



An unhealthy obsession?

The impact of work hours and workplace culture on Australia's health

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The opinions expressed in this paper are those of the authors, as is responsibility for any errors or oversight. They should not be regarded as representing the official position of the organisations involved.

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Summary

Australians work some of the longest hours in the developed world – substantially longer than their counterparts in Denmark, The Netherlands and Norway. For many Australians though, work stress is related not to the number of hours worked, but a mismatch between the workers' desired and actual hours of work, and the inflexibility of these arrangements. This is true for workers across the earning spectrum.

A well-functioning labour market would be expected to produce a closer match between the hours worked and workers' desired hours. But many Australian workers indicate their difficulty in negotiating more flexible, predictable or suitable hours with their employers.

It is clear that relieving the impact on individuals, families and communities of inflexible hours of work starts with communication – not only do Australians work long hours, but around one in five Australians also work unpredictable hours, with around 2.2 million Australians reporting that they have little or no idea what time they will finish work that day.

Furthermore, a large number of Australians report that they do not feel secure about their work. That is, around 20 per cent of the workforce, more than two million people, feel uncertain about the security of their tenure, the security of their work hours, or both.

The combined impact of dissatisfaction with the length of working hours, the unpredictability of working hours and the uncertainty about job security combine to cause around half of all Australians to express dissatisfaction with their hours of work, with around a quarter wishing they worked more and a quarter wanting to work less.

Dissatisfaction with working hours is, in turn, associated with a wide range of adverse impacts, the most common of which are stress and anxiety (83 per cent), lack of sleep (74 per cent) and the inability to meet family commitments (54 per cent). Of even greater concern is the fact that there is strong evidence linking stress and overwork in the workplace to depression and heart disease; health impacts that cost employers, and society more generally, billions of dollars per year. Other ill-effects on Australian workers closely related to working arrangements include negative impacts on financial security, career opportunities, productivity and mental wellbeing.

Significantly, employees who reported that they are working longer hours than they would like are more than twice as likely to report that work is causing adverse impacts on their physical health, mental health and the strength of their personal relationships.

While a majority of employees feel comfortable raising workplace issues with their managers, the issues that they are least comfortable raising relate to their own mental health or the mental health of their colleagues. That said, while around 80 per cent of respondents reported that they felt comfortable discussing their work hours and their work/life balance with their manager, around 50 per cent of the same respondents said that they would like to work different hours to their current work hours. These contradictory results suggest that while employees may be comfortable raising concerns, some workplaces may be unwilling or unable to respond to such concerns.

Interestingly, employees of small businesses report feeling more comfortable discussing work life and workplace issues with their managers than employees of medium and large organisations. This is likely to reflect the relative proximity of employees to the senior management and the capacity of management in small business to implement changes in response to feedback from employees.

For workers who have been unable to resolve the causes of stress and anxiety caused by their working arrangements the most common source of support is family and friends. A far smaller proportion of the workforce says that they are likely to seek support from their manager, Centrelink or a union. Interestingly, casual workers were much more likely to consult websites for support and much less likely to discuss their concerns with managers than their full time counterparts.

Finally, it is important to note that 42 per cent of respondents, representing more than five million employees, reported that they experienced no negative effects as a result of their current working conditions. Interestingly, while income level and permanency of employment do not appear to greatly influence the probability of employees being content, perceptions of the security and predictability of work and satisfaction with hours of work were strongly linked to the absence of ill effects.

In conclusion, while the length of the working week plays an important role in determining the health and wellbeing of the workforce, the workers likely to experience the most adverse impacts are those with the biggest disparity between their actual and desired hours of work and those whose work is the most unpredictable – job satisfaction, or lack of it, appears to be the key factor.

While around half of the workforce reports that they feel comfortable talking to their managers about work/life balance and mental health, a substantial proportion of the workforce report that they feel comfortable discussing such issues while simultaneously reporting dissatisfaction with their actual working conditions. This suggests that there is substantial room for improved communication between employees and managers as well as for improvement in the responsiveness of organisations to the preferences and concerns of their workforce.

1 Introduction

Australians work some of the longest hours in the developed world. According to the OECD the average full time Australian employee worked 43.2 hours per week, around an hour per day more than the hours worked in Denmark (38.3 hours), the Netherlands (39.2 hours) and Norway (38.5 hours).¹

But it is not just the total number of hours worked that has an impact on individuals, families and communities. Rather, as the data reported below demonstrate, it is the *mismatch* between actual and desired hours of work, and the *predictability* of actual hours worked that place stress on family relationships, prevent people from participating in sporting and social activities and lead to harmful physical and mental health outcomes.

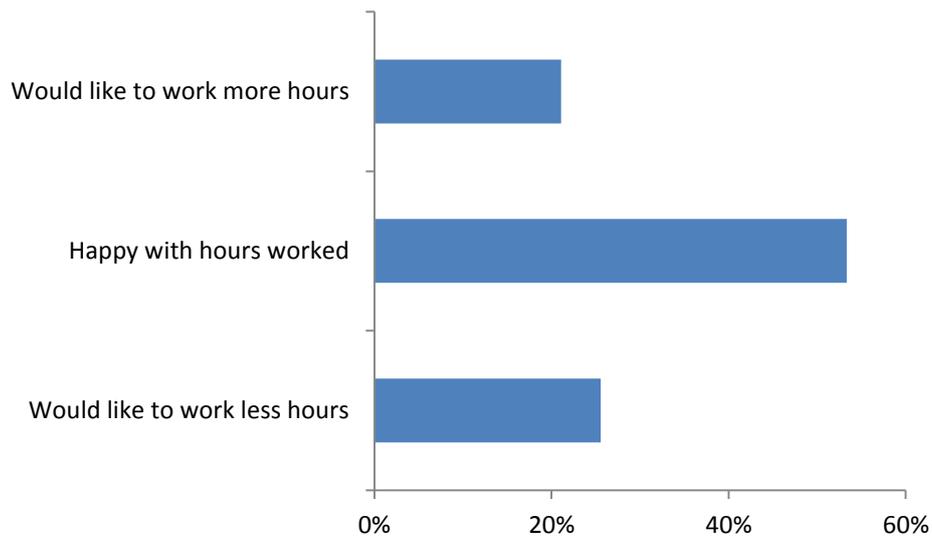
Ironically, for nearly thirty years Australian policy makers, business groups and unions have been discussing the need for, and consequences of, increased labour market flexibility – yet this report shows that, for millions of Australians, employment practices remain inflexible and incapable of accommodating their individual or family circumstances.

While much of the policy and political debate about labour market flexibility has focused on the nature of the contractual relationships between employers and employees this paper focuses on a different dimension of the flexibility problem, namely, that more than half of the workforce is dissatisfied with their hours of work.

In a genuinely flexible workplace, a workplace in which employers and employees seek mutually beneficial arrangements, it would be expected that most employees would express satisfaction with their agreed hours of work. However, as shown in Figure 1, around 21 per cent of employees desire more hours, 26 per cent desire fewer hours and only around half (53 per cent) of employees are happy with their hours. Given that there were 11.5 million people employed in Australia in September 2012² this suggests that around 5.4 million workers were dissatisfied with their working hours. Those who desire more hours of work are likely to report experiencing stress, anxiety, loss of sleep and a range of other indicators of physical and psychological ill health as a result of their financial circumstances, while those who desire to work fewer hours are likely to report similar risk factors as a result of time pressures and their perception that they are harming their personal relationships. Put simply, having too much or not enough work is harming the physical and mental health of millions of Australians.

1 OECD (2011). *Labour Force Statistics – Average usual weekly hours worked on the main job*.

2 Australian Bureau of Statistics (2012). *Labour force, Australia, Sep 2012*.

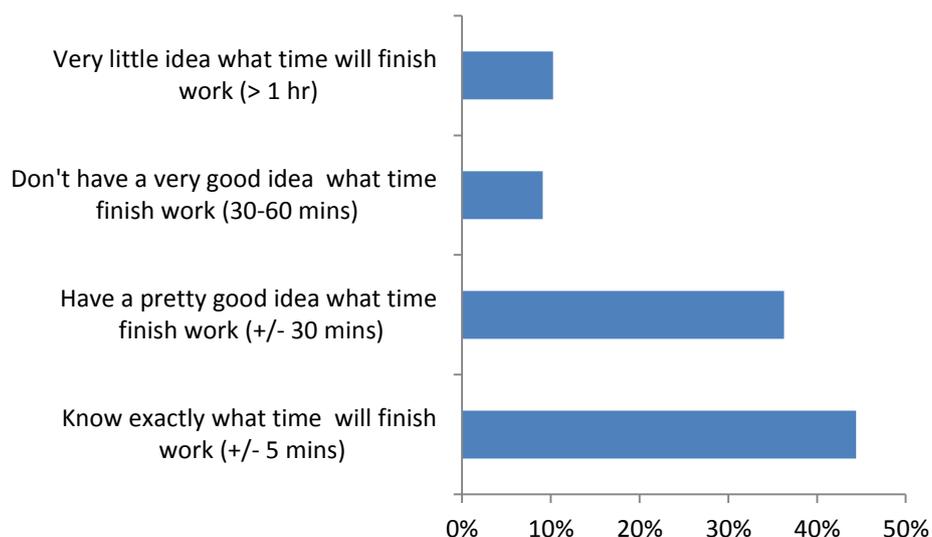
Figure 1: Satisfaction with hours of work

Base: 849. Question wording: "Would you like to work...?"

A well-functioning, and flexible, labour market would generate a close match between actual and desired hours of work but, as Figure 1 highlights, this is not the case in Australia. The discussion below considers the difficulties faced by employees in negotiating more suitable and more predictable hours of work as well as the difficulties many employees face in accessing their annual leave.

In addition to the total number of hours worked, and the suitability of those hours, this paper examines the predictability of hours of work. That is, the paper reports data on the ability of Australians to anticipate the time they will leave work each day as they head off to work in the morning and their ability to accurately forecast how many hours they will work in the coming week. As Figure 2 shows, around 2.2 million Australians have little idea what time they will knock off work each day as they head out of the home in the morning.

Figure 2: Ability of respondents to predict what time they will finish work each day



Base: 849. Question wording: "Thinking about how many hours you are likely to work next week, do you?"

A large body of research into the physical and mental health impacts of long hours of work exists,³ as well as the impact of such hours on productivity⁴ and safety⁵. However, rather than focus simply on long work hours, this paper focuses instead on the adverse impacts of both the mismatch between actual and desired hours of work and the unpredictability of hours of work. That is, given the diversity of care and other time-consuming responsibilities that most Australians have outside of the workplace, this paper focuses on the impact of having too much or too little work on the health of individuals, families and communities. It also considers the adverse impact of the unpredictability of hours of work.

The paper is structured as follows. The following section provides a brief overview of the evidence linking work/life balance to physical and mental health. Section 3 presents new survey evidence on the nature and extent of the imbalance between people's preferred working arrangements and their actual arrangements with a focus on working hours and the predictability and security of those hours. Section 4 looks at the impact of work hours and workplace culture on health and wellbeing. Section 5 examines how employee perceptions of how their workplaces address concerns about work hours, security and workplace stress. The paper ends with conclusions about how individuals can improve their wellbeing and how employers can better address these issues in the workplace.

3 For a discussion, see, for example: Pocock, B. et al. (2012). *Time bomb: Work rest and play in Australia today*; Schor, J. (1992). *The overworked American: The unexpected decline of leisure*.

4 LaMontagne, A.D. et al. (2010). *Estimating the economic benefits of eliminating job strain as a risk factor for depression*.

