

# Flexitime and the Long-hours culture in the Public Sector: Causes and Effects

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## Abstract

*There has been a major international debate about the importance of work time change. One key aspect of this debate has been the extent and impact of extended work hours. In this paper we examine the effects of a flexitime system on excessive hours in a Queensland public service department. This study finds that, for some groups of workers, the introduction of the flexitime system directly contributed to the development of a long-hours culture. The long-hours culture developed as part of managerial prerogative and in the absence of adequate regulation. Our research also finds that employees reluctantly working long hours consistently reported negative effects on their working and non-working life.*

## Introduction

In the area of employment relations and labour market studies, time has always been a central issue, alongside the issue of pay. Time and pay are related, of course. While both can be determined independently, the interrelation between the two in terms of quantum, timing and control, provides one of the central dynamics of employment relations. Since the

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commencement of industrial capitalism, employees and their unions have fought to reduce working hours, limit or inhibit unsocial working hours and increase employee control over hours. Employers, for the most part, have sought to resist these employee and union aspirations. The struggle over time is at the heart of industrial life and strife.

Since the mid 1970s, the struggle over work-time has been couched in the language of flexibility. Employers have sought greater flexibility in the scheduling, deployment and pricing of labour. These efficiency-oriented forms of flexibility have included the reduction or elimination of penalty rates and overtime pay, new shiftwork arrangements including 12 hour-shifts, extended opening or operating hours, annualised or averaged hours arrangements and greater employer control over labour deployment. Equally, unions have sought greater employee-oriented flexibility in terms reduced weekly work hours, new forms of leave, restrictions on excessive hours of work and greater employee control of the balance between work and life (Blyton, 1985; Campbell, 1993). Working time remains 'contested terrain' for both unions and employers (Hinrichs, Roche and Sirianni, 1991).

The contemporary importance of work-time change to employers is clearly demonstrated by the prevalence of new work-time clauses in enterprise agreements. In the 1990s, new work-time arrangements were a feature of approximately 80 per cent of registered agreements (ACIRRT, 1999). Many of these changes have sought to increase employer-oriented flexibility (Watson *et al.*, 2003). Unions also have directed much attention to the issue of working hours. In recent years, Australian unions and the ACTU have pursued a number of industrial and political campaigns to reform work time. Without being exhaustive, the union movement has sought to reform and improve work time in areas such as shorter work hours – particularly in construction – carers' leave, long service leave, unpaid and paid parental leave, reasonable hours and work/life balance (see the ACTU website).

One major area of development in recent years has been the issue of increased working hours (Campbell, 2002). For 150 years, the average hours worked in industrialised countries declined steadily. Since the 1980s, Australia has been one of the few countries to witness a reversal in that long-term trend decline in working hours. In 2000, full-time employees were working almost 4 hours more per week on average than they were in 1982 (Campbell, 2001). Over the same period, there has also been a sharp increase in the proportion of employees working very long hours. Over a fifth of employees now work 50 hours per week or more (Watson *et al.*, 2003:87). With the exception of the UK, Australia has a higher proportion of the workforce working

more than 45 hours per week than other OECD countries (Campbell, 2001).

Research indicates that while people working extended hours report similar levels of job satisfaction to other workers (Wooden, 2000:139), they do report lower levels of satisfaction with their hours of work and their work/non-work balance (Watson, *et al.*, 2003:87). Long hours at work can negatively affect the quality and quantity of workers' participation in family and social life (Pocock, 2001). Long hours of work reduce time available for recuperation and revitalization (Figart and Golden, 1998) and can have negative effects on health and safety at work (Dawson *et al.*, 2001).

One of the key issues to arise from this literature is the extent to which employees consent to working excessive hours. As Wooden (2000) has observed, people working long hours may prefer to do so as a matter of personal preference. Additional hours produces higher income and hence a higher standard of living. Pocock (2003), on the other hand, suggests that in some cases, employees merely acquiesce to long hours. 'This acquiescence is frequently shaped by pressure: it is far from a "free" choice' (Pocock, 2003: 157). It is often difficult for employees to resist the informal workplace cultures that entrench long hours.

In the following case study, we examine the issue of workplace culture and long hours in a public service department in Queensland, labeled the Department of Government Affairs (DGA).<sup>1</sup> The department had experienced problems of excessive hours, particularly associated with operation of their flexitime scheme. Flexitime has traditionally been seen as beneficial to employees and a prime example of employee-oriented flexibility. Flexitime allows employees greater control over starting and finishing times and allows them to accumulate hours to be taken as part or full days off work at a later date. This working hours system can be characterized as a particularly positive and distinctive feature of public sector employment. Flexitime was introduced into the public sector in the 1970s to reduce turnover and absenteeism, improve morale and increase productivity. The disadvantages of introducing such a scheme were considered to be minor in comparison to the benefits derived (Beveridge, 1976:40).

