

Workplace Flexibility in the ADF: anathema or panacea? ¹

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Introduction

Discussions about 'flexible work' in Defence have brought with it questions about what 'work', rather than 'service', looks like within the organisation. Yet what 'flexibility' means for Navy, Army and Air Force members, what 'flexible work' looks like, and what its implications are for capability remain contested. Assessing members' understanding of flexibility and members' consideration and access to specific individual flexible work practices is a base-lining activity that provides a foundation to inform the way workplace flexibility is further developed and practised within the ADF.

The 2009 and 2013 Defence White Papers both emphasised the importance of strategic reform around personnel to ensure sustainable Defence capability.² Essentially, the White Papers recognised that Defence has a structural supply chain problem with regards to external pressures such as labour market fluctuation, operational tempo, operation type, regional politics and events, and global financial issues. All of these complicate the issue of workforce management in an organisation that prides itself on (and requires) growing and keeping its own.

There is recognition too that cultural issues challenge Defence's positioning as an 'employer of choice' in an increasingly-competitive labour market. Assessments of how gender factors within the organisation, as well as reviews into other aspects of Defence, have provided evidence suggesting there is a need for cultural change.³ Discussion and debate emerging from critiques about workforce supply, gender, wellbeing and work-life balance (among other things) are often distilled down to one dominant discourse: flexibility.

This article presents empirical evidence from one component of the 'Workforce and Work Design Analysis' research project undertaken by Project SUAKIN as part of a larger workforce reform project. Overall, the study found that differences, such as Service, gender, rank and work-site type, need to be accounted for and should not be minimised in seeking a 'one-size' approach to understanding and applying flexibility across the Services.

The findings are contextualised in broader literature on working flexibly, both in organisations outside of the military and for the ADF specifically. The lenses of *work*, *worker* and *workplace* are used to show the implications of the findings and to assess whether flexibility is an anathema or a panacea for the structural and cultural challenges faced by the ADF.

Background

Understanding 'flexibility'

Most commonly, the ways in which organisations and individuals talk about workplace flexibility are categorised into either formal or informal flexible work arrangements (FWAs). However other common ways of understanding or defining workplace flexibility include *individual*, *organisational*, *numerical* and *functional* flexibility, and they are underpinned by a variety of motivating factors and access dependencies, as summarised at Table 1.

Table 1: Framework for understanding flexibility

Categorisations of 'flexibility'	<p>Formal FWAs include codified and endorsed structures, policies and procedures that enable an organisation to provide other than full-time, permanent work options to its personnel, such as part-time and contract work.⁴</p>
	<p>Informal FWAs include more local, individual and ad-hoc arrangements, such as temporarily working from home, or working non standard (that is. not 9-5pm) hours.⁵</p>
	<p>Individual flexibility, which focuses on the ability of the individual to negotiate a satisfactory work-life balance, and is most commonly achieved through the formal and informal FWAs described above.⁶</p>
	<p>Organisational flexibility is the ability of an organisation to choose or direct resources towards particular business outcomes. It is, in a sense, the ability of an organisation to adapt to its environmental influences and constraints.⁷</p>
	<p>Numerical flexibility is where an organisation's primary tool to meet fluctuations in product/service demand is the ability to adjust the size of its workforce.⁸</p>
	<p>Functional flexibility is the linear alternative to numerical flexibility, and is the dual- or multi-skilling of workers to enable the (current) workforce to adjust to current business needs.⁹</p>
Motivations for implementing FWAs	<p>Flexible workplace practices have emerged in response to the emphasis placed on the 'work-life balance' of individuals and the need for organisations to adapt in response to internal and external pressures, particularly in relation to labour supply.¹⁰</p>
	<p>The development of many workplace flexibility initiatives are underpinned by the goal of enhanced organisational effectiveness.¹¹</p>
	<p>In tightening civilian labour market conditions, there has been a measurable increase in employment via 'non-traditional' work categories, such as casual, fixed-term employees, self-employed contractors, and labour-hire employees, driven by both 'supply-side' (employee perspective) and 'demand-side' (employer perspective) factors.¹²</p>
	<p>Access for civilian employees to more individualised types of FWA is now mandated in legislation.¹³</p>
	<p>Beyond the formal requirements, employers who offer their employees flexibility and choice in employment provide assurance that the employer is supportive and that the needs of individuals can be met when circumstances dictate.¹⁴</p>
	<p>The increased levels of assumed accountability the individual has over their work as a result of access to FWAs is an important factor in both engagement and effort and can result in productivity gains for the organisation.¹⁵</p>
Dependencies for access to FWAs	<p>Access to FWAs is, however, dependent on the employee's ability to request such arrangements and this in turn is related to the real or perceived level of support an individual receives from their supervisor.¹⁶</p>