5 Muller, R. et al. (2008). *Epidemiological Diagnosis of Occupational Fatigue in a Fly-In-Fly-Out Operation of the Mineral Industry*.

2 The link between work hours and health

Long and irregular hours of work have been linked to a wide range of adverse physical health outcomes including greater risk of accident and injury through fatigue,⁶ cardiovascular disease as a result of stress and inadequate sleep⁷ and a wide range of chronic illnesses associated with lack of exercise and poor diet⁸.

Long and irregular work hours have also been linked to a wide range of mental health problems including anxiety and depression.⁹ As with adverse physical health impacts, the impact of work patterns on sleep and exercise patterns can exacerbate a wide range of mental health problems as well as contribute directly to their cause.

Mental health is the major cause of non-fatal disability in Australia, with depression and anxiety accounting for around half of that burden.¹⁰ Indeed, it has been estimated that the cost of depression in the workforce was \$12.6 billion in 2010, with the main drivers of these costs being reduced productivity and increased job turnover.¹¹

While attachment to the labour market is often associated with improved physical and mental health outcomes, this is not always the case, especially when people are only marginally attached to the labour market or are experiencing the ill effects of excessive work hours or workplace stress. Indeed, moving from unemployment to a poor-quality job may even lead to a decline in mental health.¹² Insecure work has been linked to poor health in a number of studies,¹³ with particularly strong links found to exist between such working conditions and anxiety, depression and the risk factors for heart disease.¹⁴

The costs of obesity in Australia have been estimated at \$21 billion in 2010,¹⁵ with lost output due to obesity being estimated at \$6.4 billion per year.¹⁶ While obesity

6 Muller, R. et al. (2008)

7 Cox, L. (2010). *Working 10 Hour Days Hurts Your Heart*.

8 See Wilkinson, R., & Marmot, M. (2003). *Social determinants of health: the solid facts, 2nd edition*.

9 Butterworth, P. et al. (2011). *The psychosocial quality of work determines whether employment has benefits for mental health: results from a longitudinal national household panel survey*.

10 Begg, S. et al. (2007). *The burden of disease and injury in Australia 2003*.

11 LaMontagne, A.D. et al. (2010). *Estimating the economic benefits of eliminating job strain as a risk factor for depression*.

12 Butterworth, P., et al. (2011).

13 See, for example: Butterworth, P. et al. (2011); Quinlan, M. (2005). *Organisational restructuring/downsizing, OHS regulation and worker health and wellbeing*; & Wilkinson, R., & Marmot, M. (2003).

14 Wilkinson, R., & Marmot, M. (2003).

15 Colagiuri, S. et al. (2010). *The cost of overweight and obesity in Australia*.

16 Medibank Health Solutions (2010). *Obesity in Australia: financial impacts and cost benefits of intervention*.

is caused by a wide range of lifestyle factors, there is a clear link between long and irregular hours of work and the prevalence of those lifestyle factors.¹⁷

Finally, by reducing the amount of time that an individual can spend with their friends and family and by introducing increased stress and anxiety into the time spent with friends and family, long and irregular work hours – including the way that technology now allows work to intrude on family time – have the capacity to both harm personal relationships and undermine the capacity of those relationships to provide support to those suffering from mental or physical health problems.¹⁸

As shown below, millions of Australians report that their patterns of work hours are unpredictable, the total number of hours they work is unsuitable and that these problems combine to reduce the time they spend sleeping, exercising and socialising. Millions of Australians also report that their work is a cause of stress, anxiety and relationship pressure.

The academic literature makes clear that not only are the links between work and health strong, but they are expensive as well. The evidence makes clear that governments, businesses and individuals that are concerned with increasing the productivity of the workforce, reducing the cost of health care to the budget and improving the quality of life for 'working families' should be particularly concerned with the nature and extent of workplace insecurity and stress in Australia. The evidence suggests that addressing these problems will reduce the magnitude of a direct cause of a wide range of physical and mental health problems while simultaneously helping to enhance the physical and psychological resilience of individuals and families.

17 Wilkinson, R., & Marmot, M. (2003).

18 See, for example: Perlow, L. (1998). *Boundary control: the social ordering of work and family in a high-tech corporation*; Pocock, B. (2003). *The work/life collision: What work is doing to Australians and what to do about it*; & Pocock, B. et al. (2012); Schor, J. (1992).

3 Predictability and security in Australian workplaces

In September 2012, The Australia Institute conducted an online survey of 1,495 people in order to better understand their experience in the workplace, their preferences, and the consequences of any mismatch between the working hours they want and the working hours they have. Of the 1,495 survey respondents, 849 people reported being in paid work and the results presented below are drawn from the responses of those respondents in paid work to the survey questions provided in the Appendix.

The respondents were asked survey questions focused on the following broad issues:

- ***the circumstances of their employment and working conditions***, including the basis on which they are employed, the number of hours worked, perceptions of predictability and security, and managerial and employer responsiveness to a range of difficult or sensitive workplace issues;
- ***the factors influencing the number of hours they work***, including personal reasons, financial circumstances, and employer-driven requirements and expectations; and
- ***the implications of their working conditions***, including on their mental and physical health and wellbeing, personal relationships and financial security.

The Australia Institute has previously conducted research into the extent and impact of work¹⁹ – and, specifically, overwork – on Australians and has consistently found that a significant proportion of Australian employees are working outside of their normal working hours, in many instances without additional remuneration²⁰.

This year's survey confirms that many Australians continue to work more hours than they wish to, and that those people working longer than they would like report significantly increased rates of adverse mental health effects including heightened stress and anxiety levels, reduced mental wellbeing and detrimental impacts on relationships with family and friends.

At the same time, those people who work significantly fewer hours than they would prefer are not immune to stress and anxiety. People who do not have enough work report far higher rates of financial or housing-related stress, and greater stress related to employment predictability and security.

¹⁹ Fear, J., Rogers, S. & Denniss, R. (2010). *Long time, no see: The impact of time poverty on Australian workers.*; Fear, J. (2011). *Polluted time: Blurring the boundaries between work and life.*

²⁰ Fear, J. (2009). *Something for Nothing: Unpaid overtime in Australia.*

Put simply, work is central to wellbeing, and only a lucky few Australians exist in the happy middle ground where they have enough work that they are not overly concerned about financial and housing security, but not so much work that they experience physical, mental and relationship harms.

Only around half of Australians are happy with their hours of work and around 2.2 million Australians head out for work in the morning with very little idea what time they will finish that evening.

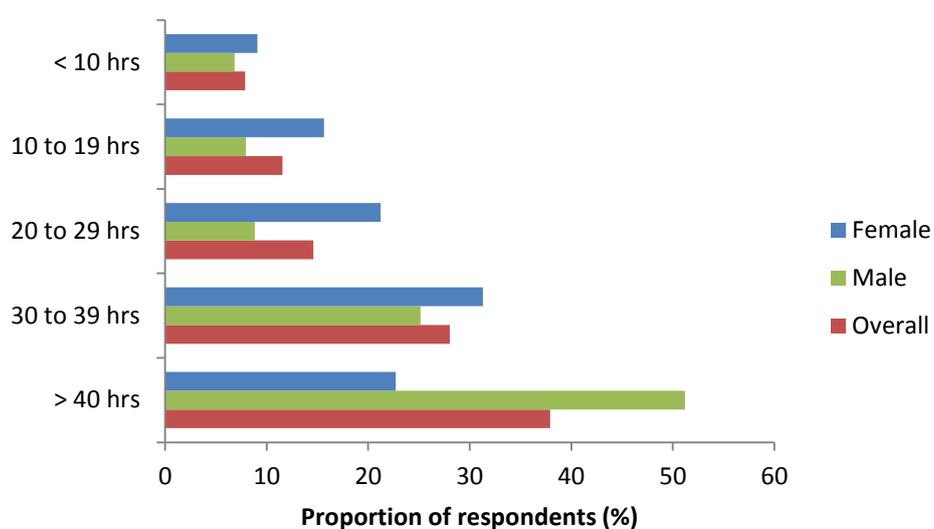
Who works what in Australia?

Two thirds of survey respondents (66 per cent) work in excess of 30 hours per week, with more than one third (38 per cent) of working Australians reporting that they worked in excess of 40 hours per week.

As shown in Figure 3 there are marked gender differences in the patterns of work with women, on average, performing substantially fewer hours of paid work than men. Overall, 46 per cent of female respondents reported working less than 30 hours per week, compared with 24 per cent of men. Conversely, just over three quarters of men and just over half of female respondents reported working 30 or more hours per week.

The distinction is perhaps most stark when considering those respondents working more than 40 hours per week: just over half of male respondents (51 per cent) reported working 40 or more hours per week, more than twice the proportion of women working those hours.

Figure 3: Gender differences in reported number of hours worked per week



Base: 849. Question wording: "How many hours a week do you work?"

Family commitments have a major impact on the number of hours that women work. Women with children²¹ are far more likely to work less than 30 hours per week than women without children (57 per cent and 35 per cent respectively).

Conversely, women without children are far more likely than women with children to work 30 hours or more per week (61 per cent and 42 per cent respectively). The impact of family commitments on male work hours is, however, less obvious. Indeed, as shown in Table 1, men are slightly more likely to report working longer hours if they have children.

Table 1: Proportion of respondents working fewer or more than 30 hours per week

		< 30 hours per week	30+ hours per week
Men	With children	19%	81%
	Without children	26%	74%
Women	With children	58%	42%
	Without children	39%	61%
Overall		34%	66%

Base: 849. 'Children' includes one or more resident children aged under 18 years.

Why do we work the hours we do?

For decades Australian political and business leaders have talked about the need to make the Australian labour market more flexible, but, while this debate has focused primarily on the nature of contractual relationships between employees and employers the data presented below suggests that millions of Australians do not believe that their work hours are flexible, or even negotiable. Indeed, for around 2.2 million Australians work hours are not even predictable.

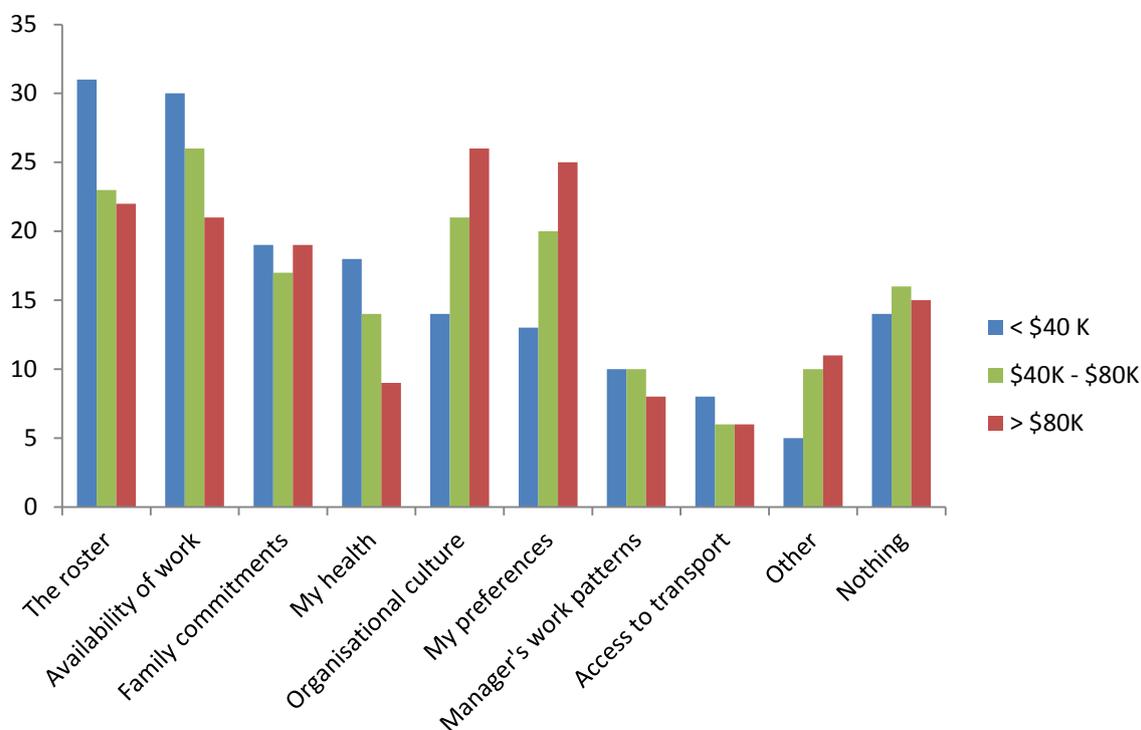
Figure 4 shows that a wide range of factors influence the number of hours that individuals work and that some of those factors are far more important for high income earners than they are for low income earners, and vice versa. For example, people earning less than \$40,000 per annum are far more likely to cite external factors such as 'the roster' or 'availability of work' as determining their work hours than respondents earning over \$40,000. Similarly, those earning over \$80,000 were far more likely to report that their personal preferences determined their work hours than lower income earners.

