement ended?
  - Who initiated it ending?
  - How much notice was given prior to it ending?
  - Do you have another arrangement in place?
12. How did you manage the transition into your flexible work arrangements – in terms of work & home/care needs?
  - What issues arose relating to work/manager/co-workers? How were these resolved?
  - What issues arose related to home/care needs/life? How were these resolved?
  - What support did your manager offer/provide with the transition?
13. How has your flexible work arrangement impacted on your personal well being? The well-being of your children? Your income/capacity to meet living costs?
14. How has your flexible work arrangement impacted on your ability to meet your care obligations? Your home life needs?
15. Given all types of flexible work arrangements possible - what would you prefer? If this differs from what you currently have – what is preventing you from making this request?
16. If you did not have access to flexibility – would this impact on your ability to undertake paid work? Why or why not?
17. If the request was denied:
  - How was the response communicated to you – in writing/verbally/both written & verbal?
  - What reasons were given for not granting your request? In writing/verbally?
  - What factors do you think helped explain this response?
  - Were you offered an alternative work arrangement to your request or a partial acceptance?
  - Where you given any right of appeal against the decision? How might this have helped do you think?

- Did you pursue your request? If so, how and what was the outcome?
- What impact has the refusal of your request had on you? At work? At home/your caring arrangements?
- Do you think you will make further requests for flexibility – in your current workplace/future workplaces?

Ask all interviewees:

18. Was the response to your request provided to you within 21 days (3 weeks)? Was it in writing?  
[If not, how was a response provided?]
19. Did you know about your right to request flexibility before you made your request?
- Where/from whom did you learn about the right to request flexibility? (National Employment Standards, Internet-what site, Fair Work Ombudsman, Union, other)
  - Did this affect your decision to request flexibility?
  - Did this affect how you went about making your request?
  - Did this affect your decision to pursue the request (if applicable)?
20. How do you think requesting/accessing flexible work arrangements could be improved in your workplace? In general – as an employee entitlement?
21. If there anything else regarding your flexibility at work that you would like to discuss?

## ***Employee interview schedule – flexible work arrangements***

Interviewer to record demographic information:

- Gender
- Age
- State, metro/regional/rural
- Occupational category
- Employment Status – permanent/fixed term/casual
- Size of Employer
- Tenure
- Usual hours of work/contracted hours
- CALD status
- Household type.
- Care type – childcare, eldercare, other

1. In total, what period of extended unpaid parental leave have you had/will you have had when you return to work?
  - When you first applied for unpaid parental leave, did you advise your employer that you intended to take 12 months – or more/less?
  - Did you tell your employer how many weeks/months of extended unpaid parental leave you wanted, or did you discuss/negotiate it – how did that work?
  - Did you know how many months of extended unpaid parental leave you were entitled to prior to commencing parental leave? And how the unpaid parental leave entitlements operate – what you could have and what extra time you could request?
2. Why did you want/need more than 12 months of unpaid parental leave?
3. How did you go about requesting the extra months of unpaid parental leave – how did you make your request to extend your unpaid parental leave?
  - Who did you make your request to? (Manager/Director/HR)?
4. How did you make the request? Did you make your request in writing/verbally/both written and verbally?
  - Why did you make your request in writing?
  - If verbal: Did you make that in-person or over the phone? At what point in the negotiation/discussion did you put your request in writing – before and after you had spoken to [the person you made the request to]?
  - If before: How did the discussion influence what you requested in writing? Did the discussion(s) lead you to request less/more than you had planned?
5. How long before the 12 months of unpaid parental leave ended did you make your request (i.e. was it at least 4 weeks before you were due to return to work)?



6. What was the response to your written request? Who made the decision?
7. If request was granted:
  - What do you think helped bring about the positive response?
  - Was the response provided to you in writing?
  - What reasons were given by your employer?
  - Where there any conditions/trade-offs attached to granting your request?
  - What has this meant/did it mean for you/your family?
8. Is/did your additional unpaid parental leave provide the positive impacts on you/your family that you envisaged? Why or why not?
9. How has/did your extended unpaid leave impact on your ability to meet your care obligations?/your home life needs?
10. If you did not have access to extended leave – would this impact on your ability to undertake paid work? Why or why not?
11. If applicable: What are your plans for returning to work at the end of your unpaid leave?
  - Same role/ same hours? Or different role/different work arrangement?
  - What plans have you made to transition back to work? At the workplace? At home?
12. If applicable: What work arrangements did you have when you returned to work?
  - Same role/ same hours? Or different role/different work arrangement?
13. If request not granted:
  - How was the response communicated to you – in writing/verbally/both written and verbal?
  - Were reasons for refusing your request provided to you in writing? What exactly were they?
  - What factors do you think helped explain this response?
  - Where you given any right of appeal against the decision? How might this have helped do you think?
  - Did you pursue your request? If so, how and what was the outcome?
  - What impact has/did the refusal of your request have on you? At work? At home – your caring commitments?
  - What has happened since? Did they offer you any additional unpaid leave or a flexible work arrangement?
  - Do you think you will make further requests to your employer (e.g. for a flexible work arrangement)?
14. Was the response to your request provided to you within 21 days – 3 weeks?

