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TITLE: All work + no play = stress

AUTHOR: Richard Denniss

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John Howard's description of work/life balance as a "barbecue stopper" was more accurate than he realised. Not only does it continue to stop conversation among the "working families" of such interest to political strategists, but the length and unpredictability of working hours makes it increasingly difficult for friends and families to make plans and keep them.

According to a recent study by The Australia Institute, around 2.2 million people head out for work each day with little or no idea what time they will finish work that day. Such "flexible" working arrangements, however, are incompatible with the more rigid aspects of our lives, such as children's bedtimes, train timetables and soccer training.

There is nothing more dangerous in public debate than a poorly defined term and there is no doubt that "flexibility" is one of the vaguest words floating around our national debates. It almost makes the term sustainability seem meaningful.

The dictionary defines flexibility as being able to bend without breaking. A commonsense workplace definition implies a willingness of employers and employees to engage in a bit of give and take that is mutually beneficial. But for millions of Australians flexibility in the workplace means working back late without any notice, answering the phone and emails late at night and on weekends and the inability to take annual holidays at times that suit.

Put simply, for many Australians it is not the workplace that is expected to be more flexible, it is their family and personal commitments. In the face of unyielding professional demands it is the time they spend with their family, friends and communities that provides the give to match their employers' take.

Australians work some of the longest hours in the developed world, on average working around five hours a week longer than their counterparts in northern Europe. We have four weeks annual leave, if we can get access to it, while the European average is around six weeks.

While our average hours have declined slightly recently, the predictability of hours of work has also declined both as the proportion of people employed as casuals and contractors have risen and as the culture of full-time work has changed rapidly, especially in the service sector.

Long and unpredictable hours of work take a huge toll on physical health, mental health, personal relationships and workplace productivity. More than 3 million Australians report that their work patterns are a source of stress and anxiety while just under 3 million people are experiencing a loss of sleep as a result of their work patterns.

While television advertisements may suggest that the solution to such problems is to consume energy drinks, research from beyondblue, the national depression initiative, shows that stress and lack of sleep are strongly linked to the onset of depression and other mental illness.

After decades of discussing the need for workplace flexibility it is time for participants in the debate to clarify exactly what it is that they want. When employer groups say that they want more flexible workplaces does that mean they want to make it easier for young parents to return to the workforce part-time? Or do they mean that they expect that young parents will stay back and work late whenever a client sends an email at a quarter to five in the afternoon?

Successive governments have told us that we need to get a larger percentage of the population into the labour force and that the best way to do so is by lowering the tax rate, but what about providing more affordable and flexible child care? Where is the evidence that it is tax rates, and not the availability of high-quality care, that is keeping parents out of the workforce?

Over the past 30 years Australian workplaces have changed fundamentally. In 1980 no one had a mobile phone. Indeed, most office workers didn't have a phone on their desk. In 1990 virtually no one had an email address.

Large numbers of Australians used to work in factories that had clear shifts and on production lines on which when one person stopped work, everyone stopped work. In offices the mail was usually delivered once a day. Employees knew what they had to do and it was their manager, not their colleagues or clients, who contacted them directly with new tasks and new deadlines.

The modern labour market is quite different and, for many, much better. The workplace of the past was not ideal, but it was a lot more certain and predictable. Such predictability meant that commuters could car pool, families could schedule meals and parents could promise to coach their kids' sporting teams and actually manage to make it on time.

Part-time and casual work was far less common in the 1980s than it is today, but so too was unpaid overtime. In the past, commuters who missed their train couldn't easily ring to let their families know that they would be late home. But at the same time few family dinners were interrupted with calls from clients.

The challenge today is to find a way to distinguish the benefits of flexible working arrangements from the dangers of removing all barriers between home and work. Just because it is desirable for some people to work part-time doesn't mean it is desirable for other workers to be permanently on call. The problem is that we are using the word "flexible" to describe both.

But while the version of flexibility that allows work to fit in around our lives is good for physical and mental health, the version that forces our lives to squeeze into the cracks left by work is causing an epidemic of stress, anxiety and lack of sleep.

In the modern flexible workplace where employees are "empowered" to take responsibility for many of their own decisions it can be very difficult for individuals to simultaneously demand more of the good kind of flexibility while single-handedly stand up to a workplace culture in which people are afraid to be the first to leave the office or not pick up the phone whenever it rings.

Barbecues have played an important role in social life for many years, and while sausages may have been replaced by skewers, the idea of relaxed time in relaxed company continues to appeal to many Australians. But it's one thing to make plans to catch up with friends and family; what matters is whether we keep them.

Dr Richard Denniss is the Executive Director of The Australia Institute, a Canberra based think tank. www.tai.org.au