Interestingly, while low income earners were more likely to report that 'the roster' shaped their hours, high income earners were more likely to report that 'organisational culture' determined theirs. While both of these factors are external

²¹ 'Children' refers to survey responses indicating one or more resident child aged under 18 years.

to the preferences of the individual, those whose hours are shaped by a roster are likely to have a higher degree of predictability in their work hours than those whose work hours are shaped by the powerful, if poorly defined, influences of ‘culture’.

Figure 4: Factors influencing hours worked, by income



Base: 722. Respondents who declined to nominate an income range have been excluded. Question wording: “Which of the following have a significant impact on your hours of work?”. Note that respondents may have indicated more than one factor as having a significant impact.

While the issue of satisfaction with work hours will be discussed in greater detail below it is interesting to highlight that of those high income earners who indicated that their own preferences influenced their working hours, 44 per cent went on to simultaneously report dissatisfaction with the number of hours that they work, with 29 per cent reporting that they would like to work less.

These contradictory responses suggest that factors such as organisational culture are likely to have a greater influence than their own preferences in determining their working hours. Another interpretation is that these respondents may feel that they have some discretion over the time that they can start and finish on a daily basis, but that they, overall, have less control over their working hours than they would like.

While Figure 4 identifies the role of income in shaping the factors that determine work hours, gender also plays an interesting role. Consider the following:

- Men were more likely than women to report being influenced by their workplace's organisational culture (27 per cent and 19 per cent respectively).
- Women were more likely to report family commitments as a factor influencing the number of hours they work (23 per cent for women as compared to 15 per cent).

That is, in the 'work-life collision' identified by Barbara Pocock in 2003, for women it is more likely that family life interferes with work while for men it is more likely that their working life interferes with their family.

This finding is underscored by the data on hours worked (see Figure 1 and Table 1), with women with children far more likely than women without children and men to work fewer hours and reflects, among other things, the significant impact of family commitments on women with children's ability or desire to undertake paid work.

Are we happy with the hours we work?

In a flexible labour market we should expect to see a diverse range of working hours and conditions but, if the market is working efficiently, we should also expect to see a high correlation between an individual's desired hours of work and their actual hours of work.

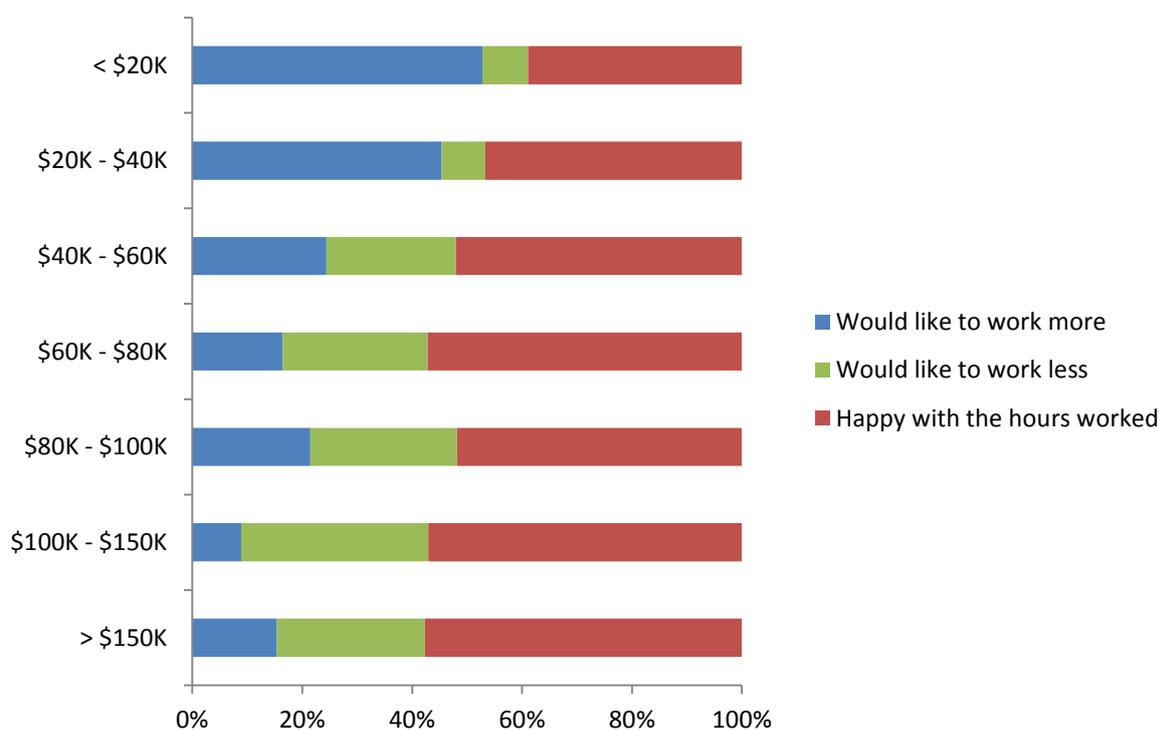
The significance of this high degree of mismatch between actual and desired hours of work depends on a number of factors including the extent of the mismatch, the ability to seek change, the responsiveness of employers to employee requests, and the extent and nature of adverse effects arising as a consequence of working too few or too many hours.

As shown above in Figure 1 around half of the workforce is dissatisfied with their work hours and, as previously discussed, there is strong evidence of the physical and mental health costs associated with underemployment and overwork. Combined, these results suggest that the nature and extent of the mismatch between desired and actual hours of work has significant economic, health and personal consequences.

Figure 5 shows that dissatisfaction with the number of hours worked tends to rise as income rises. Low income earners are far more likely to report a desire for additional hours of work while high income earners are far more likely to desire fewer hours of paid work. Similarly, satisfaction with hours of work peaks for those earning \$60,000 to \$80,000 per year, around the median full time income in Australia.

While the adverse consequences of unsuitable working hours and conditions will be discussed below, it is important to highlight at this point that Figure 5 underpins the subsequent finding that low income earners are far more likely to experience work-related stress and anxiety as a result of inadequate or uncertain income, while high income earners are more likely to experience stress and anxiety as a result of inadequate time to invest in sleep, exercise or family relationships.

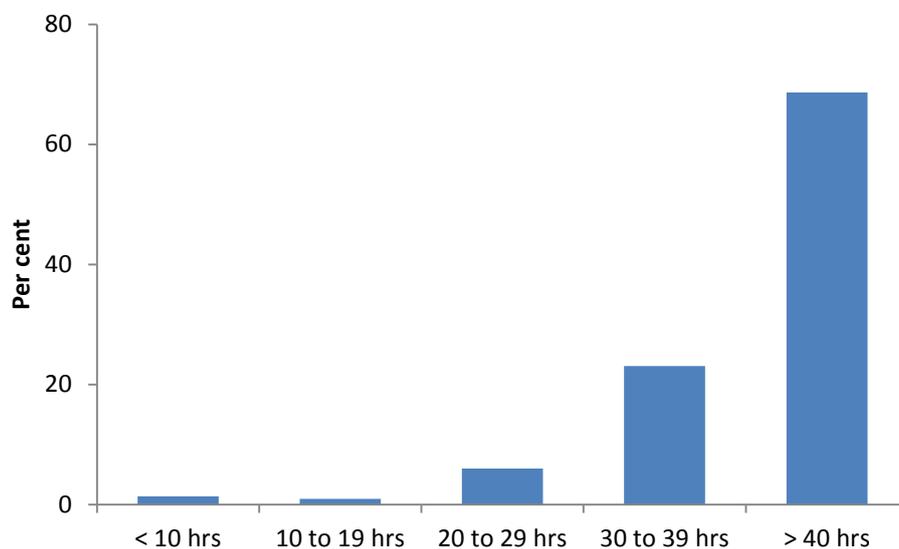
Figure 5: Satisfaction with working hours, by income



Base: 722. Respondents who declined to indicate an income range have been excluded from the above figure. Question wording: "Would you like to work...?". Possible responses were 'more hours', 'less hours' or 'my hours are about right'.

Figure 6 makes the link between long work hours and the desire to work fewer hours even more clearly. Put simply, of those respondents who said they wanted to work fewer hours, 69 per cent were currently working in excess of 40 hours per week.

Figure 6: Working hours of respondents who want to work less



Base: 217. Figure includes the reported weekly working hours of those respondents who, in answer to the question "Would you like to work...?", indicated that they would like to work less hours.²²

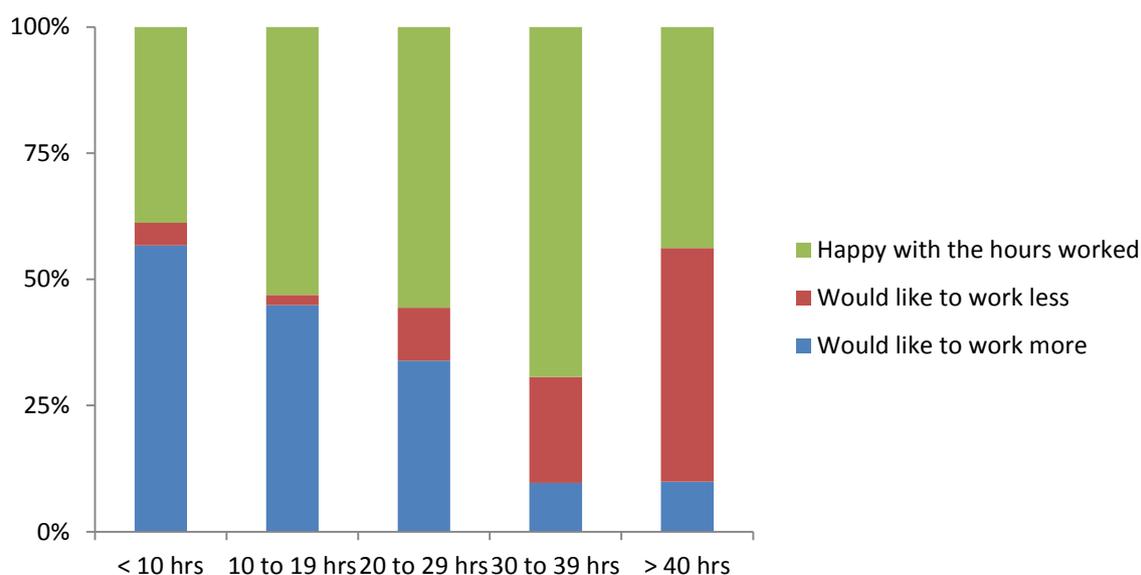
Figure 7 shows that while those with the most work and those with the least were the least content with their hours of work, those working 30-39 hours per week were by far the most satisfied, with almost 70 per cent reporting that they were working about the right amount.

