

Genuine choice can boost participation rates



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In this, the second in a three-part series on the labour market implications of Australia's ageing population, we look at part-time work...

If our organisations are to retain and attract skilled workers in the face of new demographic challenges, they will need to be much more flexible than before. How they handle part-time work will be a central issue. This is especially true for the library and information sector. Almost half of Australian librarians currently work less than 35 hours per week. More than one in five work less than 16 hours. With 52 per cent of employed librarians now aged over 45 and women accounting for 83.6 per cent, demand for part-time work can only grow.

Part-time jobs are often presented as an easy answer to the growing problem of work and family balance in today's Australia. But this is often superficial. Poor quality work can actually make things worse. Their quality will determine whether these jobs meet the challenges of a very different labour force. Australia is certainly a leader in providing part-time work, with 28.6 per cent of all workers in that category. This makes us second only to Holland among developed countries. Yet our labour participation rates are low by international standards.

Most part-timers are women. Well over a third quote caring for children as the main reason they do not work full-time. More than 35 per cent of women with dependent children now work part-time, compared to 25 per cent working full-time. But 40 per cent are not in the paid workforce. These data suggest that Australia could increase participation by creating more jobs that give people real opportunities to fit paid work around family demands.

It is becoming obvious that a sound work/family balance involves more than just reduced hours. Equally important are other job characteristics such as regular working times, attractive scheduling, job security and access to benefits enjoyed by full-timers. Research suggests that reduced hours are too often associated with reduced conditions.

Reliable data on how well reduced hours cater for people with major caring responsibilities is only just emerging. But what does seem clear is that we need better mechanisms for assessing the quality of part-time jobs rather than just measuring their incidence. A valuable contribution toward that goal comes from a paper presented by Iain Campbell, Jenny Chalmers and Sara Charlesworth to the recent New Directions in Social Policy conference arranged by the

Centre for Public Policy at the University of Melbourne. It suggests a framework for part-time work that genuinely meets the diverse needs of employees. In particular, they tackle the question of 'choice', rapidly becoming — like 'flexibility' — one of those words that have come to mean whatever the user wants them to mean. As these researchers point out, choice is of limited benefit if all it means is the availability of more than one unsuitable option. Unless employment options deal directly with the varying preferences and needs of potential workers, they may be practically inaccessible. It follows that provision of choice should *begin* by analysing people's preferences.

As well as genuine flexibility in hours of work, other key factors in quality assessment of part-time jobs include whether *wage levels* are set at rates equivalent to those of full-timers doing similar work. Other *employment benefits*, such as various forms of leave, should also be equivalent. Part-timers have at least as much need for *job security* as other workers — reduced hours should not be used as a vehicle for creating a pool of low-pay, expendable casual workers. *Training and career progression* should not be absent just because an employee does not work full-time. Even though they spend less time at work, part-time workers have just as much need for proper *job design* as their colleagues.

Australian workplaces now stand at a crossroads. The federal government has foreshadowed sweeping changes to long-established labour relations practices and institutions. The Prime Minister, in particular, has placed his proposals squarely in a context of choice for employers and their employees. He strongly asserts that removal of unfair dismissal rights, reduced formality and legalism in setting wages and conditions, and emphasis on individual and non-union agreements will increase the choices available in Australian workplaces, thereby boosting employment and productivity. These are laudable goals, but few would deny that employers will have a much stronger hand. Faced with skill shortages and an ageing workforce, sensible organisations will surely continue efforts to provide work that attracts and retains the skilled employees they need. It will be a pity — and a pyrrhic victory — if others use their stronger position to make life harder especially for part-time employees, by reducing conditions, removing flexibility and avoiding options that can increase labour market participation. Those who do so will shoot themselves — and probably Australian productivity — in the foot. ■

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