Yet, in this study, flexitime was closely associated with long hours. The questions guiding our research in this study were: (a) in what ways was flexitime related to excessive hours and; (b) what effects did excessive hours have on employees? The first question seeks to explore how the flexitime system contributed to a workplace culture of long hours in some sections of the Department of Government Affairs. The second research question seeks to explore the positive and negative experiences of employee working with flexitime. In particular, this article seeks to compare the experiences of two groups of workers: those reluctantly work-

ing longer hours versus those who were not.

This research topic is particularly important given that flexitime is conventionally considered to be a positive development for workers because it provides them with greater control over their work hours. Clearly identifying the weaknesses or potential weaknesses of such systems has important implications for unions, management and employees in terms of the design of effective flexitime arrangements. This study is also useful as it provides a salient example of the importance of workplace culture in promoting a long hours work regime.

We report the findings of our research in the following manner. In the next section, we outline the methods used to gather data. Following that, we provide some background information on the case study organisation and the introduction of flexitime in the Queensland public service. The core of the paper contains the main findings of the case study. In this section, we report, firstly, the qualitative interview data where we explain how flexitime is associated with long hours of work. We subsequently report the quantitative survey data where we examine the effects of excessive hours on employees. A conclusion draws the main threads of the paper together.

## **Method**

The case study at the DGA was undertaken in 2001. Managers at the DGA organisation were contacted and agreed to participate in the study in early 2001 as work time was a key issue of concern to the organisation. Data were collected in four main phases. First, interviews were conducted with several managers to provide an overview of the key issues and the historical development of the work time issue. Second, documentary materials were collected and studied. These materials included copies of industrial awards and agreements, organisational charts and diagrams, background reports and publications on the nature, history and operation of the organisation. In addition, the authors also gathered excerpts of research conducted by the organisation on the issue of excess working hours among senior staff.

Third, staff were interviewed, individually and in focus groups. Interviews were of a one hour duration and taped. Some twenty-three personnel were interviewed. Staff interviewed were overwhelmingly employed on administrative duties in the human resource management and finance areas. We sought to interview this workforce segment in particular as this group of staff are to be found in all government departments and are thus reasonably representative of the state public sector as a whole. To get a

slightly broader view though, we also interviewed several professional staff and technical officers. The bulk of staff interviewed were from head office, although several staff from regional centres were interviewed by phone as well.<sup>2</sup>

In the fourth phase of the research, we conducted a survey. The survey was designed as part of a broader study of working time change in Queensland. The survey instrument was designed after the three earlier phases of research, detailed above, and sought to address key issues which emerged from our initial data analysis. The aim of the survey was to investigate employees' experiences with work time arrangements. We distributed the survey to some 200 personnel. As with the interview data, we targeted the survey to administrative and professional personnel. Some 113 useable surveys were returned to us giving a modest but acceptable response rate of 57 per cent.

### **The Department of Government Affairs (DGA)**

The DGA is responsible for providing and improving essential social services in the state of Queensland. The department has a divisional structure. The main divisions are: Service Delivery, the Regional Network, Administration, Service Improvement and a Policy division. The service delivery units are organised into regions and managed through the Regional Network. The department employs some thousands of personnel, the majority of whom are employed on a permanent full-time basis. The organisation employs a range of personnel including managers, administrative staff, professional and technical service delivery personnel as well as blue-collar workers. Service delivery and improvement personnel are deployed in regional and rural areas as well as the metropolitan area. Most white-collar workers are employed at head office in Brisbane and several regional offices throughout the state.

### *The introduction of flexi-time in the public service*

In the 1970s, the Federal public service adopted flexitime. With flexitime, employees were able to vary their starting and finishing times around a core of hours. Staff were also able to accumulate extra hours and take those extra hours as time off as either a part or full day off, subject to the agreement of supervisors. The purpose of this system was to provide workers with greater flexibility to balance the work and non-working aspects of their lives. Ever since flexitime was introduced in the Federal public sector, State public sector workers in Queensland had sought to introduce a comparable scheme in the Queensland public service. Queensland public sector unions were unsuc-

cessful in their endeavours until the late 1980s.

It was not until 1987 that a flexitime agreement on banked hours was struck with the Government<sup>3</sup> (ICAC, 1987). Under the agreement, staff who worked in excess of their standard week hours would be allowed to bank and to accumulate these extra hours up to a limit of 15 hours. Unlike the Federal public sector flexitime system, State public sector workers operating under the banked hours system were only allowed to take a maximum of four and a half hours off in a day, and were thus not entitled to take a full day off work.