Of those employees working more than 40 hours per week, almost half (46 per cent) wished that they worked less. Of those working less than 10 hours per week, more than half reported wanting to work more.

²²

It should be noted that only one respondent who wanted to work less worked fewer than 10 hours per week. It may be the case that this respondent has particular care responsibilities that make working even a small number of hours difficult (even if it is necessary for them to do so).

Figure 7: Satisfaction with hours worked, by the number of hours worked



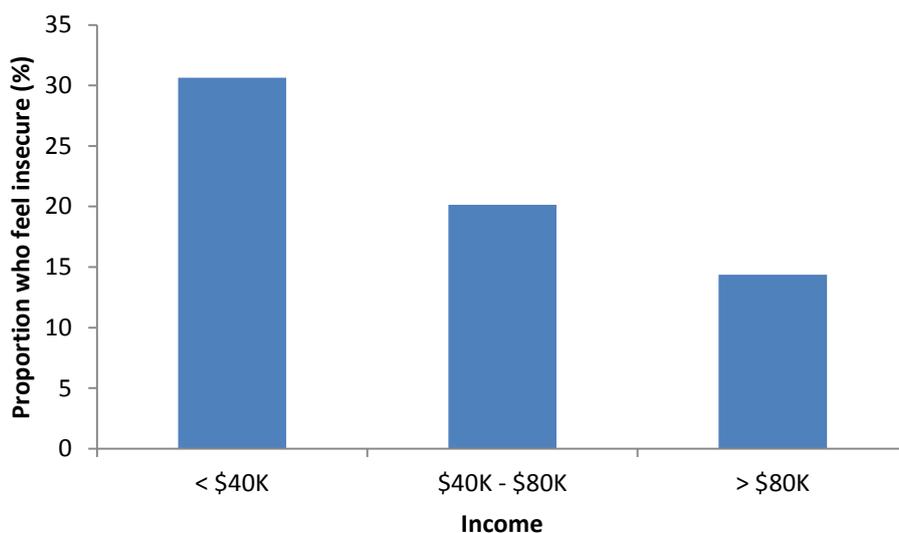
Base: 849. Question wording: "Would you like to work...?". Response options were 'more hours', 'less hours' or 'my hours are about right'.

Do Australians feel secure at work?

The existence of secure work is an important determinant of an individual's capacity to obtain secure housing and form long term relationships, as well as having a significant impact on physical and mental health. Accordingly, it is important to understand an individual's perceptions of their workplace security in order to understand, and mitigate, the harmful impacts of job insecurity.

The majority of survey respondents (78 per cent) indicated that they are in ongoing, permanent employment with the remainder engaged in casual or self-employment arrangements.

Thirty eight per cent of those respondents in paid employment indicated that they have been worried about their job security in the past, and one in five respondents indicated that they did not feel very secure about their current employment or the future availability of work hours. As Figure 8 shows, low income earners felt much less secure about their current employment – the level of security rises steadily with income.

Figure 8: Perception of security of employment, by income

Base: 722. Respondents who declined to indicate an income range have been excluded from the above figure. Question wording: “How would you describe the security or tenure of your job?”.

Unsurprisingly, non-permanent employees²³ reported much lower levels of security, with 39 per cent reporting that they did not feel confident about their future employment or working hours. By contrast, 14 per cent of permanent employees reported similar feelings of insecurity.

However, security of tenure does not necessarily coincide with feeling secure in the number of hours that will be worked in any given week—for this reason, it is important to separately examine the extent that working hours are predictable.

The financial, physical and mental health toll associated with perceptions of lack of job security will be discussed in greater detail below.

Do Australians know how many hours they will work next week?

The ability to accurately predict the number, and pattern, of hours that will be worked in the coming week is an important determinant of an individual’s ability to schedule sporting and community activities, plan their transport, exercise, and food preparation routine and, in the case of those with care responsibilities, arrange formal or informal care. For those whose income varies directly with their hours worked the inability to predict their hours of work also implies the inability to predict their income.

²³ Non-permanent employees include those who are employed by an employer on a casual or contract basis, or who identified as self-employed. Overall, 30 per cent of respondents were classified as non-permanent.

Despite the importance of being able to plan ahead, workplace culture and managerial expectations make this difficult, or even impossible, for a large number of Australians. As shown in Table 2 around one in five respondents (19 per cent) reported not having a good idea of what time they are likely to finish work when they leave for work in the morning.

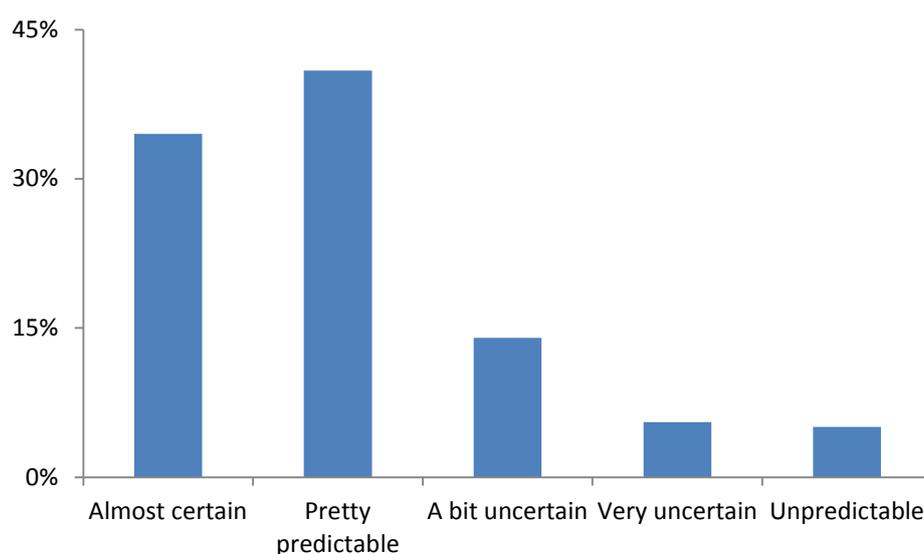
Table 2: Proportion of respondents reporting uncertain or unpredictable working hours

	Men	Women	Total
Day-to-day	23	15	19
Weekly	30	19	25
Overall	26	22	25

Base: 849. Question wording (day-to-day): “When you go to work each day do you...?”. Table identifies the proportion of respondents who indicated that they have not a very good idea or very little idea of what time they will finish. Question wording (weekly): “Thinking about how many hours you are likely to work next week, do you...?”. Table identifies the proportion of respondents who indicated that they have a vague idea or very little idea of how many hours they will work. Question wording (overall): “All up, how would you describe the predictability of your hours of work?”. Table includes respondents who identified as having uncertain or unpredictable working hours.

A quarter of respondents reported not having a good idea of how many hours they were likely to work in the coming week; similarly, a quarter of respondents rated the overall predictability of their hours of work as at least somewhat uncertain or unpredictable. Figure 9 provides a breakdown of respondents’ perceptions of the overall predictability of their work hours.

Figure 9: Overall predictability of working hours

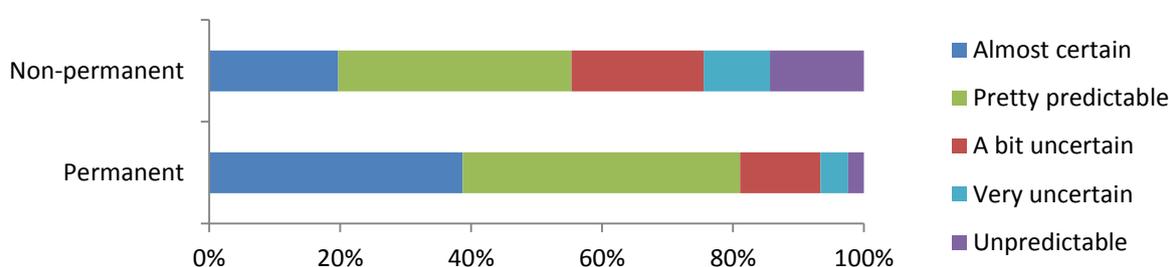


Base: 849. Question wording: “All up, how would you describe the predictability of your hours of work?”. Possible responses were ‘almost certain’, ‘pretty predictable’, ‘a bit uncertain’, ‘very uncertain’ or ‘unpredictable’.

Men and women reported similar levels of uncertainty overall, however, as shown in Table 2, on both a day-to-day and a weekly basis men reported significantly greater levels of uncertainty regarding working hours than female respondents. This finding is consistent with the earlier finding that men are more likely to report that work interferes with family life and that women are more likely to report that family interferes with their work life.

Non-permanent employees reported much higher levels of uncertainty than permanent employees, both on a day-by-day and a weekly basis; this was also reflected in the overall assessment of the predictability of hours, with almost half (45 per cent) of respondents who are non-permanent employees reporting that their working hours are uncertain or unpredictable.

Figure 10: Overall assessment of predictability of working hours by employment type



Base: 849. Question wording: "All up, how would you describe the predictability of your hours of work?". 'Permanent' includes those respondents who identified as working for an employer on a part time or full time basis. 'Non-permanent' includes those respondents who identified as working for an employer on a casual basis and those working as a contractor or who identified as being self-employed.

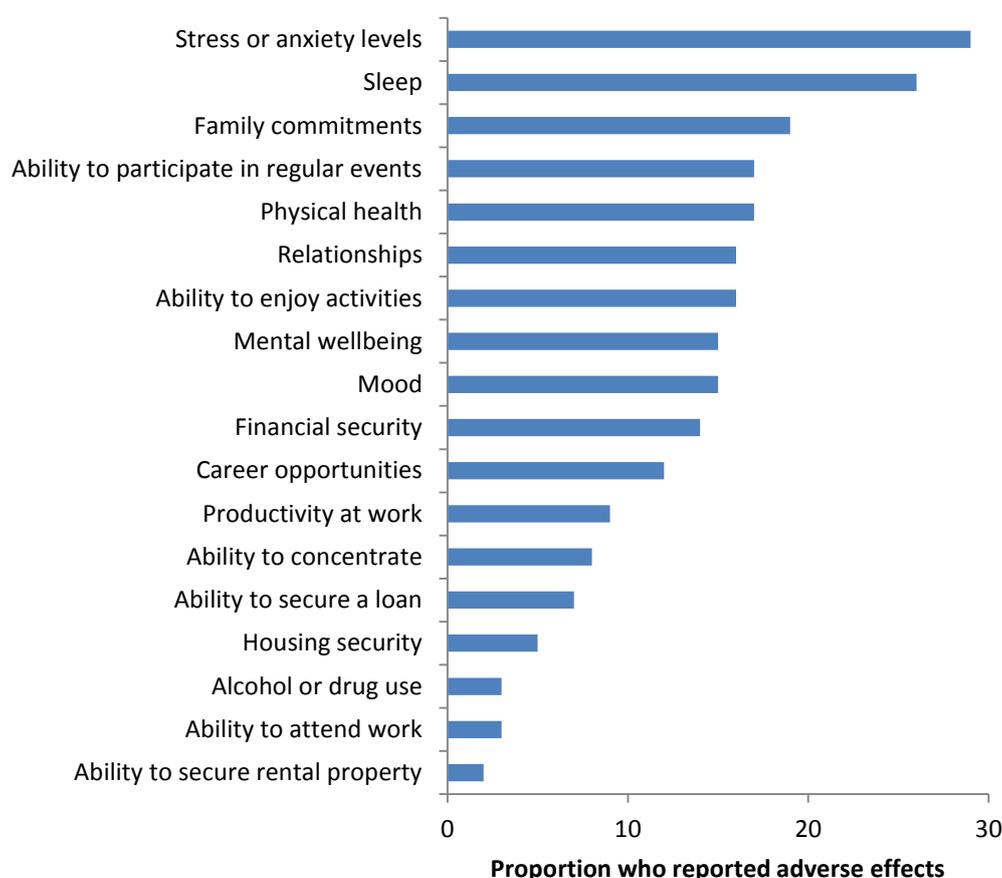
Accordingly, many Australian employees – even those who feel secure about their job and/or hours – are at risk of suffering adverse effects arising from unpredictable working hours. These effects are financial, social or related to the care of dependents.

