

**TITLE: A better way to work**

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The idea that more flexible workplaces promise advantages to all is not new. For decades, Australians have been told that with the aid of new technologies, we can "work smarter, not harder" to achieve a better work-life balance and greater productivity.

Goodbye to rigid nine-to-five office-based regimes. Employees will be able to negotiate working arrangements that allow them to care for their children and their aged parents and better manage their own health and personal needs while still participating effectively at work. New technologies enable us to do our work wherever we are, seamlessly interweaving it with our other activities.

Employers reap the benefits through happier, healthier and consequently more productive employees. Fewer days lost to personal leave, lower staff turnover and the right environment to maximize the full potential of the workforce as women and older people remain attached to work throughout their lives. It's a win-win situation all round. Right?

It all makes perfect sense - in theory. But in practice, this positive transformation of the workplace has not occurred. Despite, or perhaps because of the flexibility rhetoric, millions of Australian workers are suffering from work-related stress and anxiety, losing sleep worrying about their job and taking more days off work or being less effective at work as a result.

We are working long hours and taking fewer breaks just to get the job done. A growing number of us are unhappy with our work arrangements - whether it is overwork, underwork or lack of work - and it is taking a toll on our families and our health.

Meanwhile, national productivity is decreasing. So what is going so wrong?

A survey for today's fifth annual Go Home On Time Day, Hard to get a break, looks at the work patterns and practices of Australians and reveals a troubling snapshot of our working lives. Although there has been a decrease in the number of hours worked per week in the past three years, the amount of unpaid overtime we do has increased significantly. Sixty percent of Australians are working extra hours for no pay, up from 45 per cent in 2009. This means that the seven million employees, who work on average 7.1 unpaid hours per week, donate labour worth \$110 billion to their employers.

While all types of workers do more unpaid work than they did in 2009, the increase is most notable for casual employees. Four years ago they reported working 18 unpaid minutes per day.

This year, it has increased to 88 minutes - 7.3 hours per week. Why is this happening? It's because of the casualisation of the Australian workforce.

Well over one third of Australians (37 per cent) are now classified as casual employees by the ABS and this is growing with the spread of non-permanent forms of work across all industry sectors. Independent contractors, people working for labour hire agencies, on fixed term contracts or as conventional casual employees now work more unpaid hours to fulfil the expectations of their jobs. The additional pressure of insecure employment makes them feel they have to.

Let me complete the picture. The report also finds that lunch breaks and long relaxing summer holidays with the family are disappearing along with the nine-to-five regime. Where once lunch and tea breaks were structured into the working day, now most employees routinely don't take a lunch break at all, eat their lunch while continuing to work or cut their break short.

Add to this the fact that most working Australians did not take their full four weeks annual leave last year and we see a pattern of overwork and pressure that is harming our mental and physical health as well as our relationships with family and friends. People say they don't take a break because they are too busy; that they need to work extra hours to meet the expectations of their job. They also say that accruing annual leave is a form of income protection, in case they lose their job.

So let's get back to the ideal of workplace and labour force flexibility and the reality of the Australian workplace today. It appears that when flexibility operates in a climate of widespread job insecurity, rather than happy and productive workers it produces workers who have to go to great lengths to keep their job.

It means they will work through the breaks which are essential for mental health and wellbeing. It means they will work extra hours for no pay to get the work done. And it means they will be stressed and anxious and depressed as a result. When flexible workplaces just mean workers must "do more with less" in a climate of job insecurity, it is a recipe for disaster. For the flexibility-productivity growth equation to work, it has to be a two-way street.

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