Unions continued to lobby for a complete flexitime system and in 1993 a pilot of the full-day-off flexitime scheme was commenced. This pilot was successful and following further negotiations with unions, the flexitime scheme was implemented throughout the Queensland public service in 1996 (QIRC, 1996). Under the new arrangements, the main features of the flexitime scheme were specified in the union/government agreement with some scope provided for individual departments to tailor the flexitime systems to suit their own operational requirements.

Shortly after the signing of the framework agreement in 1996, the executive management group at the DGA issued guidelines for the operation of new flexitime scheme, titled as an 'accrued hours system'. As per the Award, staff were employed on a 36 and a quarter hour week. Staff had some discretion in starting and finishing times around a core of hours. Additional hours worked – up to 10 per day – accumulate in an accrued hours 'bank'. Employees were only allowed to accrue a maximum of 30 hours in the time bank. At the end of each month, any hours worked over the 30 hours maximum would not be carried forward to the next period. Staff therefore needed to ensure that their accrued balance was below the maximum 30 hours otherwise excess hours would be forfeited. There were separate arrangements for overtime pay. We do not address this issue in this study as few public servants are eligible to receive overtime pay.

### **Staff Views on Flexitime at DGA**

In this section we report the views of staff about the advantages and disadvantages of the flexitime scheme. In our interviews with staff, we found that both managers and employees at DGA were highly supportive of the flexitime system. Interviewees commented that there were a number of advantages to employees of the flexitime system. One employee, who had many years' previous experience working in the private sector, was very enthusiastic and supportive of the flexitime system. She felt that such a system justly compensated employees for working extra hours –

something that did not happen in the private sector in her experience. Indeed, one manager noted the flexitime system made the public sector an attractive employer and increased its ability to recruit good personnel. Another manager commenting on the professional labour market made a similar comment although she felt that the superior conditions of public sector employment was partial compensation for the comparatively lower salaries.

DGA employees mentioned other benefits of the flexitime system. Generally, flexitime provided many employees with flexibility in terms of their starting and finishing time. Some staff preferred to start or finish work early and others preferred to start or finish late. Given choice, staff generally came to work at times when their personal productivity was highest. Further, one of the great benefits of flexitime system was the flexibility it gave staff to manage their work and non-work lives. Staff were able to legitimately take time off work to attend to their personal affairs whether it be medical appointments, meetings with bank managers, family matters or just attending personal engagements. One staff member with a young child noted that she had used the flexitime system to arrange a nine-day fortnight so that she could spend more time with her child. Another mentioned that they were able to take time off for a range of family related activities such as taking the children to the movies, going shopping with the family, fishing and so on. Other employees noted that the banked hours system was a clear benefit to staff with or without children. Indeed, staff were universal in their approval of this aspect of the flexitime system.

The interviewees noted the flexitime system had a number of advantages to the organisation. It was noted by some employees that the nature of work in many areas was not even and continuous. Rather, much work was of a project nature or was cyclical such as financial reporting requirements or pay cycles. As a result, workloads tended to vary over the cycle or project phase. With the flexitime systems, employees were able and willing to work the extra hours to meet organisational goals as they knew they would be able to take the accumulated hours during less busy times in many cases. For instance, one manager noted that on some jobs her employees would be required to work extra hours at night. She felt that because of the flexitime system, her staff accepted the need to be flexible in their deployment as they knew that they could take the extra hours off at another time. A number of interviews noted that the flexitime system led to improved trust and morale and generated employee good will. It was also noted that the flexitime system gave staff extra time off work which aided recuperation and enabled staff to return to work more re-

freshed than they would otherwise have been.

### **Flexitime and the problem of excessive hours**

However, despite the clear support for the flexitime system, many managers and employees alike considered that flexitime was associated with the arrival of a regime of long working hours and inadequate time off. Even though the flexitime system was intended to increase employee control over work time, most respondents in our study felt that the flexitime scheme had contributed to a culture of excessive hours. While the nature of overwork differed between work units, excessive hours was almost universally acknowledged as a major problem affecting some areas of the organisation. So much so, that senior management had commissioned a report on excessive hours and implemented directives to reduce overwork in 2001.

In the interviews, a small number of staff commented that overwork was due to problems indirectly associated with organisational change in recent years. However, these comments were far outweighed by the staff perception that the problems of overwork were directly caused by the operation and management of the flexitime system that had led to the development of a culture of long hours. This culture had always existed to a smaller extent within some parts of the organisation – particularly among professional staff – but had recently become significantly more widespread and pervasive in the administrative areas of the organisation due to the introduction of flexitime.