These elements of flexibility are not 'stand-alone' but interact with each element intersecting with and influencing the whole. Environmental considerations (structure, culture, macro, micro, internal, external, short, long-term) add further complexities to the interactions but are necessary to explore and understand the way that flexible work operates within a contemporary employment environment.

Regardless of definition, access to a variety of flexible work options is considered a normal part of most contemporary organisational environments and a way for employers to ensure competitiveness (see Table 1 for examples and associated literature). However, recent Australian research sheds light on some of the issues regarding requesting FWAs in organisations across the nation and emphasises that flexibility is not always a positive.¹⁷

Understanding the threshold for flexible work within an organisational unit and the impact on an individual, regardless of whether the request for a FWA is granted or not, should be a continued focus in further examination of flexible work practices.

Flexible work in the ADF

ADF workplace flexibility practices for individuals have received increased profile over the last two years, due in part to specific critique contained within the Broderick Review.¹⁸ This review identified flexibility as one area where there are significant cultural and structural challenges for the ADF in supporting other than full-time, on-base work and service options.

Significantly reworked in May 2012 as a response to the Broderick Review, the flexible work instruction Defence Instruction (General) 49-4 has now been incorporated into the *Military Personnel Policy Manual*, which sets up the structural frame for understanding and implementing workplace flexibility broadly within Defence.¹⁹

The success of FWA policy, both as a retention tool for the ADF and a work-life balance mechanism for its members, is challenged by the financial and personal costs, logistical difficulties and attitudinal barriers resulting from the way FWAs have been implemented within Defence. These challenges can be seen clearly in the application of part-time leave without pay, which has a very low take-up rate.²⁰ A second major organisational proxy for flexible service in the ADF has been the use of Reserves, who provide a workforce component that enables 'numerical flexibility'.²¹

Despite Defence White Papers and commentary on the role of Reserves and Defence force structure pointing towards even greater integration between permanent and reserve workforce components, cultural tensions around the value of full-time service remain apparent in the ADF.²² For example, there are acknowledged tensions around perceptions of Reservists, with permanent members questioning the motivation, levels of commitment, and military skills proficiency of Reservists.²³ Such tensions have potential consequences in regards to team and organisational cohesion, impacting the attainment of organisational goals which, for individuals, may ultimately lead to disengagement from the organisation.

Study overview

The Workforce and Work Design Analysis research project, which received approval from the Australian Defence Human Research Ethics Committee, examined complexities around Service practice (where, what and when) and work design (structure, content and work flow). Information was gathered from interviews with senior leadership and commanding officers, member interviews and a diary study, with the results then contextualised in a broad review of the literature and Defence knowledge.

The diary study formed the largest component of the project and provided a snapshot of the day-to-day Service experience.²⁴ Navy, Army and Air Force members were asked to complete a diary over five consecutive days to capture information on:

- Their overall experience of service in the ADF;
- The current state of flexibility within the ADF; and
- The productivity and well-being of ADF members.

Diaries were provided to targeted research sites: operational and operational-support units, training establishments and Navy, Army and Air Force Headquarters. The data collection period for each site was two weeks, during August and September 2013, and members could choose any five consecutive days to complete their diary within that period, with 733 completed diaries returned.

The findings presented in this article are drawn from two key areas of the diary study.²⁵ Firstly, an assessment of members' perceptions and understandings of flexibility, derived from free-text responses to the questions of what members think FWAs include and what they think 'working flexibly' means. Secondly, information on members' consideration of decision-making processes and access to FWAs, derived from a series of multiple choice questions on six specific individual workplace flexibility options (working remotely, taking a few hours off for personal reasons, compressed work week, altered start/finish times, job sharing, and part-time leave without pay).

Qualitative data was analysed using a grounded theory technique, with themes emerging from the data rather than being imposed. Descriptive frequencies were calculated to show the general trends observed in the data. Quantitative data, based on a series of specific FWA questions, was analysed descriptively and data weighted for representativeness. The variables of *Service*, *gender*, *site type* and *rank* are the key demographics by which the responses have been considered.