4 The impact of work hours and workplace culture on health and wellbeing

Working hours that are unsuited to personal circumstances or family obligations has the potential to cause significant physical, social, emotional and psychological impacts and, in Australia, more than half of those in paid work (58 per cent) indicated that they were experiencing at least one negative effect arising from their current working arrangements. As shown in Figure 11:

- Almost one third of respondents indicated that they had experienced increased stress or anxiety levels.
- More than one quarter of respondents indicated that working conditions had adversely affected their sleep.
- Relationships with family and friends and the ability to meet family commitments suffered as a result of current working conditions, as did the ability to participate in activities external to the workplace. Physical health impacts were also reported at high rates.

Figure 11: The negative effects of current working arrangements



Base: 849. Question wording: "Do your current working arrangements negatively impact on your...?".

The negative effects reported by respondents were broadly consistent across a range of incomes; however, lower income earners reported higher rates of adverse financial consequences than middle and high income earners.

Although women and men generally reported similar rates of overall adverse impacts, men were more likely than women to report adverse impacts on their physical health (19 per cent and 14 per cent respectively) and the ability to meet family commitments (21 per cent versus 16 per cent for women). Men were also more likely to report that relationships with their partner or friends suffered as a result of their working conditions (19 per cent for men and 13 per cent for women).

Women, on the other hand, were more likely than men to report greater financial stress as a result of their working conditions (17 per cent and 12 per cent respectively).

Does working longer hours make things worse?

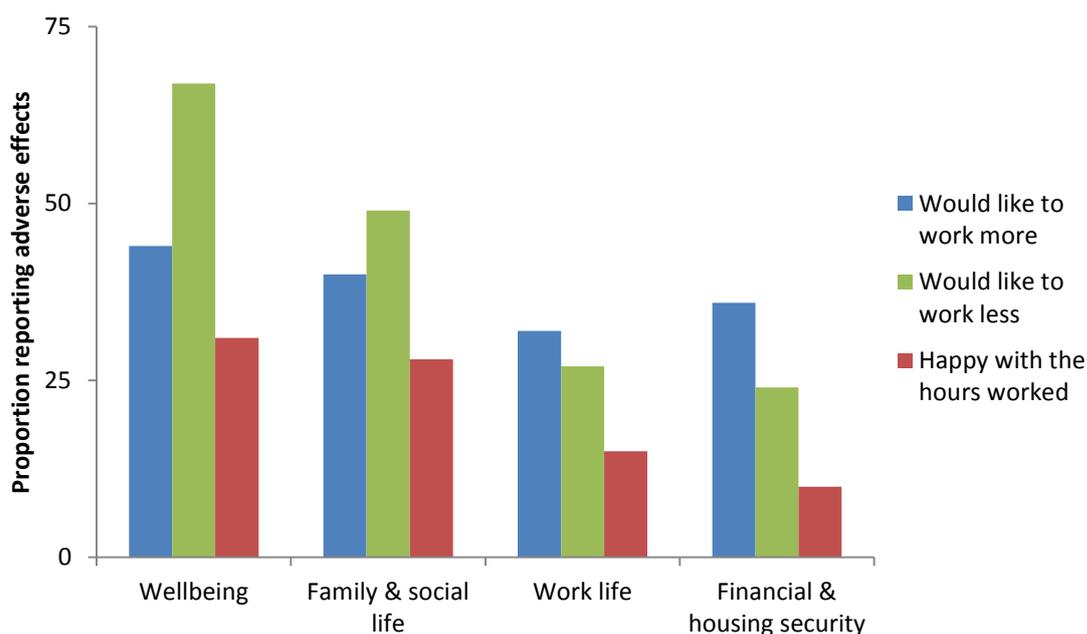
Findings discussed so far have shown that more than half of Australians experience adverse health impacts as a result of their work patterns. However, whether respondents feel satisfied with the number of hours they work has a significant bearing on the likelihood that they will suffer these adverse effects.

Respondents who reported that they are overworked (that is, they are working more than they wish to) are significantly more likely to report adverse effects on wellbeing, their family relationships and their social life, with two thirds of respondents who want to work less reporting at least one negative effect on their wellbeing and half reporting at least one adverse effect on their family and social life.

In relation to financial and housing security, those who wish that they worked more hours are more likely to report adverse effects as a result of their working arrangements – this is to be expected given that those working fewer hours are more likely to suffer financial strain.

As shown in Figure 12, those respondents who reported feeling satisfied with the number of hours that they work were, without exception, less likely to report adverse effects as a result of their working conditions.

Figure 12: The negative effects of working conditions, by satisfaction with working hours



Base: 849. 'Wellbeing' includes impacts on physical health, stress or anxiety levels, mood most of the day, sleep, mental wellbeing, and alcohol or other drug use; 'family and social life' includes impacts on the ability to enjoy daily activities, meet family commitments, relationships with friends and/or partner, and the ability to participate in regular events such as sports or hobbies; 'work life' includes impacts on the ability to concentrate, productivity at work, career progression and opportunities, and the ability to attend work; and 'financial and housing security' includes impacts on the ability to ensure housing security, financial security, the ability to secure a car or home loan, and the ability to secure a rental property. These figures represented in each of the four categories above indicate respondents who reported at least one negative effect. Multiple responses were possible.

Similarly, those employees working 30 or more hours per week were more likely than those working fewer hours to report adverse effects on wellbeing, family and social life and their work life. Those working fewer hours were slightly more likely to suffer the adverse effects of financial and housing security.

Do workplace culture and working arrangements have an impact on our wellbeing?

The disparity between actual and desired hours of work is not the only feature of the workplace that has the capacity to impact on the wellbeing of employees. Indeed, as the following data shows, a range of workplace matters (for example, workplace culture, organisational commitment to mental health and predictability of working hours) are strongly correlated with reductions in the perceived wellbeing of respondents.

Respondents who reported increased stress and anxiety levels in their current position were at least twice as likely to come from workplaces that they rated as poor or very poor in dealing with a range of difficult or sensitive issues. Fifty nine

per cent of employees who rated their employers as dealing with workplace culture poorly reported that they themselves experienced increased stress and anxiety levels. This compares to 24 per cent of employees who rated their employers as dealing with workplace culture well. This same trend is evident across a range of wellbeing indicators.

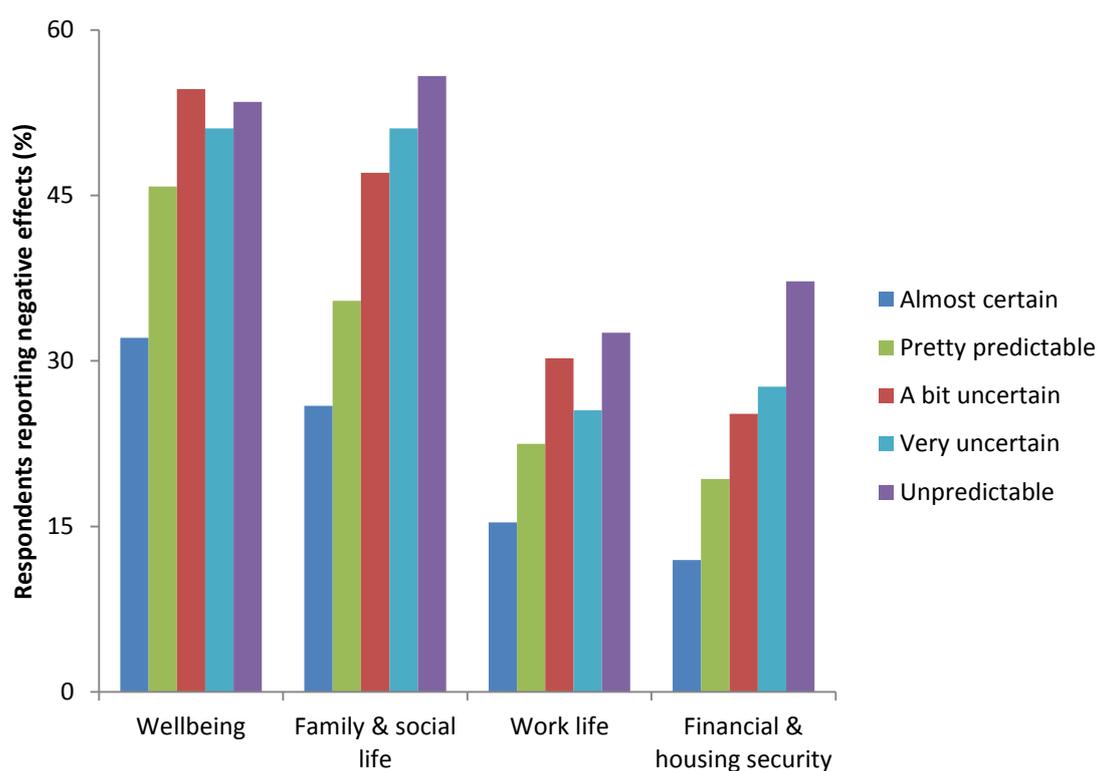
Similarly, those respondents who reported that their workplace was causing them to experience adverse mental health effects were around three times as likely to be employed in a workplace that they rated poorly in dealing with workplace issues. For example, 39 per cent of those respondents who rated their employers as having a poor or very poor commitment to mental health also reported experiencing adverse mental wellbeing effects themselves. At the same time, only nine per cent of those respondents who rated their employers as having a fair to very good commitment to mental health reported suffering mental wellbeing effects.

A similar relationship was apparent between the degree of comfort respondents felt in talking to their managers about a range of workplace issues and their reported stress and anxiety levels. While the direction of causation is unclear, it is clear that the relationship between management and employer culture and practices and reported adverse mental health outcomes is pronounced.

In addition to workplace practices and managerial culture, the extent to which employees feel secure in their position also appears to have an effect on mental health. Those respondents who reported feeling insecure about their position, or their future hours of work, were much more likely to report increased stress and anxiety levels as a result of their current working arrangements than those who felt secure (40 per cent compared with 26 per cent). A similar relationship exists between a lack of security and adverse effects on mental wellbeing.