The introduction of flexitime was blamed for the gradual demise of the traditional, standard-hour working regime and the shift to longer working hours. Prior to the introduction of the flexitime system, many administrative staff worked standard hours. They came to work 9.00am to 5.00pm – or thereabouts – and took their designated luncheon and morning and afternoon tea breaks. Under this traditional system, few people worked long hours as overtime could only be worked with prior approval of management. Interviewees noted, therefore, that with the old standard hours system, there was a clear delineation between work and non-work spheres. Staff were expected to work during worktime but they also took their designated breaks and went home after working standard hours.

With the arrival of the new flexitime regime, though, the traditional demarcations between work and rest or private time began to break down. This breakdown happened slowly, almost imperceptibly. With the arrival of flexitime, employee work patterns became more individualised as people could choose when they wanted to start and finish work. As staff no longer had common starting and finishing times and rest periods, they



began arriving at and leaving from work at different times from their colleagues. The previous standardised rhythm of work and rest thus became fragmented. Individualised work patterns replaced the previously standardised temporal ordering. Because staff no longer had synchronised work patterns, the practice of staff taking designated breaks together also began to break down. In this way, staff began to have less 'common time' to socialise and recuperate together during rest and meal breaks (see Watson *et al.* 2003:92).

At DGA, the gradual break down of 'common time' meant that fewer people tended to take their breaks at all because when they wanted a break, everyone else was still working at their desk. Staff felt it inappropriate to rest while others worked. As an alternative, staff took their breaks at their desk while continuing to work – as their colleagues were doing. Such behaviour tended to become the norm in some areas. Indeed, so entrenched had the practices of skipping rest breaks become, that one interviewee noted that their departmental manager had just recently reintroduced the novel practice of staff taking morning tea together.

In a further departure from the standard work time model of the past, staff in some areas gradually began to spend longer spells at work and fewer and fewer people worked standard daily hours. This situation arose because some staff began starting working earlier than the traditional starting time. People arriving at work later on tended to feel as though they were 'late' for work, because some staff were already on the job. Equally, staff also started to perceive that they were leaving work too soon because when they went home there always appeared to be some people staying back in the office. Over time staff started to feel that their workmates were working longer hours and harder than they were because there was always someone at work when they arrived and when they went home. Eventually, new work norms started to develop where people felt obliged to be working longer hours as everyone else seemed to be doing so – particularly the managers. Staff noted that as the flexitime regime broke down the standard office hours pattern of working it also tended to disrupt the traditional distinctions between work and non-work activities.

A number of interviewees noted that the distinction between work and home had become more blurred with the flexitime system. Several employees commented that while they appreciated being able to take time off during the week, they also felt a continuing sense of responsibility to be on-call at home when taking flexitime. Some managers took their mobile phones home with them and were happy to deal with urgent matters over the phone at night and on their days off. One manager recounted a number of occasions when she had to bring her child into work on her day off

to deal with important matters. Interviewees also reported that on some occasions staff brought their sick children to work for the day as staff felt unable to take time away from work, even though they had accumulated hours available and had access to carer leave entitlements. Several staff also had offices at home and would dial into work to monitor their email when they were taking flexitime. In this way, the flexitime system led to a blurring of boundaries between work and private life. Just as dealing with private matters during office hours became more acceptable, so too did dealing the work matters in private time. This was a development that staff were uneasy about. These findings are consistent with Pocock's (2003) conclusions about the collision between work and life due to the corrosive effects of long hours.

A key problem with the long-hours culture was that staff felt or were unable to take adequate time off. Many of the personnel interviewed stated that one of the main weaknesses of the flexitime system was that some people tended to accumulate large banked hours balances but were unable to take time off. Staff in metropolitan and regional centres shared this view. While one employee noted that he had worked an extra 80 hours, he commented that a colleague of his had worked an additional 800 hours. Both knew that they could only carry forward 30 hours maximum, but they kept a running tally of their hours nonetheless. Several staff stated that the problem was often due to the lack of staff to replace them if they took time off. Employees in regional areas said that this was a particular problem for them due to the lower numbers of staff employed in non-metropolitan areas and the general lack of qualified personnel in the regions. Some staff noted that even if they could take time off, there was no respite from the workload, as their work would pile up on their desks awaiting their return to work.

One of the consequences of the flexitime system was that people tended to use flexible hours instead of a range of other leave entitlements. For instance, staff would use their accumulated hours instead of sick leave, carer leave, other forms of personal leave and even holiday leave. Under the flexitime system, staff were obliged to use up their accumulated hours prior to taking holiday leave. Some staff working long hours would take several weeks accumulated time off over the year but not use any of their holiday entitlements. As a result, a number of managers commented that this was causing a problem as some people were accumulating large holi-

day leave balances and it was not clear how and when staff would be able to take their full entitlements.