Findings

Attitudes towards flexibility

Analysis of the free-text responses found that Navy, Army and Air Force members have a multi-dimensional understanding about what 'flexibility' is and what it means. Flexibility practices, levels of formality, reasons for access, dependencies and underpinning concepts all combine to provide a general understanding of Service member perceptions around flexibility.

The large proportion of members whose responses were classified as 'standard' or 'more progressive' demonstrates that member understandings of flexibility are heavily, although not exclusively, shaped by discourse apparent in current ADF flexibility policy and support materials (such as the *Military Personnel Policy Manual*).

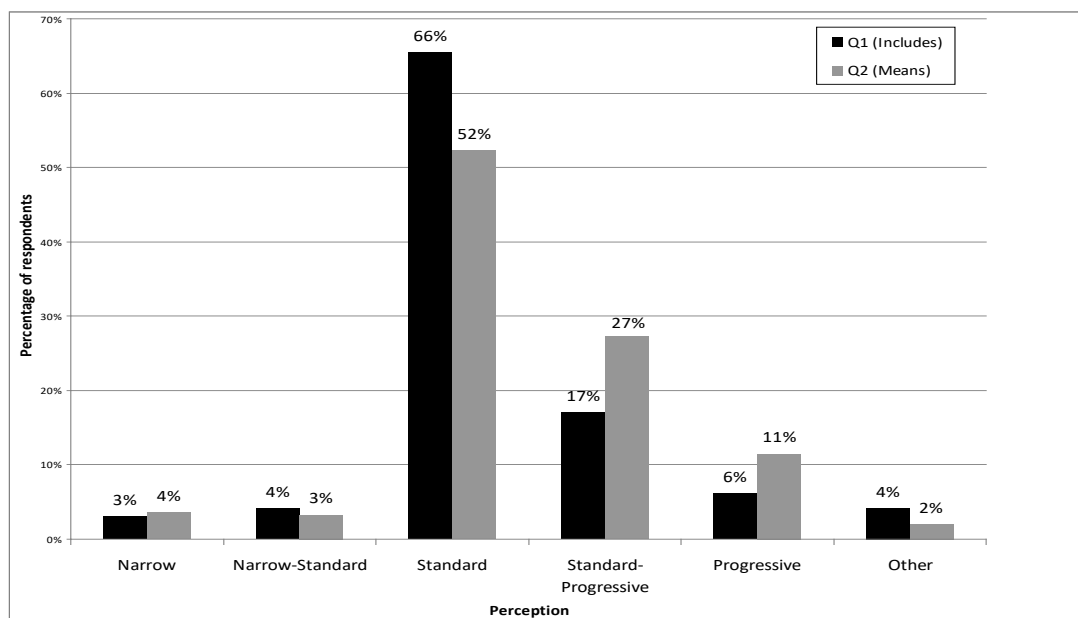


Figure 1: Perception of flexibility
(comparison between what it is and what it means)

- **'Narrow'** perceptions are very limited or proscriptive in relation to FWAs
- **'Standard'** perceptions align with current ADF discourse around FWAs (for example, they are consistent with the *Military Personnel Policy Manual*).
- **'Progressive'** perceptions capture concepts, attitudes and practices that are currently outside of the *Military Personnel Policy Manual* (circulating in wider Australian discourse).
- However, perceptions alignment is not necessarily equal to positivity towards FWAs in the ADF environment.

Acknowledging the variety of views regarding perceptions and attitudes towards flexibility can be beneficial to both individuals and the organisation, and help us understand and identify (and possibly minimise) the disconnects between FWA policy and practice.²⁶

Overall, the results sit in contrast to the current discourse that suggests that, as a collective, Service members themselves require significant remediation to progress their thinking and support for a range of FWAs.²⁷ In addition, over 80 per cent of the sample population considered, and just over half accessed, at least one of the six flexible work options presented, which further supports the notion that FWAs are not inherently incompatible with Service life.

