Flexible Work Arrangements

Accessibility in a University Environment

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Attraction and retention of highly qualified employees has become an area of concern for Australian universities. It has been suggested that flexible work arrangements can be utilised to achieve this goal once the factors affecting their uptake have been identified. This mixed-method study of 495 academic and general staff at an Australian University investigated the utilisation of flexible work arrangements. The findings indicate that employee job type is significantly related to the take up of flexible work arrangements as well as employee satisfaction with current work-life balance. Academic staff appear to have limited ability to access flexible work arrangements due to their increasing workload, and were significantly less satisfied with their current work-life balance than their general staff colleagues. There are implications arising from this research for all stakeholder groups.

Introduction

The higher education sector in Australia is experiencing a period of rapid and complex reform including a new regulatory regime. Some changes include the increased emphasis on quality and accountability, greater expectations for quality research, changing student demographics and a projected shortage of suitably qualified staff (Paull, Omari & Sharafizad, 2009). In addition, organisations worldwide have had to step-up their attraction and retention efforts due to environmental changes.

Flexible work arrangements have been found to improve attraction and retention, and have also been linked to a variety of positive organisational and individual outcomes. Research by Raabe (1997 cited in Waters & Bardoel 2006) suggested that universities are increasingly offering flexible work arrangements to obtain a competitive advantage. However, several studies have found that the mere offering of these arrangements does not ensure uptake, and that a provision-utilisation gap exists (Hall & Atkinson 2006; McDonald, Guthrie, Bradley & Shakespeare-Finch 2005). Research on the specific utilisation barriers latent in the higher education sector is somewhat

limited. Studies on the differences in uptake between academic staff and general staff in the tertiary education sector are noticeably absent. While academic staff have traditionally enjoyed a certain amount of flexibility, research over the last decade has suggested that this is changing (Coaldrake & Stedman 1999; Doherty & Manfredi 2006; Lazarsfeld Jensen & Morgan 2009). This paper reports the findings of a case study which investigated whether an employee's job type, and satisfaction with their current work-life balance are related to their uptake of flexible work at an Australian university (hereafter referred to as The University).

Literature review

Flexible work arrangements are defined as: 'any policies, practices, formal or informal, which permit people to vary when and where work is carried out' (Maxwell, Rankine, Bell & MacVicar 2006, p. 138). Gardiner and Tomlinson (2009) view flexible work arrangements as a broad concept that includes any work arrangements that digress from standard employment involving fixed daily hours on the employer's premises.

There are an increasing number of flexible work arrangements on offer across organisations. The most prevalent are flextime (or flexitime) and flexspace. These flexible work arrangements allow flexibility in the timing of work and the place in which the work is conducted (Shockley & Allen 2007). Gainey and Clenney (2006) found that telecommuting, which involves working from home using technology, has been instrumental in helping employees meet the many demands on their time. Other popular types of flexible work arrangements are part-time work and job-sharing (Secret 2000). At times when the labour market is particularly competitive, flexible work arrangements can be utilised not only to retain staff, but also to attract groups who are currently under-represented in employment due to family responsibilities or other limitations (Brumit Kropf 1999).

Flexible work arrangements have been acknowledged as a means of obtaining a competitive advantage by improving the attraction and retention of high quality employees, who may have been overlooked in the past for various reasons including their personal circumstances (Brumit Kropf 1999; Cole 2006; Poelmans, Chinchilla & Cardona 2003). There are further suggestions that the utilisation of flexible work arrangements has been linked to improved organisational commitment, motivation and job satisfaction (Nadeem &

Henry 2003), and increased productivity and morale (Melbourne, 2008). Flexible work arrangements have also been recognised as a means for employees to create a more satisfying balance between their work and family lives (Grover & Cooker 1995 cited in Shockley & Allen 2007). Employees that are experiencing work-life conflict are likely to suffer negative individual and organisational consequences, further illustrating the individual and organisational benefits of flexible work arrangements. Lewis (2001) contends that flexible work arrangements came to prominence during the skills shortage of the 1980s when recruitment concerns were compounded by restructuring and downsizing. The need to avoid absenteeism and stress associated with work-life conflict was recognised as being a compelling argument for continuing the development of flexible work arrangements. This would suggest that regardless of economic conditions, there are significant benefits to offering and utilising flexible work arrangements.