As Figure 13 shows, the detrimental effects of a lack of predictable working hours is most stark in the categories of family and social life and financial and housing security. This highlights that the consequences of working unpredictable hours are far ranging – from the inability to meet family commitments and maintain and nurture relationships, to income fluctuations making it harder to secure loans and stable accommodation.

Figure 13: Relationship between predictability and negative effects



Base: 849. Question wording: "When you go to work each day do you?"; "Do you current working arrangements negatively impact on your...?" Responses were categorised.

In a similar vein, 40 per cent of those respondents who felt somewhat uncertain about their hours also reported suffering increased stress and anxiety levels, whereas 25 per cent of those who considered their hours to be predictable reported suffering stress and anxiety effects. A similar relationship exists between a lack of predictability and adverse effects on mental wellbeing.

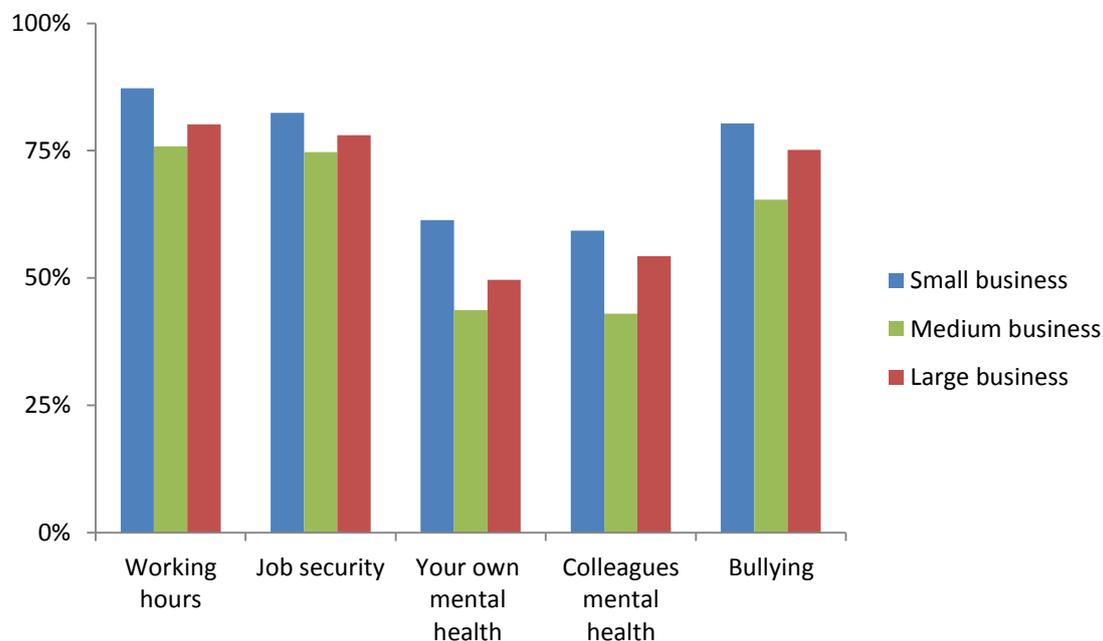
With the exception of financial and housing security, permanency of employment did not have a predictable relationship with the likelihood of adverse effects.

Does the size of a business have an impact on the wellbeing of its staff?

The size of organisation people work for varies and it appears that size can influence workplace culture and its impact on the wellbeing of employees. Figure 14 shows that employees of small businesses are far more likely to report feeling comfortable raising workplace issues with their manager than employees of medium sized and large businesses. Further, in all instances the employees of medium sized businesses report being the least likely to feel comfortable raising such issues. One explanation for this finding is that while small businesses have the advantage of accessibility to senior management and flexibility for management to respond, and large businesses have the resources to dedicate to

consultation and internal communication, medium sized companies may be too big to be flexible and too small to have dedicated resources for employee support.

Figure 14: Comfort discussing workplace issues with management – by firm size²⁴



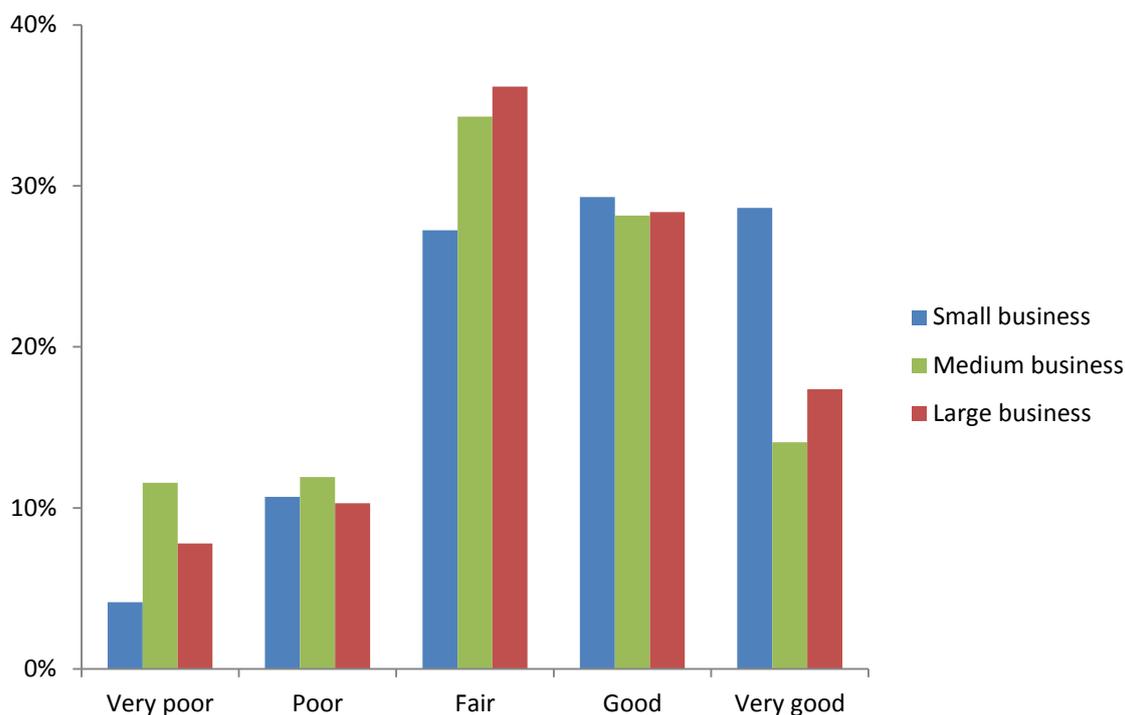
Base: 849. Question wording: “How comfortable would you be discussing the following with your manager?”

In addition to being more comfortable raising difficult workplace issues with their managers, employees of small businesses are also more likely to rate highly their managers’ skills in discussing mental health issues than employees of medium or large businesses. Indeed, employees of small business were more than twice as likely to rate their manager as being ‘very good’ at discussing mental health problems than employees in medium sized enterprises (29 per cent and 14 per cent respectively).

It is important to note, however, that Figure 14 clearly shows that of all the issues considered, employees find discussing mental health issues with their manager the most difficult and that 52 per cent of all employees rate their manager as ‘very poor’, ‘poor’ or ‘fair’ at discussing mental health issues in the workplace.

²⁴ Results refer to the proportion of respondents who said they were comfortable or very comfortable raising each issue with their manager.

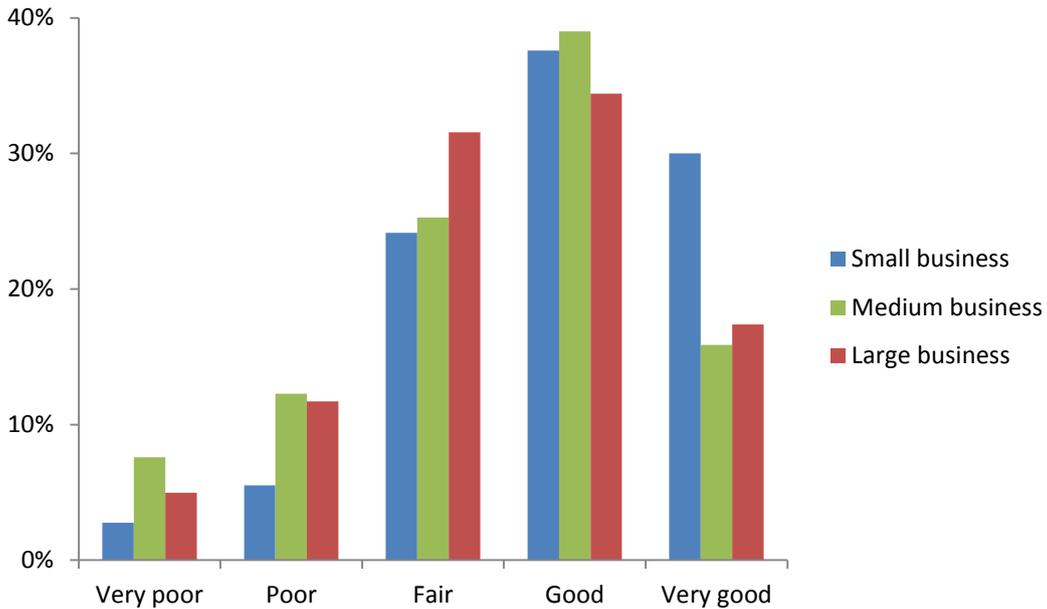
Figure 15: Employee perception of management skill in discussing mental health problems in the workplace



Base: 849. Question wording: "How do you rate the skills of your manager to hold conversations about the following? :- mental health problems in the workplace".

Consistent with the finding that employees of small business find it easier to talk to their managers and rate their managers more highly in terms of their ability to discuss complex issues is the data presented in Figure 15 which shows that, overall, employees in small business are more likely to rate their workplace culture as very good. In fact, employees of small businesses are nearly twice as likely to rate their workplace as 'very good' as employees in medium sized enterprises.

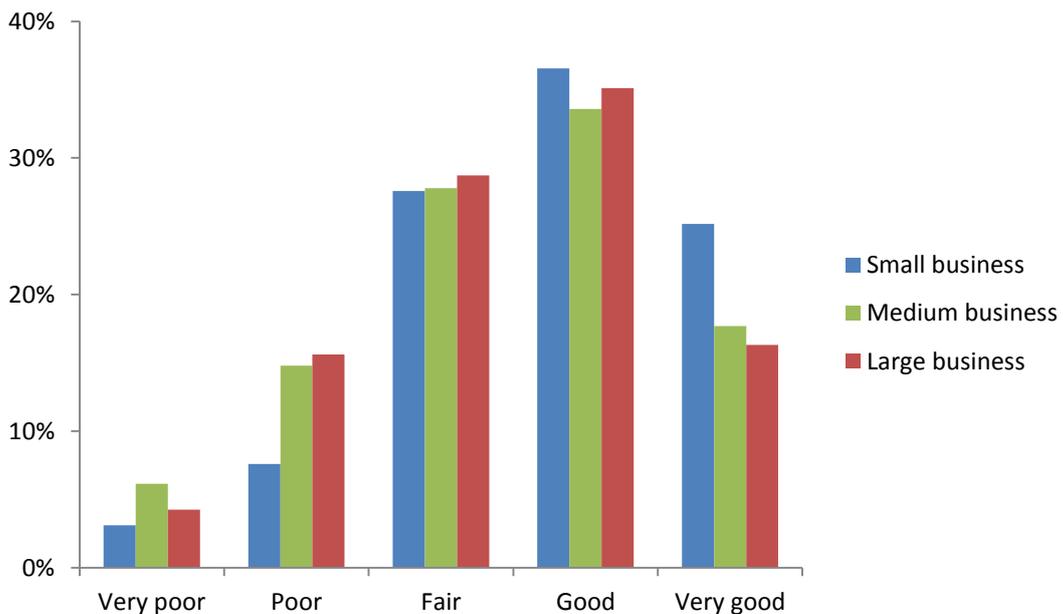
Figure 16: How would you rate your employer with regard to workplace culture – by firm size



Base: 849. Question wording: “How would you rate your employer in regards to the following? :- workplace culture”.