Yet while perceptions evident in responses to direct questions around FWAs seemed relatively benign or even somewhat positive, a very small minority of responses (7.0 per cent) expressed narrow, resistant attitudes towards flexibility in general and in their Services specifically. These views must be considered with respect to the wider context in which they operate, as the level/location of the persons holding these views may be more culturally powerful, visible or influential than members holding alternate (although numerically dominant) views (noting that the highest possible rank of survey respondents was Commanding Officer-level). Further, it may be that these respondents were the few who were able to explicitly (or confidently) articulate their implicitly-held views in regards to flexibility.

Taken as a whole, the results highlight an intersection of the worker and workplace; that is, development of Service members' perceptions of FWAs is most certainly influenced by the ADF workplace environment and experiences. The existence of more progressive views is also likely a result of external influences, such as personal experience, family, friends and media, acknowledging that the survey respondents (and ADF members more broadly) do not exist inside an ADF vacuum.²⁸

The findings presented here have implications for the way the Services and the ADF talk about flexibility with members, and are particularly relevant if member attitudes towards and behaviours around flexibility are to be influenced.

Member understandings of flexibility

The most frequently identified workplace flexibility practices included flexible hours, flexible location, and work flow, and these were consistently present across the variables of Service, gender, site type and rank. The practices broadly align with the widespread conceptualisation of flexibility as the 'when, where and how' of the ways that work is conducted.²⁹ Importantly, these results further reinforce that member conceptualisation of what flexibility is and means may be shaped by those practices that are available and achievable within the current work environment.

In particular, constructs around 'when' in regards to FWAs emerged via focus on the flexibility practices around variability of work hours. The ADF is a work environment that is characterised by the duality of unrestricted service (no organisation-wide and clearly set 'minimum' hours per week) and the rigidity of base routines (lack of autonomy over work routine). The ability of members to exercise some control over these elements of one's work schedule may be a realistic and accessible expression of current possibilities around workplace flexibility within the Services.

In a civilian context, a focus on hours as a dependency for support for flexible working is not unexpected, as many workplaces are structured around a set number of full-time hours of attendance each week.³⁰ The results in this study may therefore appear anomalous, given that there are no formal, ADF-wide minimum hours promulgated: indeed, each Service and unit sets its own general hours (which can vary by type and intensity of work domain). Further, the requirement for members to provide unrestricted service may mean that any 'set' hours are subject to change in response to operational demands.

Two factors may explain the frequent identification by members of 'same hours' as a precondition to flexibility:

- An assumption that 'sameness' equates to fairness,³¹ a somewhat rudimentary comparative framework, but one that is not unexpected in an environment characterised by uniformity;³² and

- The presence of a continuing belief that hours equate to effort, which privileges presence over effectiveness when it comes to member productivity.³³

These preconditions can be seen to support the widespread notion of what constitutes an ‘ideal’ worker—one that is seen to be available and puts the company first.³⁴ Such a construction has been found to be particularly prevalent in male-dominated environments (such as policing) but is also evident in the wider cultural articulation of the traditional male model of work, which is underpinned by the separation of work/home spheres and the gendered division of labour.³⁵

However, the focus on hours sits in direct contrast to the belief—also evident in the results—that flexibility is acceptable as long as outcomes are achieved or that productivity is maintained. Such a dependency is more outcome-focused, and evidence of more contemporary thought around work and work management (which challenges the ‘ideal worker’ construction). A focus on outcomes allows workers to take greater responsibility for the way work is organised to achieve an outcome, rather than adhering strictly to a process-oriented approach. This results in increased organisational affinity and productivity of the worker.³⁶ Notwithstanding the fact that much military work is, by necessity, required to be process-driven, the response is indicative of ADF member capacity to think in different ways about work.

Leveraging identified dependencies, by reinforcing or myth-busting processes, may foster conditions under which workplace flexibility is more likely to be accepted. Whatever approach is taken, care must be exercised with regard to the (potential) impact on members holding contrasting views.

Level of flexibility formality

Although members’ overall perceptions of flexibility fit generally within current ADF policy framing, an important distinction is that members’ understanding of flexibility is not explicitly defined by formal, policy-driven practices.³⁷ Out of the 1123 combined responses to the questions on what flexibility is and means, the vast majority (84.6 per cent) did not refer to flexibility as being specifically formal or informal. The results indicate that formality (or lack thereof) does not seem to be a defining characteristic of ADF member understanding of what flexibility includes. This result is potentially significant given the effort/attention paid by both researchers and practitioners to maintaining the formal/informal flexibility distinction and the present emphasis on measuring (formal) FWAs within the ADF.