Various other changes in the environment have further encouraged the shift towards alternative work arrangements. The typical employee of the 1950s has been described as a male full-time employee with a wife at home taking care of the domestic duties (Robbins & Judge 2010). Today, less than 10% of the workforce fits this stereotype, and traditional programs no longer fit the increasingly diverse workforce (Robbins & Judge 2010). Cabrera (2009) observes that while the workforce has changed dramatically, the workplace has not. The changes in the workforce need to be mirrored in the arrangements on offer in the workplace.

Charlesworth (1997) suggested that women with dependent children have by far been the largest demographic group to utilise flexible work arrangements, although Secret (2000) could not corroborate this finding. Donnelly (2006) adds that the fact that Western economies are now largely based on knowledge has resulted in the emergence of new employment patterns. Knowledge workers, due to their level of employer-employee interdependency, are more likely to be able to extract 'deeper concessions' from their employers than traditional workers (Donnelly 2006, p. 78). This is likely to include greater flexibility in work arrangements.

The literature suggests that a provision-utilisation gap exists: the mere provision of flexible work arrangements does not ensure uptake. Several barriers to employee uptake of flexible work arrangements have been identified, including the national culture of a

country (Lyness & Brumit-Kropf 2005), a lack of awareness among employees, high workloads and career repercussions (Waters & Bardoel 2006).

Secret (2000) has suggested that there appears to be limited research available on the characteristics of employees who use flexible work arrangements. There is scant evidence of how employee demographics affect the utilisation of flexible work arrangements, although the relationships between uptake and gender and job type have been investigated previously. Waters and Bardoel (2006) suggested that it would be beneficial to tie multiple demographic and work related factors together in one study.

The study reported in this paper sought to investigate the relationships between demographic variables and the utilisation of flexible work arrangements, and employees' satisfaction with their current work-life balance at The University. The study reported here focused on the differences between academic employees and general employees as two distinct groups. The term general staff refers to all staff 'that are not involved in the traditional academic roles of teaching and research' (Paull, Omari & Sharafizad 2009, p. 6). This term clearly delineates that as a collective group general staff are 'somewhat different from their 'academic' colleagues' (Paull, Omari & Sharafizad 2009). Waters and Bardoel (2006) have found there to be limited research examining the direct link between work-family policies and their use by academic and general staff in Australian Universities.

While academics have been traditionally able to work flexibly, many academics are now facing the problem of heavy workloads and a requirement to work longer hours (Doherty & Manfredi 2006). Research at an English university found that larger student numbers; the increase in full cost courses with more demanding students; increased level of evening and weekend teaching; and the pressure to do good quality research are resulting in overwhelming workloads for academics (Doherty & Manfredi 2006). These pressures have resulted in a reduction in the attractiveness of academic careers (Hammond & Churchman 2008; Lazarsfeld Jensen & Morgan, 2009). Hugo (2005, p. 238 cited in Hammond & Churchman 2008) predicted that this will ultimately lead to a shortage of academics in the English speaking world.

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Methodology

The aim of this study was to investigate whether employee demographics affect the utilisation of flexible work arrangements and satisfaction with current work-life balance at an Australian university. The demographic variables studied were age, gender, family circumstances, career stage and job type. This paper focuses on the relationship between job type variables and the utilisation of flexible work arrangements, and employee satisfaction with work-life balance. For the purposes of this discussion, flexible work arrangements refer to the 17 options available at The University (see Figure 1 for the full list). This list includes all options available through the two collective agreements (for general and academic staff) which set work conditions at The University. Some items in the list have been traditionally recognised as benefits (e.g. study leave) rather than flexible work arrangements. Each of the demographic variables were tested against the available flexible work arrangements to ascertain a relationship, if any.

Figure 1: The 17 Flexible Work Arrangements Available at The University

- Dependant sick leave/family leave
- Long service leave ½ pay
- Long service leave double pay
- Paid maternity leave
- Paternity leave unpaid
- Special paid leave
- Paid study leave
- Unpaid study leave
- Annual leave
- Purchased additional annual leave
- Flexible start/finish times
- Part time work
- Part time options on maternity leave return
- Compressed working hours
- Time off in lieu
- Work from home
- Part-time contract in transition to retirement

This cross-sectional exploratory research was based on quantitative data, which was further supported by qualitative comments. The data was collected through an on-line survey posted on the University's intranet for a period of three weeks in May 2008. The survey targeted all 1154 full-time and part-time, academic and general staff at the University. There were 495 surveys completed, equating to an overall response rate of 43 per cent. The response rate for academics (31 per cent) was significantly lower than that of general staff (50 per cent). The age and gender distributions among survey respondents were similar to the overall age and gender distributions across The University, improving the validity of the findings.