A similar pattern is repeated in relation to the perception of the employees of small business of their work/life balance with small business employees more likely to rate the culture of their workplace as ‘good’ or ‘very good’ in relation to work/life balance than employees in larger organisations.

Figure 17: How would you regard your employer in regard to work/life balance – by firm size



Base: 849. Question wording: “How would you rate your employer in regards to the following? :- work/life balance”.

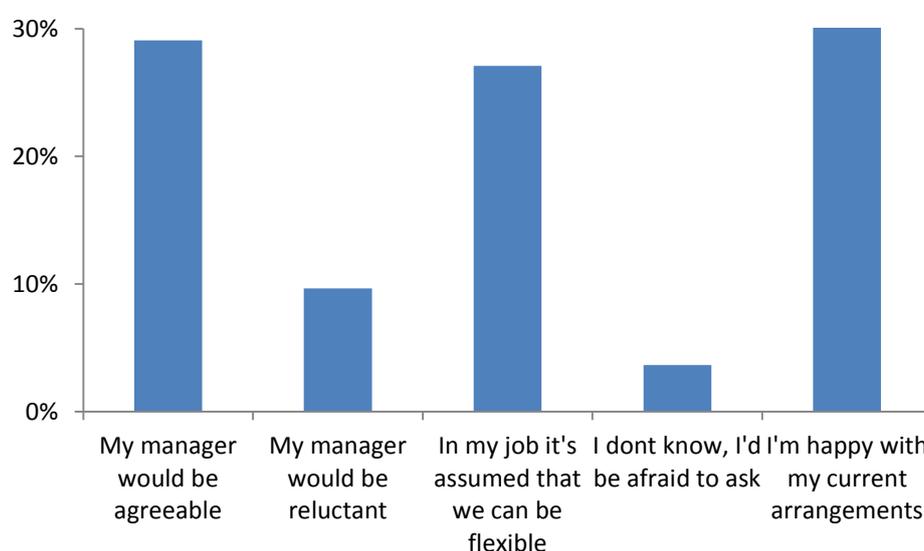
5 Providing a positive, healthy workplace

Employees are more likely to seek more suitable working conditions if they feel comfortable raising issues surrounding work/life balance, security and predictability with their managers. That is, if they feel their manager is likely to be responsive to making positive changes, and if they view their employer as promoting a positive approach to addressing difficult or sensitive workplace issues, they are more likely to request such changes. Such a workplace may benefit from lower levels of absenteeism, higher productivity and reduced labour turnover.

As shown in Figure 18, the survey results revealed that, when considering the responsiveness of employers to employee preferences for greater security, 30 per cent of respondents indicated that they would not seek change because they were happy with their arrangements and 29 per cent indicated that they thought that their manager would be agreeable to providing greater certainty.

However, more than a quarter (27 per cent) of respondents indicated that they considered that the ability to 'work flexibly' was a requirement of their workplace, and 14 per cent of respondents considered that their manager would be reluctant to provide greater certainty or that they would be afraid to ask for increased predictability.

Figure 18: Perceived employer responsiveness to desire for more predictable work



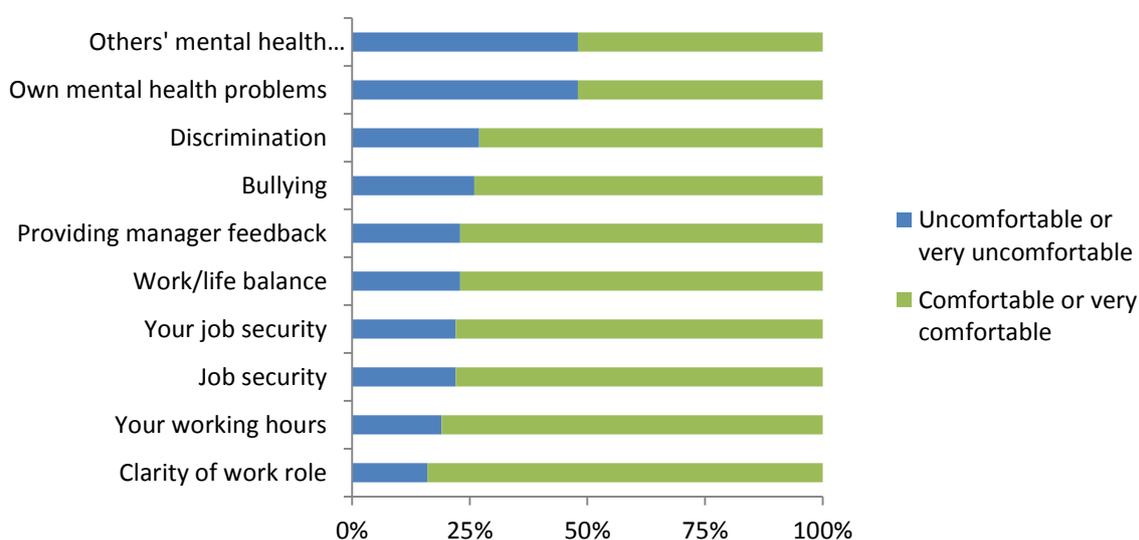
Base: 849. Question wording: "If you wanted to work more predictable hours of work, do you think that...?".

Respondents were also asked about their perceptions of their manager's skill in being able to discuss sensitive workplace issues. Overall, 43 per cent of respondents rated their managers as only fair, poor or very poor in terms of the skill they exhibited in discussing difficult or sensitive workplace issues.

Many respondents also reported feeling uncomfortable or very uncomfortable in discussing a range of workplace issues with their managers, particularly those relating to mental health. As shown in Figure 19 almost half of the respondents indicated that they would feel uncomfortable or very uncomfortable raising mental health issues with their manager.

A key finding from Figure 19 is that of all the issues that employees feel uncomfortable raising with their managers the most widespread reluctance is found in relation to concerns about mental health. This suggests that substantial stigma about mental health issues is perceived to exist within the workforce, and that this stigma is likely to result in delays in employees asking for support.

Figure 19: Level of comfort in discussing workplace issues with managers

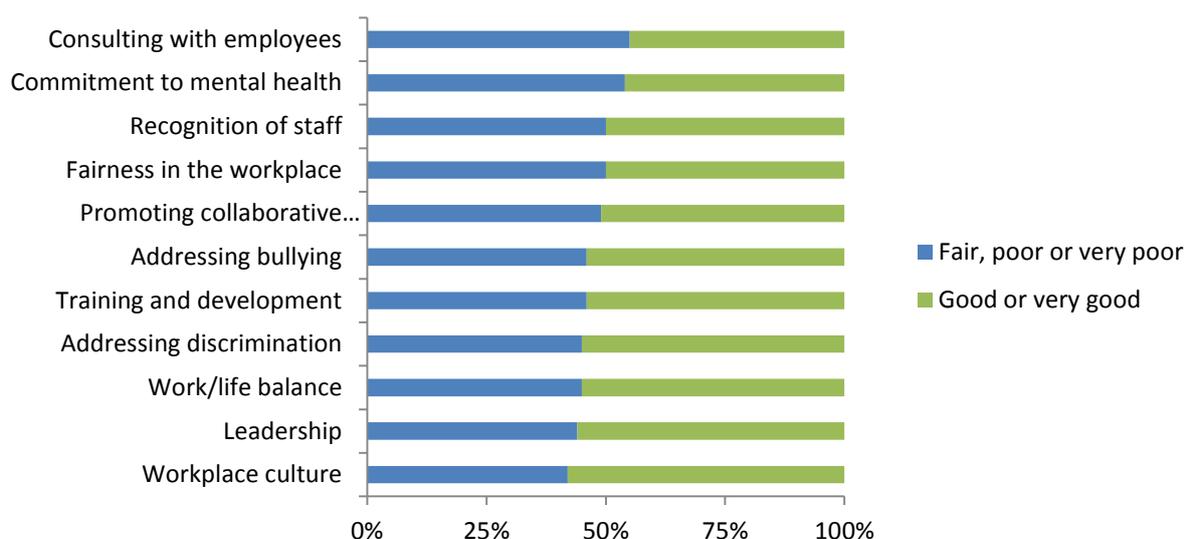


Base: 849. Question wording: "How comfortable would you be discussing the following with your manager?". Possible responses were 'very uncomfortable', 'uncomfortable', 'comfortable' or 'very comfortable'.

Interestingly, while almost 80 per cent of respondents said that they would feel comfortable discussing work/life balance with their managers, 50 per cent of all respondents said that they would like to change the number of hours that they work (see discussion above). This may be indicative of broader workplace issues – for example, while employees may be comfortable discussing such issues with their managers, they may not feel that the organisation as a whole is responsive to requests for change.

The finding that far more employees are comfortable talking about work/life balance than report satisfaction with their work/life balance is consistent with the finding that, as shown in Figure 20, a relatively large proportion of respondents (just over 40 per cent) rate their employers as only fair, poor or very poor in dealing with work/life balance despite the fact that nearly 80 per cent say they feel comfortable raising the issue with their manager.

Figure 20: How well employers deal with workplace issues

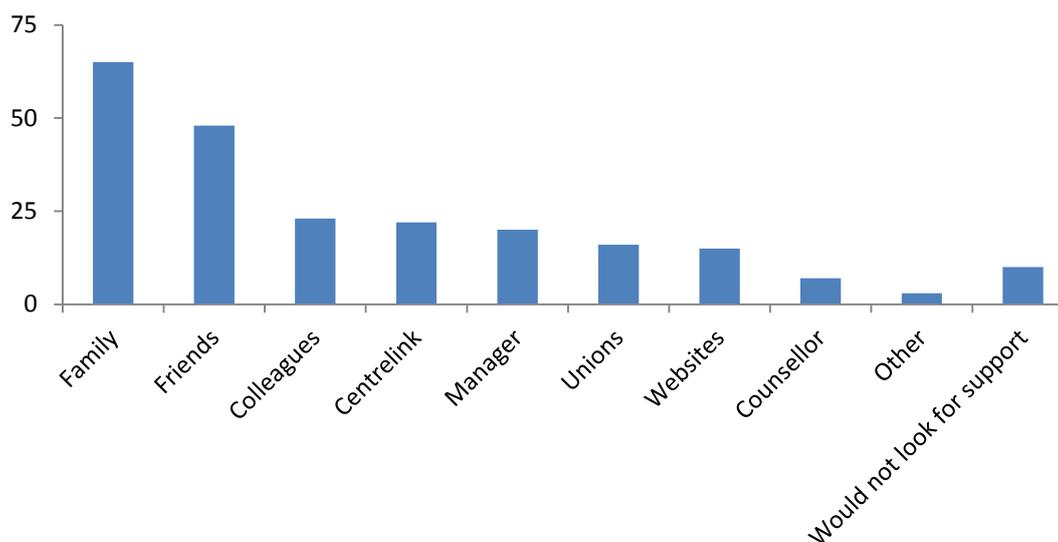


Base: 849. Question wording: "How would you rate your employer in regards to the following?". Possible responses were 'very poor', 'poor', 'fair', 'good' or 'very good'.