## **The role of management in fostering an excessive hours culture**

Despite the flexibility that the flexitime system afforded to employees, a key finding from this study is the importance of local management in fostering a long-hours culture.

Several interviewees complained that in some areas, workloads were not evenly distributed between staff within work units. As a result, some staff had lighter workloads and were able to accumulate and take off accrued hours relatively easily. Other staff with higher workloads tended to accumulate hours but were unable to take time off. As a result, some staff would need to write off the extra hours that they worked over and above the 30 maximum accrued hours. These personnel tended to be continually overworked and had difficulty in taking time off.

The pattern of overwork varied considerably between different sections of the DGA and was strongly influenced by the work time culture promoted by the local manager. Many local managers worked long hours and expected their staff to do so as well. In some cases, managers were explicit in their expectations that staff work long hours. These managers would vocally exhort staff to work long hours as a symbol of organisational commitment and dedication. For instance, one employee commented that her manager would comment 'going home early' if she left work at 5.00pm. Another employee recounted that one manager commented that staff not working till 7.00pm were not working hard enough. In other cases, though, staff felt that the pressure to work back late was more subtle; managers worked long hours and staff felt an implicit pressure to work similar hours for fear of appearing out of step with the behaviours of management and colleagues. Staff had a strong sense of identification with the organisation and their colleagues and felt obliged to labour long hours if other staff were doing so. This pattern of working long hours became quite pervasive and over time became a recognisable feature of the culture of the organisation – especially in some work units.

Another area where there was inadequate management of the flexitime system was the development of different informal practices between sections. In some units, managers would administer the system according to the rules. Thus, staff would be allowed to accrue 30 hours maximum and any hours accumulated over this total would be lost to the individual. In other units though, the local manager would allow staff to accumulate and

take off hours many fold greater than the 30 hour maximum. In the latter case, local managers explained that if staff worked those hours they felt staff were entitled to take them off. For managers not to do so would cause morale problems. But for staff in other units that strictly administered the work hours policy, there was a lot of resentment and jealousy that staff in other areas were allowed to accumulate hours when they were not allowed to do so. Several interviewees noted that the differential application of policy was a source of some staff dissatisfaction.

### **Flexitime among professional and technical staff**

Interestingly, while the advent of the flexitime system tended to be associated with the extension of hours in some administrative areas, the reverse occurred in some professional and technical areas. Traditionally, professional staff worked 40-50 hours per week without claiming overtime or filling in timesheets. Staff worked what they considered to be long 'professional' hours, and in compensation, staff would be given time off work to attend a medical or other such appointments during working time. The prevailing ethos in the past was that staff were 'salaried personnel' and worked professional hours as a sign of professional conduct. The culture of working long hours was strongly promoted and maintained by local professional managers who wanted the public sector professional staff to emulate the behaviour of their private sector counterparts.

With the arrival of the flexitime system, staff began recording, accruing and, in some cases, taking off their extra hours in the same manner as some administrative staff were doing. Some managers were initially taken aback at this development and resisted what they saw as a departure from professional practice. As one interviewee expressed, some managers of professional staff would reel back in 'shock horror' if they knew staff wanted to 'flex off' for a day. Despite the reluctance in some quarters, there has been a gradual acceptance of the flexitime system by some managers of professional staff who now routinely allow staff to accumulate and take time off. Indeed, some managers themselves are taking advantage of the flexitime system by taking accrued time off. To this extent, there has been an equalisation of sorts between the work time behaviours of administrative and professional staff; that is, administrative staff adopted some of the behaviours of professional staff – long hours – and the professional staff took on some of the behaviours of 'waged workers', filling in time sheets and so forth.

In some professional units, managers made a conscious decision to restrict hours and ensure that staff received their due entitlements. One

manager insisted that all staff work reasonable hours, himself included. Another manager for instance, had recently had a child and had decided to work a 9-day fortnight. Extra hours over the fortnight would be taken as a full day off. She similarly expected her staff to take time off to compensate them for the extra hours worked during critical periods on projects. She commented, though, that while her area attempted to work reasonable hours, other departments were notorious for working very long hours, calling in pizzas late at night and so forth. These findings reinforce the important role of management in the culture of excessive working hours.

### **Effects of excessive hours on employees**

To gain some further insights into the effects of excessive hours on employees we surveyed staff. We asked staff if they believed that working long hours was taken for granted at DGA; some 46 per cent of respondents agreed with this statement. We also asked staff if they personally worked more hours than they wanted to; 27 per cent of staff stated that this was so. These results are consistent with the interview data and suggest that while there was a widespread perception of a long-hours culture in the organisation, excessive work hours were restricted to some work units in the DGA.