The study was conducted in collaboration with the human resources department of The University whose goal was to obtain employee-feedback to enhance attraction and retention rates. The University and the researchers had different objectives in terms of data collection, although these were not competitive or contradictory. The resulting survey consisted of seven parts with a total of 22 questions. The questions were multiple choice, Likert-scale and open-ended, seeking free response data.

Findings

Employee job type was found to be significantly related to uptake of flexible work arrangements. General staff had a significantly higher utilisation of dependant sick leave/family leave (t=4.444, p=0.000, Z=-4.349, p=0.000), time off in-lieu (t=7.564, p=0.000, Z=-7.123, p=0.000), special paid leave (t=2.369, p=0.018, Z=-2.142, p=0.032), long service leave double pay (t=2.259, p=0.024, Z=-2.489, p=0.013) and paid maternity leave (t=2.180, p=0.030, Z=-2.179, p=0.029). Academic staff utilised work from home (t=-9.757, p=0.000, Z=-8.767, p=0.000) and paid study leave (t=-2.862, p=0.004, Z=-2.142, p=0.000).

Employee job type was also significantly related to employee satisfaction with current work-life balance (t=4.644, p=0.000, Z=-3.985, p=0.000). General staff were found to be significantly more satisfied with their current work-life balance.

The findings indicate that general staff have better access to, or are more able to utilise flexible work arrangements that provide them with periods of leave. Academic staff had a significantly higher uptake of work from home and paid study leave. As academic work is often not bound to a specific location the work from home arrangement is ideal for work tasks that do not need to be conducted at the office: research, marking or the preparation of teaching material. Academics are required to continuously broaden their knowledge. While the option of paid study leave is officially available to all staff at The University, qualitative data collected suggests that accessing this FWA was not as easy for general staff. One of the general staff respondents indicated that:

> To get paid study leave (for non-academic staff) is like skinning a cat. You will get there but it is painful. To get flexible hours i.e. leave early for class etc is OK as long as you are getting your work done.

While paid study leave is available to both types of employees, there are clearly factors that affect the actual uptake, such as general staff feeling discouraged from requesting this arrangement.

General staff utilise all but two of the available flexible work arrangements significantly more than their academic colleagues. Academic staff indicated that their increasing workload has resulted in a situation where they can simply not afford to take up flexible work arrangements. One of the respondents encapsulated this in the following statement:

> What other commitments??? Most of the academic staff I know don't have time for much of a life beyond their work commitments. The trouble is that most seem to see this as normal – just part of the job, but it puts an inordinate strain on families and friendships.

Increasing workloads are forcing academic staff to make trade-offs between teaching and research, with one respondent stating that:

> Seriously look at what is being pushed down to academics. Everyone works such long hours and there is a growing expectancy that this is the norm. If you stick to a reasonable working week then what suffers is your own research productivity which means that you trap yourself here as you become no longer competitive for employment elsewhere. Alternatively if you focus on your own research and do not do the ENDLESS admin associated with teaching then you leave that work for colleagues to do and make their lives worse.

Another academic stated:

> Firstly I am delighted that this question is being asked. My answer is we need better management. We are supposed to teach, research and ensure our administration is done. I tried a simple experiment. I taught my classes and then tried to ensure all my administration was done prior to doing any

research. This experiment ran for a couple of weeks. The result – I never managed to do any research. AND I never got on top of the administration.

Doherty and Manfredi (2006) have suggested that academics have been traditionally able to work flexibly but are now facing a problem of heavy workloads and a requirement to work longer hours. Over a decade ago, Coaldrake and Stedman (1999, p. 9) reported that 'many academics feel burdened by the increasing weight of expectations placed upon them, in contrast to their ideal of determining the parameters of their own working lives'. Houston, Meyer and Paewai (2006) reported that staff in one of New Zealand's eight public universities were extending their working time to meet work demands, with approximately one third working in excess of ten hours over a full time load. This pattern is consistent with workload findings in universities in Australia (Forgasz & Leder 2006; Lazarsfeld Jensen & Morgan, 2009). There is also consistency here with the notion that flexible working practices can be linked to work intensification (Kelliher & Anderson, 2010). From an industrial relations point of view the attractiveness of flexible work arrangements is offset by the contested nature of the division between work and non-work time. Employers seek to maximise productivity, scheduling work when it is most productive for their business, and employees see to find a balance between the demands of their work and non-work life (Rubery, Ward, Grimshaw & Beynon 2005). Workload could also be considered to be an issue requiring ethical consideration (Davson-Galle 2010).

