

# Policy to match demographics

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WHAT will happen to those National Employment Standards proposed for 2010 that are particularly geared to supporting working families and individuals to integrate their work and personal lives? Will issues like paid maternity leave and the right to request flexible work arrangements just disappear along with stock values?

For the pessimists among us it's easy to think the answer is "yes". After all, if the economy takes a plunge, if we enter a recession or depression, people will be scared of losing their jobs. In that kind of environment, nobody would complain about working a 65-hour week if it meant having a job and keeping food on the table.

Work-life issues will not only stick around, but strengthen. There are enduring trends that are forcing individuals, businesses and governments to take account of work-life issues that even the financial crisis will not change.

The demographics of the labour force in Western economies have fundamentally changed over the past generation. The dramatic changes to the composition of the workforce mean that we have gone from a division of labour of men as breadwinners and women as family care givers, to where men and women are both breadwinners. The workforce reality today is women in the workforce, dual-earner families, increase in part-time work, men wanting to spend more time with children and an ageing population.

Recent events mean that public policies supporting work-life issues are still fundamental to moving Australia to sustaining a competitive workforce and healthy community.

Concern and activism over work-life balance increasingly focuses on the policy and political bottlenecks that prevent people from successfully caring for themselves and their families while satisfying their career needs and ambitions. This is an improvement on the focus on individual achievement that still drives too much of the discussion on balance.

If passed in the Senate, the proposed 10 National Employment Standards will enshrine several additional entitlements for employees that did not previously form part of the industrial safety net under WorkChoices; such as the right to request flexible work arrangements, parental leave, personal/carer's leave and compassionate leave.

Employees, after a qualifying period of at least a year, will have the right to request a change in their working arrangements to assist them in caring for a child under their responsibility. However, employees needing flexible work arrangements—for example, working parents with children under school age—will remain subject to the whims of employers.

Labor's document merely states that employees with a year's continuous service "may request" a "change in working arrangements".

A wide range of benefits can issue from introducing flexible working practices. Many companies have achieved benefits from them such as improved recruitment and retention, reducing absenteeism, reducing costs — especially property, travel and overtime costs, extending hours of operation, improving customer service, and responding more effectively to changing market conditions.

So, managers should greet any request for flexible work hours as an opportunity to re-evaluate and improve the way work is organised.

The Productivity Commission has just finished a rigorous analysis of options related to paid parental leave and has proposed the introduction of a taxpayer-funded paid parental leave scheme to provide paid post-natal leave for a total of 18 weeks that can be shared by eligible parents, with an additional two weeks of paternity leave reserved for the father at the adult minimum wage (now \$543.78) for each week of leave for most eligible employees, with benefits subject to normal taxation.

Such a scheme would have several advantages. It would generate child and maternal health and welfare benefits by increasing the time parents can stay at home from work to care for their baby. The commission estimates that the vast majority of children will be able to be exclusively cared for by their parents for at least the first six months after birth.

It would also stimulate lifetime employment rates of women and contribute to reducing the gender pay gap, increase retention rates for business, with reduced costs for training and recruitment, and, most importantly, contribute to publicly supported social goals, and the normalcy of combining a caring role for children and working women.

One of the interesting features of the sustained economic growth that we have experienced in Australia is that rather than prompting development of social policies that assist people to integrate their work and family lives we saw the encouragement of market processes and policies to enforce market competition but an undermining of safety nets for employees — culminating in the WorkChoices legislation of the Howard government.

The Howard government missed the chance to introduce progressive policy changes that would have affected positively people's ability to integrate their work and family lives.

If Australia is to move "forward with fairness" we need strong leadership that does not let the financial crisis be an excuse for knee-jerk reactions and short-term thinking on important social policy around work-life issues. The Labor Government must not water down its plans to introduce paid parental leave and the right to request flexible work arrangements.

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