



Flexible Work

Workplace flexibility is an enabler of gender equality, retaining women in the workforce and supporting more men to take on caring responsibilities. Several studies show positive connections between flexible working arrangements, improved productivity and revenue generation. ⁱ

However, research by CEW and Bain shows that men are twice as likely to have their flexible work requests rejected than women.ⁱⁱ Currently 72.7% of employers promote flexible work, however only 5.6% have set targets for employee engagement and just 2.3% have set targets for men's engagement. ⁱⁱⁱ



During COVID-19, many organisations have moved large sections of their workforce to work from home. As people adjust to new ways of working, it will become more evident that flexible working arrangements can be effective.

Beyond the immediate crisis, there is an opportunity to see a shift in social norms and a more equal distribution of caring responsibilities, and capitalise on a new normal of flexible work. ^{iv} This presents an opportunity to strengthen and implement best-practice flexible working and work from home practices – in turn unlocking workforce participation and productivity.

Removing Barriers

While employers intend to make flexible working arrangements available to everyone, there is a persistent belief that 'flexible work is for women'.^v In a 2019 survey of 6000 Australian parents and carers, more than half agreed that "employers are less likely to support men to take time off to care for family than women". ^{iv} In addition, 64% of respondents agreed "it is more acceptable for women to use family friendly work options than men".

Men and women need to have equal access to working flexibly, without negative judgments or repercussions for career progression. ^{vii} We know that women's underrepresentation in full-time work can limit opportunities to progress in the workplace. Research also shows that if men are unemployed or reduce work hours for family reasons, they may experience a 'flexibility stigma', leading to lower earnings and limiting future career opportunities. ^{vi}

Implementing a flexible working policy is simply not enough to normalise and support flexible work for both men and women. A cultural shift is needed, breaking down stigma and negative sentiment associated with flexible work.

Summary

As sectors adjust to new ways of flexible and remote working during COVID-19, there is an opportunity to better leverage flexible working arrangements to drive workforce participation, support carers and build productivity.

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- i Workplace Gender Equality Agency (WGEA) (2019), *Flexible Working is Good for Business: The business case*, <https://www.wgea.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/Business%20Case%20February%202019%20Final.pdf>
- ii Bain & Company and Chief Executive Women (2016), *The Power of Flexibility: A key enabler to boost gender parity and employee engagement*, https://cew.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/BAIN_CEW_REPORT_The_power_of_flexibility_Boosting_gender_parity-vF.pdf
- iii WGEA (2019), *Gender Equality Scorecard*, <https://www.wgea.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/2018-19-Gender-Equality-Scorecard.pdf>
- iv United Nations (2020), *Policy Brief: The Impact of COVID-19 on Women*, https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/policy_brief_on_covid_impact_on_women_9_apr_2020_updated.pdf
- v *National Working Families Report 2019*, https://parentsandcarersatwork.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/National-Working-Families-Report-2019_1.pdf
- vi As above
- vii Bain & Company and CEW (2016), *The Power of Flexibility: A key enabler to boost gender parity and employee engagement*, https://cew.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/BAIN_CEW_REPORT_The_power_of_flexibility_Boosting_gender_parity-vF.pdf
- viii Coltrane, Scott et al (2013), *Fathers and the Flexibility Stigma*, <https://spssi.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/josi.12015>

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