The rationale for formal FWAs is that FWA access (theoretically) becomes fairer for all workers: the decision-making criteria are transparent, there are avenues for appeal, and uptake/demand is more easily monitored.³⁸ In emphasising formality, the role that informal FWAs play in managing *ad hoc* work-life interface issues may (inadvertently) be downplayed, and consequentially reduce the ability of workers and managers to negotiate mutually-beneficial (temporary) work patterns.³⁹

Further, informal FWAs may be more often used by those for whom, or in contexts that, accessing formal FWAs is associated with both social and career stigma.⁴⁰ Types of flexibility considered by the greatest proportion of members in this study were those that lend themselves to or are more easily actioned as informal arrangements; consideration of more formalised FWAs was much lower.

Specifically, the importance of informal FWA options emerged from the FWA activity level data where a large proportion of both consideration and action was in regards to the (predominately *ad hoc*/informal) FWA involving ‘a few hours off’. While the impact of the Service context shaping member consideration of what is possible must be kept in mind as an explanation for the results, it must be recognised that access to informal FWAs may also be a way of ameliorating potential negative career impacts which may result from formal FWA arrangements.

That the formal/informal distinction did not emerge when members were asked about flexibility in an open-ended way has two broad implications. Firstly, the default connotation of flexibility for members can be inferred as informal. High levels of awareness of and access to informal flexibility operating at the working level may mask the need for and expression of discourse around more formalised FWAs by members. This may be particularly true when these results are considered in tandem with flexible hours emerging as the dominant or default flexibility practice, and one which can be relatively easy to enact informally.

Secondly, there is some level of disjuncture between the language and/or framework used by members for understanding flexibility, and that used to understand and communicate about flexibility by the ADF. Such a disjuncture potentially compromises flexibility outcomes for both employees and employers and, therefore, has direct implications for those monitoring and managing flexibility access and uptake across the ADF.⁴¹ These results are relevant for the ADF in relation to the way it communicates about flexibility to members, and may impact more broadly in regards to requirements to track/monitor and manage (formal) flexibility as required by the Broderick Review.

Access to flexibility

The results from the multiple-choice questions on specific FWA provide a snapshot of current FWA prevalence/achievement within the Services and show there is a strong relationship between taking action regarding flexibility and achievement of it. Overall, about two-thirds of members who considered at least one of the FWA options took some sort of action in regards to FWA follow-through. ‘Taking action’ at the individual level can be considered a prime enabler for FWA achievement.

Table 2: Flexibility activity levels in the ADF by FWA⁴²

Flexibility type	Considered	Took action	No action	Achieved FWA	FWA not Achieved
A few hours off for personal reasons	70.6%	47.1%	23.4%	47.1%	0.0%
Remote work	33.0%	11.8%	21.1%	11.1%	0.8%
Altering start/finish times	31.5%	17.2%	14.3%	16.2%	1.0%
Compressed work week	11.5%	3.7%	7.8%	3.2%	0.4%
Part-time leave without pay	6.8%	1.8%	4.9%	1.7%	0.1%
Job-share arrangement	3.7%	1.6%	2.1%	1.5%	0.1%
Overall (all types aggregate)	80.5%	55.0%	25.5%	53.8%	1.2%
Overall (excluding ‘a few hours off’)	55.7%	27.1%	28.6%	25.2%	1.9%

It is clear that while an individual may consider accessing a FWA, results show they undertake a decision-making and risk-assessment process prior to taking any action. Service, gender, site type and rank were all shown to be factors that impact on rates of member action-taking. Overall, for the ADF, the potential ‘discontented non-requesters’ (those who thought about flexibility but took no action) appear to be slightly more Army, predominately male, working at operational site types and of lower rank.

These assessments point to a range of factors that intersect to create the ‘invisible’ and ‘cultural’ barriers to individuals taking action and, therefore, potentially accessing FWAs. The risk for any organisation in the existence of a discontented population segment is lost productivity (capability) via reduction in employer engagement/loyalty, and associated loss of productivity at both the day-to-day individual level and/or the replacement costs of lost personnel.⁴³

However, factors influencing individual action-taking behaviour, including individual motivations (reasons) and imperative (necessity), must be considered alongside organisational constraints influencing their decision-making process. While encouraging members to ‘take action’ may result in increased FWA take-up, ‘taking action’ is also predicated on certain environmental conditions being met.