To further analyse the effects of excessive hours on employees we split our dataset into two groups. One group comprised staff who reported that they worked more hours than they wanted to. We take this group as a proxy to represent employees who, reluctantly, work too many hours due to the long-hours culture in some parts of the organisation. The second group comprised the remaining respondents who disagreed or were neutral in their opinion of the statement that they worked longer hours than they wanted to. By dividing the dataset into these two groups, we are able to assess whether reluctant long hours workers had different workplace experiences compared to the rest of the employees. In this analysis, we are particularly interested to assess the views of the reluctant conscripts in the long-hours culture, irrespective of how many hours they actually work each week.

The occupational groups most likely to report that they worked more hours than they wanted to were managers/administrators ( $n=7$ ) and associate professionals ( $n=14$ ). Some 43 per cent of managers/administrators and associate professionals reported working more hours than they wanted to compared to 23 per cent of other occupations ( $n=82$ ) ( $p < 0.1$ ).

As can be seen from Table 1, the employees reluctantly working long hours were consistently less likely than other workers to be satisfied with

aspects of their work. These differences were statistically significantly for starting and finishing time, work intensity and the work/life balance. There were no significant differences between the two groups in terms of overall job satisfaction, perceptions of safety and fair treatment at work, the ability to care for sick family members and ability to take time off for personal matters. Our findings are consistent with other research which

**Table 1: Satisfaction with Issues at Work (percentage of respondents answering positively to the following statements).**

How satisfied are you with:	Group who work more hours than want to	Group who don't work more hours than want to
	(%)	(%)
Your start and finishing times (n=111) *	57	91
How hard you have to work (n=111) *	33	73
The balance between your work and personal life (n=111) *	37	77
Your job (n=111)	63	77
The safety of your workplace (n=110)	83	91
How fairly you are treated at work (n=110)	60	70
How easy it is to care for sick children or relatives on work days (n=73)	47	55
How easy it is to take time off for other personal matters (eg sporting events, school concerts) on work days (n=100)	52	67

Note: \*  $p < 0.01$

shows that employees working long hours commonly report roughly similar levels of job satisfaction in some areas (Wooden, 2000:139), although they do report lower levels of satisfaction with their hours of work, their work/non-work balance (Watson, *et al.*, 2003:87) and workload.

Table 2 provides further data on differences between the two groups in terms of a number of workplace issues. On almost every item, the group reluctantly working longer hours tended to be more likely to report negative experiences and perceptions of workload, non-work issues, the work context, management and the role of the union. The differences were statistically significant for the workload and non-work issues. Consistent with the interview data, the survey data reinforces the finding that staff working long hours felt that work pressures affected the quality of their

**Table 2.** Employee Perceptions and Experiences of Workplace Issues (percentage of respondents answering positively to the following statements)

Item	Group who work more hours than they want to (%)	Group who don't work more hours than they want to (%)
<i>Workload</i>		
You can say that you don't want to work overtime here and it won't cause you any problems (n=90) **	27	63
There should be more employees here to do the work that we do (n=108) **	66	38
If you take time off or get sick, your work just builds up while you're away (n=111) *	98	77
I leave on time most days (n=110) **	38	77
We could work fewer hours here and still get just as much work done (n=107)	21	17
<i>Non-work life</i>		
I am often too tired to properly enjoy my time away from work (n=109) *	53	28
I often take work home (n=111) *	40	20
I get told at home that I am working too much (n=101) **	75	23
My work responsibilities interfere with my social life more than they should (n=108) **	50	13
I would be happy if we worked fewer hours than we do now, for less pay, if more jobs were created as a result (n=108) **	32	10
<i>Work context</i>		
The economic situation for this organisation is favourable (n=103)	48	61
We work to tight deadlines here (n=110)	70	71
My job is very secure (n=107)	55	71
If it were possible I would like to get a job with another organisation (n=106)	35	31
There should be an upper limit on how many hours someone can work each week (n=108)	80	64
<i>Management</i>		
The performance targets that management sets are mostly very reasonable (n=106) *	43	65
Management can be trusted to tell things the way they are (n=106)	35	40
Employees here have enough say if a problem arises with management (n=109)	53	66
When my workload gets too much for me, it is easy enough to get it reduced by talking to my supervisor (n=110)	30	41
Management tries to co-operate with employees (n=107)	59	69
<i>Union issues</i>		
I would prefer it if a union was more effective at this workplace (n=102) *	50	28
Employees here have made a lot of concessions in recent years (n=98) *	41	21

Note: \*\* p<0.01; \* p<0.05

non-working life. This group were also statistically more likely to perceive union weakness than was the other group.