Figure 20 also highlights that the most common criticism of employees about their workplace relates to a lack of consultation, followed closely by the belief that their workplace lacks commitment to mental health. This result is particularly significant as it reinforces the finding that employees find it particularly difficult to discuss mental health issues with their managers.

Who do people turn to when they need to talk about work and health?

Despite the potential for work patterns to have adverse effects on relationships with family and friends, the survey results highlight that family and friends would be a significant source of support and advice if respondents were faced with workplace worries. Indeed, almost two thirds of respondents said that they are likely to seek advice from family, and almost half that they are likely to seek advice from friends. As shown in Figure 21, employment-centred sources of support such as colleagues, managers and unions were also nominated by respondents as being important.

Figure 21: Seeking support for workplace issues

Base: 849. Question wording: "If you were worried about losing your job, who would you turn to for advice and support?"

It is interesting to note that non-permanent employees reported being much less likely to seek advice from employment-centred sources than permanent employees. One explanation for this result is that non-permanent employees may feel some degree of disconnection or isolation from their workplaces due to the nature of their working arrangements.

It follows, therefore, that regardless of the explanation of why non-permanent employees feel the way they do, in order to reach employees who are dealing with difficult workplace issues, it is necessary to target different groups of employees in different ways. That is, in some cases, workplace-based communications strategies may be appropriate, but in others they may not be effective at all.

What have happy and healthy employees got in common?

Forty-two per cent of respondents, representing over five million employees, reported that they experienced no negative effects as a result of their current working conditions. This following section provides an overview of the characteristics that these most content of employees have in common.

Interestingly, level of income and permanency of employment do not appear to greatly influence the likelihood of employees feeling content with their working conditions. Rather, factors that do appear to significantly influence contentedness were security, predictability, satisfaction with working hours and the total number of hours worked.

Employees who report that their work has no adverse impacts on their wellbeing were likely to also report that their workplace had a stronger than average commitment to a workplace culture that was supportive of work/life balance and mental health.

Of those workers who reported feeling confident in the security of their tenure and/or hours, 46 per cent reported that they did not suffer any adverse effects as a result of their working conditions. Only 28 per cent of workers who felt insecure could say the same.

Similarly, workers who considered their hours to be predictable or pretty predictable were more likely than those who felt that their hours were uncertain or unpredictable to report no negative effects (46 per cent and 32 per cent respectively).

The number of hours worked has a clear, linear relationship to the likelihood that an employee will enjoy no adverse effects as a result of their working conditions, with a very clear fall if working 40 hours or more.

Table 3: Hours worked and the likelihood of reporting no negative effects

Hours worked	Respondents enjoying no negative effects
Less than 10	55%
10 to 19	53%
20 to 29	48%
30 to 39	42%
40 or more	32%

Base: 359. Question wording: "How many hours a week do you work?" Open answer has been categorised.; "Do you current working arrangements negatively impact on your...?" Response was "none of these" to options provided (See the Appendix).

Finally, the level of satisfaction with working hours has a clear bearing on whether employees are likely to report any negative effects. That is, more than half (54 per cent) of those who reported feeling satisfied with their hours of work also reported feeling no negative effects as a result of their working conditions. Those who want to work more, however, are less likely to report the same (35 per cent reported no negative effects); and those who want to work less are less likely still to report feeling no negative effects of their working conditions (24 per cent).

Conclusion

More than 3.2 million Australians report that their working conditions are a cause of stress and anxiety, 2.9 million have experienced a loss of sleep as a result of their working arrangements and 2.2 million Australians report that their work has an adverse impact on their personal relationships.

Not only do Australians work among the longest hours in the developed world but their work patterns are highly unpredictable. In fact around one in five employees have little idea what time they will finish work each day as they head out to work in the morning.

Long and unpredictable work hours are having a significant adverse impact on the physical and mental health of Australians as well as on the health of their personal relationships. While the financial cost of lost output and health expenditures associated with these effects has been estimated in the billions of dollars per year, the personal and psychological costs, while impossible to measure, should not be ignored.

The data reported above make it clear that respondents who are the most dissatisfied with the length and predictability of their work hours are the most likely to report adverse impacts on their wellbeing. The same is true for workers who are dissatisfied with their job security and their workplace culture.

On a positive note, 42 per cent of respondents, representing more than five million employees, reported that they experienced no negative effects as a result of their current working conditions.

Interestingly, while the level of income and permanency of employment do not appear to greatly influence the probability of employees being content with their working conditions, perceptions of the security and predictability of work, and satisfaction with hours of work were strongly linked to the absence of ill effects.

Just as employees, employers and governments share the benefits of reducing the harm caused by inappropriate working arrangements and poor workplace culture, so too is the responsibility for addressing these problems evenly shared across all of these groups. While there is no 'silver bullet' solution, the evidence collected above suggests that:

Employees should make a greater effort to discuss their work/life preferences and expectations with their family, colleagues and manager.

Employers should make a greater effort to act on the feedback they receive from their staff in order to increase staff satisfaction, reduce staff turnover and reduce

the costs of absenteeism arising from the poor physical and mental health outcomes associated with poor workplace culture.

Small business performs well with regard to listening, and responding, to concerns raised by employees. Those working for medium sized businesses report the worst outcomes in this regard suggesting that medium sized businesses could be too large to deal with the issues of each individual yet too small to offer a broad range of options for staff seeking flexibility.

Unions and web based resources play an important role in providing support to individuals but there is substantial scope to draw more heavily on these resources.

Governments should help to shift the public debate away from the belief that 'flexibility' implies a willingness to remove the boundaries between work and life.

Given the strength of the link between satisfaction with working conditions and wellbeing governments should seek to ensure that employees are much better informed about the workplace culture and practice of potential employers. This could be achieved by requiring all organisations that employ more than 100 staff to publish the results of an externally conducted, and nationally consistent, survey of employee satisfaction. The collection and publication of such data would provide significant benefits to both potential employees seeking a new job and existing employers who provide a healthy workplace culture.

Flexibility means to bend without breaking. In turn, a flexible workplace should involve choice on both sides of any negotiation over workplace conditions. Genuine flexibility can be of substantial benefit to both employers and employees, but this is only the case when employer and employee expectations are aligned and when employees feel sufficiently secure to be clear about their preferences.

Such alignment in expectations will always need to be underpinned by a legal framework, but that said the results reported above suggest that a culture of listening and responding to both requests for flexibility and requests for support from employees make a significant contribution to physical health, mental health and productivity in the workplace.

While the results do not suggest that there is one solution for workplace stress and anxiety, they do suggest that some things are typically found among workers experiencing those problems. The greater the disconnect between desired and actual hours of work the greater the reported incidence of stress and anxiety. The same is true for the link between perceived job security and mental health.

Appendix

Q 1 When you go to work each day do you....?

- Know exactly what time you will finish work (plus or minus 5 mins)
- Have a pretty good idea what time you will finish work (plus or minus half an hour)
- Not have a very good idea about what time you will finish (30-60 mins)
- Have very little idea what time you will finish (more than 1 hour)

Q 2 Thinking about how many hours you are likely to work next week do you:

- Know exactly how many hours you will work
- Have a pretty good idea how many hours you will work
- Have a vague idea how many hours I will work
- Have very little idea how many hours you will work, it depends on my manager
- Have very little idea how many hours you will work, it depends on how much work there is

Q 3 How many hours a week do you work?

Q.4 Would you like to work....?

- more hours;
- less hours;
- my hours are about right

Q.6 All up, how would you describe the predictability of your hours of work?

- Almost certain
- Pretty predictable
- A bit uncertain
- Very uncertain
- Unpredictable

Q. 7 Which of the following have a significant impact on your hours of work?

- The roster
- My preferences
- Availability of work
- My manager's work patterns
- The culture of my organisation
- My family commitments
- My access to transport
- Other
- Nothing does

Q. 8 If you wanted to take a few days off next month would your manager...?

- Almost certainly agree
- Probably agree
- Probably wouldn't agree
- Almost certainly not agree
- No idea – you can never tell

Job security

Q. 9 What type of employment do you have?

- Ongoing
- Fixed term
- Casual or contractor

Q.10 How would you describe the security of your tenure or job?

- I have ongoing and secure work
- I am on a fixed term contract and I know when it ends
- I am employed as a casual or contractor but I am pretty confident that I will have as much work as I would like in the coming months
- I am employed as a casual or contractor and I am not very confident that I will have as much work as I would like in the coming months
- I don't know the basis on which I am employed but I am pretty confident that I will have as much work as I would like in the coming months
- I don't know the basis on which I am employed and I am not very confident that I will have as much work as I would like in the coming months

Q.11 Last year, did you take all of the annual leave to which you were entitled?

- Yes
- No

Q.12 The main reason I didn't take all of my leave last year was

- I couldn't get time off that suited me
- My boss wouldn't let me
- I was saving my leave up to use later
- It didn't suit my plans
- Other

Q.13 Have you been trying to move from casual or fixed term contract to a permanent employee? If so, for how long have you been trying?

- Less than 3 months
- 3-6 months
- 6-12 months
- More than 1 year
- No I have not been trying to move from casual or contract to permanent.

Q.14 In the past have you ever been worried that you might lose your job, lose your contract or have your hours cut substantially?

- Yes
- No

Q.15 If you were worried about losing your job who would you turn to for advice and support? (Select all that apply)

- Family
- Friends
- Manager
- Colleagues
- Unions
- Counsellor
- Centrelink
- Websites
- Other
- Would not look for support

Q.16 Do your current working arrangements negatively impact on your: (please select all that apply)

- physical health
- stress or anxiety levels
- mood most of the day
- ability to enjoy daily activities
- sleep
- ability to concentrate
- mental wellbeing
- family commitments
- relationships with friends/partner
- housing security
- financial security
- productivity at work
- career progression and opportunities
- ability to attend work
- ability to secure a home or car loan
- ability to secure a rental property
- alcohol or other drug use
- ability to participate in regular events (e.g. team sport, dance classes, book groups)
- none of these

Management/employer support

Q.17 How comfortable would you be discussing the following with your manager? (Very uncomfortable, uncomfortable, comfortable, very comfortable)

- Your working hours
- Your job security
- Mental health problems related to you
- Mental health problems related to a colleague
- Clarity of your work role
- Bullying in the workplace
- Discrimination in the workplace
- Work life balance
- Providing feedback to your manager

Q.18 How do you rate the skills of your manager to hold conversations about the following? (Very poor, poor, fair, good, very good)

- difficult or sensitive workplace issues
- mental health problems in the workplace

Q.19 How would you rate your employer in regards to the following? (Very poor, poor, fair, good, very good)

- Workplace culture
- Leadership
- Work/life balance
- Commitment to mental health in your workplace
- Consulting with employees in decision making
- Training and professional development for employees
- Fairness in the workplace (e.g. in terms of workload, salary or promotion)
- Promoting collaborative working relationships
- Recognition of staff
- Addressing bullying in the workplace
- Addressing discrimination in the workplace

Q.20 If you wanted to work more predictable hours of work do you think that:

- My manager would be agreeable
- My manager would be reluctant
- In my job it's just assumed that we can be flexible
- I don't know, I'd be afraid to ask
- Not applicable, I'm happy with my current arrangements.

Q.21 If childcare was more affordable my partner or I would probably work more hours?

Q.22 If childcare was more available my partner or I would probably work more hours?

Q.23 If I could get after school hours care for my children my partner or I would probably work more hours?

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