Member assessment of the likelihood of FWA approval, as well as consideration of the FWA impact on work team, were influential in the risk-assessment and decision-making processes involved in progressing desire to action. In particular, the perception that the FWA ‘won’t be approved’ was the most common reason for not progressing FWA consideration to action overall (38.6 per cent of reasons), and across Services, gender, site-type variables and members at the ‘other ranks’ level. These findings highlight the importance of the approval chain to accessing FWAs and that this importance extends not only to demonstrated supervisor attitudes and behaviours but also members’ perceptions of anticipated supervisor behaviour.

Reasons for accessing flexibility

Overall, the results show that reasons for accessing FWAs centred around life-management issues, such as managing the work/non-work interface rather than on work-related issues, such as increasing individual productivity. The more rigid nature of the day-to-day Service workplace environment is almost certainly an influential factor for the overwhelming focus on the life-management issues as a reason for access flexibility for ADF members.

Member motivations for considering flexibility were consistent with the broader Australian reasons for requesting FWAs—and reinforce for the Services the importance of family/childcare and its relationship to and as a driver for flexibility for ADF members. Indeed, reasons for considering flexibility across Service, gender, site type and rank were largely driven by the need to manage childcare arrangements.

The figures from the open-ended questions also reinforce these results, with attending to family needs, including attending to childcare requirements, dominating these responses as a key reason associated with flexible work (30.7 per cent of overall responses).

Emphasising ‘family’ as a reason for accessing FWAs, in both policy and practice, has the potential to marginalise FWAs as something only applicable or relevant for those attending to ‘family’ demands. This devalues consideration or requests for FWAs for members who need or prefer to work flexibly for non-family reasons.

Table 3: Reasons for considering FWA

	All FWA options	Excluding ‘a few hours off for personal reasons’
Reasons	Total survey population (result rank)	Total survey population (result rank)
Greater ability to work around child care arrangements	21.0% (1)	23.4% (1)
Health reasons	9.5% (2)	5.8% (7)
Making time for sports/hobbies	9.1% (3)	9.1% (3)
Making time to study	6.4% (4)	6.5% (5)
Opportunity for uninterrupted work	5.5% (5)	9.9% (2)
Just taking time out	4.1% (6)	7.5% (4)
Greater ability to work around care of someone other than children	3.5% (7)	3.3% (8)
Reducing travel time to/from work	3.3% (8)	6.0% (6)
Couldn’t find anyone to job share with	0.3% (9)	0.6% (9)
Other	37.2%	28.0%
Total	100%	100%

It must also be acknowledged that while members recognised that workplace flexibility could assist them personally, it was not wholly perceived as a one-way deal. Many of the open-ended responses emphasised that FWAs are a balancing act between the needs of members and the needs of their Service. This recognition may constitute an ingress point to discussions or communications around workplace flexibility, and may even allay managerial and co-worker fears that FWAs are all about ‘take’ by the individuals concerned.

Implications

The lenses of work, worker and workplace can be applied across the findings to flesh out the ways in which ‘flexibility’ articulates across the ADF. Each of these contexts draws attention to barriers and enablers to flexibility that might be leveraged to inform practice. Such analysis can help determine where and how flexibility, as currently observed in the ADF environment, is an anathema or panacea.

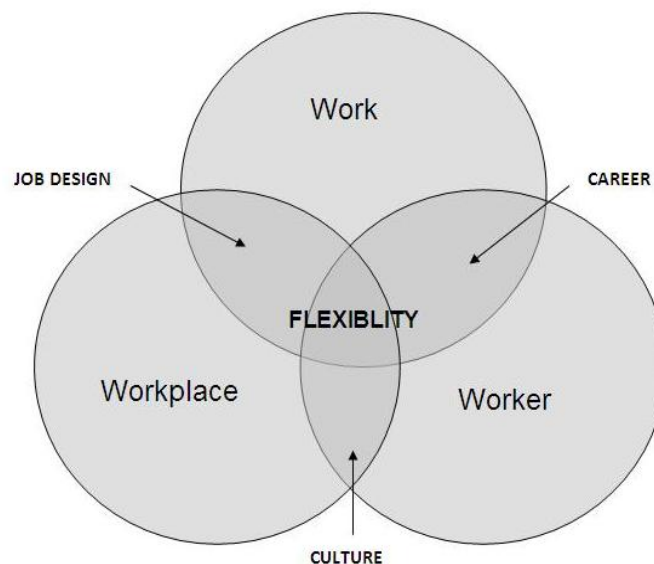


Figure 2: Locating flexible work in context

Work

The tension observed between an input-focus (hours) and an output-focus (productivity or capability) has implications for management of flexibility in the Service context, particularly in the space of work or job (re)design.