15. Where you aware of your entitlements to parental leave under the National Employment Standards – to take 12 months of unpaid parental leave and to request an extension of up to a further 12 months?
- If so, how did you learn about this right? (National Employment Standards, Internet – what site, Fair Work Ombudsman, Union, other)
  - How did this effect your decision to request additional unpaid parental leave?
  - How did this impact on the way you went about requesting this additional leave?
  - Do you believe that your employer was well informed about your entitlement to request an extension to your unpaid parental leave – what your rights are and what their obligations are? Why or why not?
16. How do you think requesting extended unpaid parental leave could be improved in your workplace? In general – as an employee entitlement?
17. If there anything else regarding your extended unpaid parental leave that you would like to discuss?

## ***Employer interview schedule – flexible work arrangements and extended unpaid parental leave***

[Note: Demographic information recorded via online survey (ORU) and verbally confirmed in phone interviews]

1. How did you become aware of this legislation (RTR & right to request extended unpaid leave)?
  - Ask with regard to flexibility & extension of unpaid parental leave
2. In your experience, how has employee request-making with regard to flexibility and extension of unpaid parental leave changed since January 2010?

Have you noticed any changes in:

- The number of requests that have been made
  - Who is making these requests
    - (eg are more men making requests?)
  - The nature of requests - what they ask for
    - (eg amount of time requested for extensions to unpaid leave, type of flex requested)
  - The way in which the organisation processes requests
    - (eg have more formal processes, or different processes, been put in place since the change in legislation)
  - The outcomes these requests
    - (eg the likelihood of a request being fully or partially accepted, or rejected)
3. How many requests for flexible work arrangements are you aware of within your organisation in the last 12 months?
    - How many of these have you handled personally
    - *Repeat for extended unpaid parental leave*
  4. What types of flexible work arrangements were requested?
    - *Length of unpaid parental leave requested – ask for range (min, max) and the most common length requested*
  5. What were the reasons given for these requests?
    - *Explore for extended unpaid parental leave*
  6. Which of these requests were a) met in full b) partially met c) refused?
    - *Explore for extended unpaid parental leave*
  7. For those requests that were met/partially met, what was the reason for accepting the requests?
    - *Explore for extended unpaid parental leave*
  8. For those requests that were refused, what was the reason for refusing the request? What reason was given to the worker for refusal? Was this provided in writing within 21 days?
    - *Explore for extended unpaid parental leave*
  9. Did any of those workers whose requests were refused appeal against the decision? If so, what was the outcome?
    - *Explore for extended unpaid parental leave*

10. How many workers in your team do you have currently? How many of those have flexible work arrangements?
- What types of flexible work arrangements do they have?
  - Did their new flexible work arrangement require an adjustment to job tasks or workload? If so, how was this decided?
  - How long have they had these arrangements?
  - Have the arrangements been reviewed? Formally/informally? Frequency of review?
11. And how many have taken extended unpaid parental leave since January 2010, or have made a request for extended leave?
- For how long is/was their extended leave (ie number of months beyond the initial 12 months)
  - Did their extended leave require an adjustment to job tasks or workload? If so, how was this decided?
  - Has this arrangements been reviewed? Formally/informally?
12. How do you think flexibility work arrangements affect workers' productivity?
- *explore for extended unpaid parental leave*
13. Do you think that having those flexible work arrangements makes workers more likely to stay with the organisation? Why or why not?
- *Explore for extended unpaid parental leave*
14. How do you think the flexible work arrangements have impacted on workers' well-being?
- *Explore for extended unpaid parental leave*
15. Has anyone in your organisation had a flexible work arrangement end? Why was this (worker decision / employer decision / mutual)?
- If employer decision, why was this decision made? How was this communicated to the worker? Did they try to appeal this decision? If so, what was the outcome?
  - How did the worker(s) transition back into traditional work arrangements?
  - How did the worker(s) transition into a different type of flexible work arrangement?
  - What support were you able to offer to support them in making this transition?
  - Did any issues arise? How were these dealt with? What was the outcome?
  - *Explore for extended unpaid parental leave*
16. Have you had any training for managing workers with flexible work arrangements?
- If so, what did the training consist of?
  - Is there any on-going support in this regard?
  - If so, what types of support do you have access to?
  - What (additional) training or support do you think would assist you in managing flexible workers?

- *Explore for extended unpaid parental leave*

17. On balance, is providing more flexible work arrangements and dealing with requests for flexibility, a good or a bad thing for your organisation? (eg: Is it onerous to deal with? And/or, does it make for a better workplace? How would you weigh up positives and negatives?)

18. Is there anything else about flexible work arrangements which you would like to discuss?

- *Repeat for extended unpaid parental leave*