For the issues of work context and management, both groups held similar opinions. As shown in the table, despite both groups holding relatively positive perceptions of the economic environment and the degree of job security, a majority of workers stated that they worked to tight deadlines. In terms of management, both groups stated that although management tried to cooperate with employees, only around a third of employees felt management could be trusted. While a majority of both groups felt that employees had enough say if problems arose with management, only approximately a third of respondents stated that their workloads could be reduced by talking to management. One difference between the groups was that employees working excess hours were less likely than the other group to believe that management set realistic work performance targets. Management expectations of excessive staff hours is likely to be one of the issues alluded to in this question.

As mentioned above, the flexitime system was introduced in 1996. The long-hours culture began to emerge over time. At the data collection point in 2001, management was beginning to become concerned about the effects of excessive hours. To get some indication of the type of changes associated with the recent development of the excessive hours cultures, we asked employees as part of the survey whether their experiences of work had changed over the past two years. Respondents could nominate whether they experienced an increase, a decrease or no change on a range of items. We report these data for the two groups in Table 3 and 4. Table 3 contains data where employees reported an increase in the item. Table 4 contains data where employees reported a decrease in an item.

As can be seen in Table 3, the group of employees reluctantly working long hours consistently reported experiencing a deterioration in aspects of their working lives in the last two years compared to the other group. The long-hours group was significantly more likely to report an increase in their normal weekly hours and their daily hours. This group were also significantly more likely to report lower levels of wellbeing in terms of increased stress and tiredness, more difficulty recovering from work and a heightened desire to take a day off work.

As can be seen in Table 4, the group of employees working too many hours also consistently reported experiencing a deterioration in aspects of their work and non-working lives in the last two years compared to the other group. The long-hours group were significantly more likely than the other group to report a decline in their ability to limit their work hours and their relative satisfaction with work hours and the job. This group



**Table 3.** Changes in Hours and Wellbeing (percentage of respondents reporting an *increase* in the following items in the last two years)

Item	Respondents who work more hours than they want to (%)	Respondents who don't work more hours than they want to (%)
<b>Hours</b>		
The total hours per week you normally work (n=110) **	43	15
The number of hours you work each day (n=109) **	45	16
The number of days you work each week (n=110)	13	5
Your say in how many hours you work (n=110)	4	5
Your ability to choose start and finishing time (n=108)	14	9
Your say over when you take a break (n=110)	13	6
<b>Wellbeing</b>		
The stress you have in your job. (n=110) #	60	40
How tired you feel at work (n=110) **	63	33
How long it takes you to recover from work (n=105) **	50	22
How often you feel like taking a day off (n=110) *	68	44
How well you are able to perform in your job (n=110)	30	24
The pressure you feel from co-workers to work hard (n=100)	26	15
The safety of your work area and the workplace (n=107)	13	16
How often you get sick (n=110)	28	21

Note: \*\* p<0.01; \* p<0.05; # p<0.1

were also significantly more likely to report a decrease in their work/life balance and lower levels of engagement with family, recreation and community activities.

Both senior management and the union, the QPSU, were increasingly aware of the problems of excessive hours. In 2001, senior management commissioned an internal study of workloads, excessive hours and work/life balance across the organisation for staff at level AO8 and above plus their spouses. The results of the study suggested that excessive hours were negatively affecting the wellbeing of senior staff and their partners. In response, management commenced a campaign to combat the long-hours culture. Staff were directed that they would be expected to work

**Table 4:** Changes at Work and in Work/life Balance (percentage of respondents reporting a *decrease* in the following items in the last two years)

Item	Respondents who work more hours than they want to (%)	Respondents who don't work more hours than they want to (%)
<i>Work issues</i>		
Your ability to limit the number of hours you work (n=107) **	30	2
Your satisfaction with the hours that you work (n=111) **	40	1
Your satisfaction with your job (n=109) *	43	20
How closely you are watched by your supervisor. (n=105)	22	27
<i>Work/life balance</i>		
Your satisfaction with the balance between your work and personal life (n=111) **	60	15
How much time you spend with people at home (n=110) **	48	20
Your involvement in hobbies, gardening or sports (n=108) **	43	18
Your ability to keep work and home life separate (n=110) **	38	16
The time spent on community activities (n=98) **	29	14
Your involvement in domestic activities (eg. Washing, grocery shopping, house cleaning) (n=110) *	23	8
Your opportunities to have a social life (n=110)	30	18
How well you get on with people at home (n=109)	13	6
Your involvement in other work away from this workplace (n=110)	17	10

Note: \*\*  $p < 0.01$ ; \*  $p < 0.05$

standard hours and managers should only work long hours in exceptional cases. Staff were advised that good performance should be assessed on outcomes and not in inputs such as hours worked (DGA, 2001).