At the individual worker level, an emphasis on input (presence) reinforces the ADF ideal worker construct, which is closely related to the ability to always ‘render unrestricted service’. It also reinforces (and is reinforced by) organisational thinking and practices (such as resourcing conventions) that equate presence to assured capability delivery. Reconceptualising these linkages at both the individual and institutional levels is essential to enabling individual workers or managers to make adjustments to when, where and how an ADF member works using an output-focused model.

The level of formality, or complexity, of a particular FWA has an impact on a member’s consideration of what is possible in the FWA space. Across the board, members show high consideration of and access to ‘more likely’ FWA options. The informal FWA remains an important mechanism by which many (and particularly lower-ranked) ADF members manage their work-life interface (to achieve work-life balance).

Members may be taking their cues about what is possible from what is currently demonstrated within their immediate context. Members at site types and in positions (ranks) where alternate ways of working are more common or easily accessed (perhaps due to job design) show consideration of a greater variety

of FWA options and consider more complex options at greater frequency. As Service members do move around the organisation, we need to ensure that FWA ideas are (able to be) translated and applied in new contexts (innovation) and that the ability to work in more flexible ways is not constrained to particular organisational stovepipes.

That the formal/informal distinction does not emerge when ADF members are asked about flexibility in an open-ended way has a further two broad implications. Firstly, the default connotation of flexibility for members can be inferred as informal. High levels of awareness of informal flexibility operating at the working level may mask the need for and expression of discourse around more formalised FWAs by members. This may be particularly true when these results are considered in tandem with flexible hours emerging as the dominant or default flexibility practice, and one which can be relatively easy to enact informally. By preferring the more informal options, members may also be accessing flexibility in a way that allows them to manage the work-life interface so that potential long-term negative career impacts are minimised.

Secondly, there is some level of disjuncture between the language and/or framework used by members for understanding flexibility, and that used to understand and communicate about flexibility by the Services. Such a disjuncture potentially compromises beneficial flexibility outcomes for both employees and employers⁴⁴ and therefore has direct implications for those monitoring and managing flexibility access and uptake across the ADF.

In particular, these points need to be kept in mind when designing surveys aiming to capture data on 'formal' and 'informal' flexibility practices in the ADF.

Worker

The findings indicate that member conceptualisation of what flexibility is and means is shaped by those practices that are available and achievable within the current work environment. Member thoughts about and actions taken with respect to specific FWAs are also shaped by a range of factors (such as Service, gender, site type and rank). These factors intersect with the broader ADF and Australian contexts to create the present and particular FWA 'climate' in ADF. Identifiable within this climate are specific cultural and structural articulations that act as both barriers and enablers to ADF member consideration and, ultimately, achievement of FWAs.

Further, all the workplace flexibility practices identified in the free-text responses by members were constructed within the frame of the 'individual'. These frames of understanding have implications when communicating with the member about a broader range of workforce flexibilities that are more organisationally focused. If the default connotation when mentioning 'flexibility' is 'flexible hours', then reference to any type of 'flexibility' outside this frame needs to be carefully constructed and communicated.

Across the results is also a constant but subtle disconnect regarding what flexibility is compared to what it means, and this has implications for the ways that flexibility is experienced presently in the Services. Indeed, this conceptual gap is indicative of some level of lack of 'fit' between individual and social value and organisational policies/norms, and may be another piece of the puzzle explaining relatively poor uptake and facilitation of flexible work practices in the ADF to date. The gap however may also signify change potential or capacity within the organisation, as the more progressive flexibility meanings (or connotations) can be leveraged or inferred when asking members to progress their thinking and behaviour around flexibility tangibles.