Staff comments indicate that flexible work arrangements have not provided sufficient improvements in terms of work-life balance for academics, and that in fact both work intensification, and extended hours have become a part of the landscape.

The qualitative data provided further evidence that general and academic staff have somewhat negative perceptions about each other's workloads. Academics were of the opinion that general staff have more flexibility:

> As an academic one has flexible arrangements within the overall expectation of working hours being 24/7; the form of the questions is oriented to General Staff, not Academics.

General staff expressed the view that academic staff had 'to [sic] much power' over them and that 'academic staff usually disagree with general staff having leave'. As the quantitative data was the main focus of this study, with the qualitative data mainly collected to support any findings, further research into these perceptions would be beneficial. Perceptions such as these cause rifts between two employee groups that should be working together to serve The University and its students. It appears that there are some preconceived ideas about the specifics of the nature of work and responsibilities of each group, with both perceiving the grass to be greener on the other side.

Academic staff commented that workload issues were caused by administrative tasks that were progressively being embedded into their positions. One of the academic respondents stated that there were 'Increased general administrative workloads being pushed down to academics'. Some academics are of the opinion that these administrative tasks should be the responsibility of general staff.

Another academic said:

> For academic staff the level of reporting is growing beyond excessive, and in many instances reported data is going to people who already have access to that data. It seems to many that the role of admin has changed somewhat over the last few years to no longer support academic staff, but rather ensure that academic staff perform all their own admin functions on time.

The qualitative data gives a small insight into the frustration of some respondents. Further research into the relationship between academic and general staff and its effects would be constructive in any dialogue that aspires to improve the workload and job satisfaction of all the staff at universities.

Some academics were of the view that an in-depth investigation was required to provide an accurate picture of their workload:

> A serious look at workload, not the surface examination that assumes academics moan on principle and that the solution is just to learn to work more cleverly. Perhaps actually shadow a selection of staff to actually see what they are expected to do and how they do it. I am aware of constantly doing things very quickly that I could do much better and which deserve more thought than I put in. I am aware of many many lost opportunities because I do not have time to follow things up…

Such in-depth investigations, however, tend to be more about maximising productivity on behalf of universities in the new higher education environment, rather than increasing work-life balance for staff.

It appears that general staff are more likely to access flexible work arrangements through formal avenues and have less autonomy than academic staff. Academic staff felt that traditionally, due to the nature of their job, they have better access to informal flexible work arrangements. Recent pressures, however, have led to a decrease in this access. Many academic staff believe that increased workload and devolution of administrative tasks are the root causes of this reduction in access. This is consistent with findings with regard to workload modeling elsewhere (Lazarsfeld Jensen & Morgan 2009) where academics are reporting that they are working harder and longer without due recognition.

Concluding Comments

This study has identified that the mere offering of flexible work arrangements will not ensure employee uptake. Further, the findings indicate that there are significant differences in the utilisation of flexible work arrangements between academic and general staff.

General staff are increasingly taking up flexible work arrangements but there is evidence that the accessibility to some forms of flexible work arrangements are restricted by a lack of understanding on the part of those who approve such arrangements.

A key finding of this study relates to the workload of academics. Academics were found to have increasingly less access to flexible work arrangements and were significantly less satisfied with their current work-life balance. While the workload of academics has been a topic of interest in previous research, none of the previous studies seemed to have made such significant findings in relation to their utilisation of flexible work arrangements, and satisfaction with their current work-life balance. The increasing workload of academics has led to a decrease in the attractiveness of academic careers.

While these findings are clearly alarming for Australian universities, they can also serve as input for the reform that is clearly needed in academic careers. This research has revealed that the vast majority of academic staff are currently struggling with their ever-increasing workload. These findings can provide universities with a better understanding and appreciation of the changes that have taken place in academic workloads over the last decade. The qualitative data collected in this study clearly supported earlier research by Whitchurch (2006) that suggested that there is a blurring of the boundaries between traditional academic work and administrative functions. These tasks often take time away from research productivity, which in turn affects the academics' employability and future career prospects.

Universities are increasingly finding it difficult to fill academic vacancies. Hammond and Churchman (2008) emphasise the importance of academics in society by highlighting that the future of Australian Universities as mass educators will depend on highly qualified and specialised staff. Clearly, in order to ensure the future of Australian universities, further research is required to inform plans of action. A critical element will be to combat the increasingly debilitating workload and improve the availability and accessibility of flexible work arrangements to allow work-life balance. Such initiatives need to be a collaborative effort involving the universities, their staff and the union.

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