Results of Flexible Work in 2010 – A Pulse Survey

Managers still find it difficult to change their views about flexible work practices and 26% do not feel competent to manage flexibility within their teams.

For many human resource (HR) practitioners it will be no surprise that the key finding of the recent survey Flexible Work in 2010 – A Pulse Survey (‘Pulse Survey’) is that – during the last five years, there have been minimal changes in the attitudes of managers to flexible working, with 47% of respondents "agreeing" or "strongly agreeing" that they are hindered by leaders in their organisation who find it difficult to change their views about the value of flexible working. Furthermore, just over a quarter of the respondents (26%) do not believe that their managers/leaders feel competent to manage flexibility within their work teams.

These are just some of the issues highlighted in the Pulse Survey conducted by Managing Work|Life Balance International\(^1\) in conjunction with CCH Australia.

Objectives of the Pulse Survey

The objectives of the Pulse Survey were to:

- identify what has changed in the workplace since the introduction, in January 2010, of the right to request a flexible work arrangement under the Fair Work Act 2009 (FW Act), and
- identify some of the ongoing challenges and opportunities for HR practitioners and managers which have the potential to impact not only on the organisation's level of compliance but also on the ability to implement flexible work practices within work teams.

Survey responses

Over 100 organisations participated in the Pulse Survey. Sixty percent of respondents were in an HR function, and the remaining 40% were either senior managers or middle managers.

The majority of participants were from medium-sized organisations (100-500 employees) with both large and smaller business groups being well represented (see Table 1).

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\(^1\) Managing Work|Life Balance International, see www.worklifebalance.co.au
Table 1: Size of participating organisations

![Size of participating organisations](image1)

Well over one third (40%) of the responses were from professional services organisations with the remainder spread across the public sector, manufacturing, health and retail sectors (see Table 2).

Table 2: Industry sector represented

![Industry Sector of participating organisations](image2)

Key findings

In 2009, there was considerable commentary within the media and amongst HR practitioners who had expected that there would be a great deal of work to do to ensure compliance with the new legislation. In reality, many organisations, especially those who are regarded as ‘best practice’ have implemented a broad range of policies and programs over the last five or so years and these are considered to be an established part of the work environment. The findings of the Pulse Survey support this view and also identify opportunities to further develop the skills of leaders and clarify some aspects of the legislation.

Responding to legislative changes

In Australia it would seem that the implementation of the ‘right to request’ under the FW Act has for many employers followed a similar path to that experienced in UK and New Zealand
organisations (ie it formalised what was already in place). The results from the Pulse Survey show that over half (52%) believe that they had made adequate preparation for the introduction of the ‘right to request’ legislation. The majority of participating organisations upgraded their policies and processes and nearly three-quarters took some type of action to skill up their managers so that they could manage flexibility better in their workplaces. Two-thirds have had to pay more attention to the way in which they respond to requests for flexibility. This is to be expected given the requirement to respond in writing within 21 days of receipt of a written request, and the need to provide a ‘business case’ if a request is refused. See Table 3 below.

**Table 3: Impact of legislative change on flexible work practices**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Changes in the legislation have meant that we have had to</th>
<th>%</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Be more objective in our responses to requests for flexibility</td>
<td>[Data]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skill our managers to manage flexibility</td>
<td>[Data]</td>
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<tr>
<td>Better manage employee expectations about flexible working</td>
<td>[Data]</td>
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<tr>
<td>Introduce processes to manage requests for flexibility</td>
<td>[Data]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Upgrade our policies</td>
<td>[Data]</td>
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**Usage of flexible work arrangements**

Half of the participants report that they have 0-20% of their staff using some form of flexible work arrangement, with a further 30% indicating that 21-40% of their staff work flexibly. This would suggest that many of those responding to this Pulse Survey (see Table 4) already had significant numbers of staff working flexibly before the introduction of the FW Act. Overall, there has been little change in the numbers of staff requesting a flexible work arrangement.
Leadership support and commitment

The attitudes and behaviours of leaders have a significant impact on the ways in which flexible arrangements are implemented within work teams. The data from this survey would suggest that educating managers about the benefits of flexible working and skilling them appropriately so that they can manage flexible work arrangements within their teams continues to be a priority if organisations are to reap the benefits that increased flexible working can bring. This situation exists despite 50% of respondents indicating that they had focused on skilling their managers in this area (see Table 3).