Workplace

The results provide insight into the risk-assessment process undertaken by members as they progress thoughts about FWAs to action. Where member risk-assessment indicates low likelihood of action success or where success may bring adverse consequences, members are left in a situation where they are living/negotiating a work/life imbalance. This is cause for concern for both the individual and the Services, potentially affecting member engagement, satisfaction and productivity (as well as compromising a member's psychological contract in regards to the Services as caring and supportive employers).

For members who do progress their initial thoughts, there is a high likelihood of achievement of some form of FWA. This likelihood of success often hinges on perception of supervisor approval, and can be driven by a combination of local conventions/work practices, specific localised leadership fostering a supporting climate and/or implementation of Service/ADF directives.⁴⁵

Thus, the supervisor/commanding officer influence extends beyond typically the role of application approver to have a much greater influence on member decisions around progression of thoughts about FWAs. Supervisors play a critical role in shaping the immediate and organisational climate to be supportive (or not) of ways of working that differ from those associated with the 'ideal worker'.

Cultural change takes place at the line manager or supervisor level, and the ability for such supervisors to exercise agency directives in managing their workforce is critical to the success of workplace transformation.⁴⁶ Enabling and supporting ADF supervisors to be able to fulfil this role (via specific management skills and adequate resources, as well as top cover) and rewarding those who do is critical to demonstrating organisational support for FWAs for workers who choose or need to work differently in both temporary and ongoing ways.

Further, gender remains a central cultural lens necessary to understand the take-up of flexibility options. The 'preference' demonstrated here by males for more informal options may not be such a 'free choice' but one that is shaped and constrained by the ADF circumstance; that is, an environment that values and rewards those members who are fully present and able to 'render unrestricted service'. Formal FWAs require men to challenge such constructions. 'Informal' options thus emerge as the middle ground, enabling the balancing of 'work' and 'life' spheres. Strong associations between family/childcarers (traditionally more 'feminine') reasons marginalise non-family reasons as legitimate reasons for requesting FWAs.

Conclusion

This article provides an initial evidence base regarding ADF member understandings of 'flexibility' and their consideration and access to specific individual flexible work practices. In particular, attention is paid to some of the complexities and nuances of the Service context that impact on member decision-making around work and FWAs. Overall, the research highlights general differences and specificities, as well as those related to Service, gender, rank and work-site type, that need to be accounted for and should not be minimised in seeking a 'one-size' approach to understand and apply flexibility across the Services.

Given the insights generated by the data and analysis, is workplace flexibility an anathema or a panacea for the ADF? Members demonstrate knowledge of FWAs, albeit largely within the frame of reference provided by the organisation, and also consider and access both formal and informal FWA options. Such evidence shows that FWAs are clearly not an anathema: FWAs currently used in the ADF are enabling members to negotiate the work/life interface and especially to manage child/family-related pressures.

However, as observed in this study, workplace flexibility is not yet a panacea for the ADF. The use of informal FWAs is widespread, presenting challenges to strategic workforce sustainability and equity in FWA access. Member perceptions of the likelihood of FWA approval strongly influence their decision to pursue FWAs, drawing attention to the critical role supervisors play not only in regards to FWA approval but in climate-setting at the unit level. Further, the culture of the 'ideal worker', one who can render unrestricted and uninterrupted service, works against members considering and seeking FWAs.

Increasing members' options regarding FWAs has clear benefits for both the individual and the organisation, resulting primarily from greater loyalty and increased efforts associated with those employees who believe their workplace accommodates their needs and provides them with control over their work.⁴⁷ However, such benefits cannot be fully realised in the current environment of the ADF.

A range of activities have commenced within recent years to improve this situation, including Project SUAKIN, a workforce reform program whose objective is to design and implement a new workforce model that will help contemporise service options in the ADF. This structural reform is complemented by ongoing efforts in the cultural reform space, vis-à-vis *Pathway to Change* and Service-specific cultural reform programs.⁴⁸ So while workplace flexibility may not be a panacea for the ADF at present, the

foundations are there for it to be further developed, championed and implemented as a tool to assist the ADF to successfully compete for human resources in the future.

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DISCLAIMER

The views expressed in this article are the authors', and do not necessarily reflect the views of Project SUAKIN, the Department of Defence or the Australian Government more broadly.

NOTES

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- ¹ This article is based on the Workforce and Work Design Analysis research project conducted by Project SUAKIN. Approval from each Service Chief and ethical approval from the Australian Defence Human Research Ethics Committee was obtained prior to the study's commencement.
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