

**The work-life balance paradox**

While economists and politicians fawn over evidenced-based research on skill shortages and workforce population decline, they are ignoring the deep sighs of a workforce that's sick of the stress. The demands on the Australian labour market have been constant for two decades - and workers want a smoko.

Data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics that indicates two million Australians desire more work has been misread. This statistic actually refers to the number of Australians interested in having more money. While we don't necessarily want to work, it's the only way we can keep our heads above the rising tide of debt repayments.

We face a paradox where we are sick of having our lives dominated by work, but we still pursue standards of living well beyond our means.

In the last decade, we have seen companies become obsessive over producing record profits. A whole new emphasis on the need to maximise shareholder value has developed with the rise of 'mum and dad' investors.

The culture of the Australian workforce has changed. Public sector redundancies in the 90s and the 'dotcom crashes' have introduced fear and uncertainty into the most stable jobs. We have countered this by clocking off later and later. We think the more time we spend at work, the more indispensable we are. And, we maintain our loan repayment capability.

There is still pressure on workers to work more unpaid overtime. And, concerned about medium-term workforce population decline, the government is now asking us to put off retirement and offering incentives to new mums to return to work.

When we combine the change in workforce culture with record levels of household debt and the sudden spectre of interest rate rises, is it any wonder Australians are saying, 'Yes, I could do with more work'?

We now live in a culture where more us are living to work, rather than working to live. We don't save. When we want a new TV or car, we go out and get it. Whitegoods and consumer sundries are all paid for on credit.

We don't live within our means. We live within whatever credit limit the banks are willing to give.

The current political push towards greater workforce participation is the final nail in the coffin. It re-enforces the assumption that we all want to participate in paid work all of the time.

But we don't. The work-life balance debate reflects this.

Downsizing is not just a flash-in-the-pan phenomenon. The Australia Institute estimates at least 30 per cent of Australians are actively downsizing. Almost a third of Australia's workforce are interested in working less, and putting greater value on holistic lifestyles.

Recent analysis of Australian labour market statistics by economist Nicholas Gruen has further emphasised that Australians are not interested in working more. He indicates that the number of jobs where people work 35 to 44 hours per week has grown by 100,000, while those involving more than 44 hours per week have fallen by 40,000.

In recent years, the debate over work-life balance has escalated. Now, we have a Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission project, and House of Representatives Committee inquiry into it.

Australians are indicating that we value unpaid work. We want to be part of a community not driven purely by profit. Money is still vital, but not our number one priority. We might tell the ABS we are interested in more work, but that's because we're struggling to pay our debts. Or perhaps it's because the social mantra has become so ingrained we give parrot-answers to such surveys.

We face a long-term future where, because of population decline, the available workforce is starting to shrink. Yet, Australians are indicating they value more than just paid work. This is the dilemma.

Economic growth relies on a workforce that is continually more productive. The time for increasing productivity simply by increasing workforce numbers is reaching an end. It is time to increase productivity by improving the quality of work.

We are at an impasse that requires more than just training programs or cash incentives to keep people at work. The new focus needs to be the quality of work, and the meaning and contribution it makes to the lives of workers and the community.

We must focus on boosting workforce morale, and improving workers' happiness and job security. We require a change of attitude that moves away from the current one of fear and uncertainty.

Continuing to talk about jobs, skills and work in economic terms will drive the Australian workforce to despair. We want more than just the money for a good day's work: it has to fit our ethics and values. Paid work must sit alongside the numerous unpaid activities in our lives. We are workers, but we are members of families and communities first.

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