In the Pulse Survey, some questions focused on issues that were hindering the impact of flexible work strategies. The questions used were the same as those used previously in the annual National Work/Life Benchmarking Study in 2005, 2006 and 2007. We are, therefore, in a position to assess any changes since the 2007 study. Interestingly, the issues that relate to manager’s attitudes still exist with 47% of respondents “agreeing” or “strongly agreeing” that they are hindered by leaders in their organisation who find it difficult to change their views about the value of flexible working (see Table 6). It is also concerning to note that just 30% believe that their managers feel competent to manage flexibility within their teams with 26% disagreeing.
Table 5: Leadership and flexibility

* Note: the high agree score in the first item of Table 5 is in fact a negative response – a reverse question was used here.

It is however, encouraging to note that nearly half (49%) of respondents indicated that it was their belief that – in their organisation staff generally feel comfortable discussing their need to work flexibly with their manager. These responses would suggest that – within those organisations – leaders are creating an environment that makes it conducive to conducting discussions about flexibility issues.

**Hindrances to flexibility**

As already described in the section addressing leadership, this section of the survey enables us to compare the 2010 responses with those from 2007. It is interesting to note that a focus on programs rather than the way work is done continues to be an issue for over a third of respondents. There would however, appear to be a shift in perceptions about the importance of work/life balance with 15% fewer respondents indicating that one of the hindrances to the achievement of flexibility is that work demands overshadow personal needs.

Another change since 2007 is the level of communication to staff about flexibility issues. This is apparent where 10% or fewer organisations indicated that this was a hindrance.
During our work within a number of organisations prior and since the introduction of the FW Act, we collected qualitative data which suggested that there were groups of employees who felt disadvantaged or excluded by the ‘right to request’ component of the ten employment matters. As part of the Pulse Survey, we sought to explore whether or not respondents had experienced any ‘backlash’ to these changes.

Whilst overall the responses would indicate that there has been little or no backlash, there would appear to be some concerns from people who ‘carry the load’ for people who work flexibly and who may not be carers. Given that many organisations have formalised and implemented flexible work arrangements that have a broader application than those required by the legislation, many of the concerns about fairness and equity in accessing a flexible work arrangement may have already been addressed.
Legislative changes

Four months after the introduction of additional parts of the FW Act, the responses to the Pulse Survey indicate that the scope of the legislation could be broadened to cover all carers rather than just those of young children (or older children with a disability). This would then be similar to changes that have recently been introduced to the UK Legislation where the ‘right to request’ was extended to cover the majority of carers.

Given the ageing of the population and the increasing number of mature aged people in the workforce who are (or will be) carers of older relatives, and/or their grandchildren, extending the ‘right to request’ to elder care (as one example) would seem to make good business sense.

The feedback also indicates that HR practitioners are also looking for more clarity around what is meant by a ‘business case’ and grounds for refusing an application for a flexible work arrangement.
Benefits of flexible working

One of the benefits that continue to accrue to organisations as a result of their efforts to create a flexible workplace for all staff is an increased level of employee engagement. Whilst flexible work arrangements will not be the only factor contributing to engagement, it is widely recognised as being an ‘important’ contributing factor. Responses to the Pulse Survey show that over a third of respondents had seen an increase of 0-5% and a further 15% had observed a 6-10% increase.

Table 9: Increases to employee engagement
**Recommendations for action**

In a recent case study, Ms Vanessa Andersen, Workplace Relations Partner at Henry Davis York (a Sydney-based law firm) emphasised the importance of properly assessing a request for a flexible work arrangement and whether or not it is sustainable. Where there are concerns about how requested options will work in practice, she advises being open to exploring ‘trial arrangements’ with proper monitoring and evaluation processes.

The findings from the Pulse Survey also indicate the importance of:

- educating managers about their rights and responsibilities in relation to the FW Act as well as the business benefits of flexible working within the team.
- skilling managers in the competencies required to respond appropriately to requests for a flexible work arrangement and manage team members who work flexibly
- giving managers and leaders the tools to manage flexibility within their teams (eg information kits and/or some form of manager guide)
- HR needing to focus on what is happening in work teams as flexible arrangements can be derailed by line managers, even those with the best of intentions
- HR needing to monitor feedback from staff/managers about what is working well (in terms of flexibility) and what needs to change. Practitioners need to remain alert for potential issues and backlash, and
- promoting success stories as well as the bottom line benefits.

**About the author**

Barbara Holmes is the Director of Managing Work|Life Balance International – one of Australia’s leading consultancies in the area of work/life balance and flexible work arrangements. Much of Barbara’s work involves working with managers and employees in client organisations to create change in the workplace, enabling business to thrive and employees to achieve the balance and career goals to which they aspire. Barbara has worked extensively in Australia and around the Asia Pacific region, providing advice, consulting support and a range of practical tool kits and resources to government and private sector organisations.

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For more information, please see: [www.worklifebalance.com.au](http://www.worklifebalance.com.au)

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iii Employment Act 2008 Provisions, UK Government