The union also was aware of the problem of long hours and inability of the flexitime system to address it. A union survey of staff revealed that an overwhelming proportion of staff were not recording all the hours they worked and that many staff were being forced to lose hours at each settlement period. As part of the broader campaign for Fair Hours, the union was asking all members to commence recording the actual hours they worked so that more accurate figures on the amount of unpaid overtime could be collected. The union saw the solution to the problem as linked to

a broader union campaign for reasonable hours and subject to further negotiations with the Government (Public Sector Voice, 2001:6)

## Conclusion

Workplace culture – employees' perceptions of 'the way things are done around here' – is not something that emerges out of thin air. It emerges from the web of formal and informal rules that govern workplace behaviour. While many aspects of culture in a workplace may diverge from the formal rules, changing the formal rules will nonetheless lead over the long run to changes in workplace culture.

In this case study, the effect of formal rules prior to the introduction of flexitime was to ensure that employees got paid for the work they did, there were clear expectations of the hours that employees would work, and there was a clear delineation of work from home life. Changing the rules changed all of these things. The rules now embodied a lot of 'give and take' to fit in with the needs of employees and the employer.

The problem was, in the long run, the organisation was 'taking' quite a lot from employees – even though this was an organisation that (despite the attitudes of some managers) appeared to have a generally benevolent approach to its employees. In fact, senior management, under pressure from the union but probably also in response to internal concerns, put in place strategies to attempt to remedy the development of a long-hours culture. In an organisation which lacked an effective union voice, or in which senior management showed less concern for employee needs, it is doubtful that this concession would have been made.

At the same time, not all employee groups were worse off, because flexitime had different effects on different groups of employees. On the one hand, for those employees for whom flexitime represented a reduction in regulation, the shift from standard hours to flexitime facilitated a lengthening of work, because many employees worked hours in excess of flexitime without compensation. However, for those employees whose hours were otherwise unregulated except by the vague limitations of annualised salaries (principally professionals), flexitime represented a form of partial regulation that enabled them to better manage their time, work pressure and the work/life interface.

The study thus demonstrates the importance of regulation in employee welfare, and shows how even the introduction of flexibilities that seem unambiguously beneficial for employees can have detrimental effects. It raises serious questions, in turn, about the effects of the agenda for more flexibility in working hours that has dominated industrial relations dis-

course over the past fifteen years. This increased flexibility was seen as being important in enabling Australia to respond more effectively to changing economic circumstances arising from the pressures of globalisation. In the period since then, evidence has emerged of growing working hours and work intensity. Whether or not globalisation explains these trends (apart from helping shape the nature of discourse) is beyond the scope of this paper. But our findings do suggest that changing regulation itself can explain at least some of the adverse patterns for employees.

Is it possible to devise a system of working time regulation that is flexible enough to accommodate employee and employer needs, but that also protects employee interests? Three things stand out from the data. First, the importance of both local and external regulation. External regulation of hours clearly mattered – but so too did the workplace actions of the union and of local managers. Without an effective union presence, regulation of working hours is likely to be circumvented, by employees failing to record their hours and by managers failing to implement rules. In particular, some form of local regulation – perhaps involving active employees, such as union delegates – is needed to ensure that local managers adhere to formal organisational rules that protect employees. Second, there was considerable majority support, amongst both those who were happy with their hours and those who were not, for a cap on the number of working hours. Such a cap could be seriously considered by policy makers, and by unions and employers negotiating enterprise agreements.

Third, some regulation is better than no regulation. One element of the shift in working time regulation in Australian workplaces has been a movement in a minority from wages plus overtime modes to ‘annualised salaries’, whereby employees’ working hours are not formally recorded and they are just expected to work ‘till the job is done’. The case study shows this mode of regulation to be the worst of all for employees. To the extent that policy makers and administrators in government and tribunals are promoting or approving working hours arrangements that are meant to provide ‘no disadvantage’ to employees, they should treat very sceptically claims that ‘annualised salaries’ arrangements will do this. As a minimum, flexible working hours arrangements should ensure that *all* the hours employees work are compensated for one way or another, be that through wages or time off in lieu. If employers are not made to pay for the time they employ labour, it adds a new dimension to the ‘open-ended’ nature of the employment relationship.

## Notes

- 1 This case study was undertaken as part of a broader case study and survey research program examining work-time change in a number of organisations in Queensland (see the Griffith Work Time Project, 2003).
- 2 At the request of the organisation, we do not cite our interview sources to ensure the identities of the research participants remain confidential.
- 3 The main unions at this stage were the Queensland State Services Union representing administrative workers and the Queensland Professional Officers Association representing professionals. As part of the union amalgamation strategy, these unions united to form, initially, the State Public Sector Federation of Queensland and, later, the Queensland Public Sector Union.

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