



ROBERT WALTERS WHITEPAPER

## DRIVING AND IMPLEMENTING A FLEXIBILITY-AT-WORK AGENDA

ROBERT WALTERS

## FOREWORD

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There is no doubt that workplace diversity is an important issue amongst employers at the moment. It is imperative for our economy that we encourage more women to re-enter the workforce after maternity leave, and our ageing population means enabling people to work for longer is crucial. Not only that, organisations are beginning to recognise that a diverse workforce could be the key to driving business success.

Every day we hear from managers who are looking for guidance on how to support diversity in the workplace, and inevitably these discussions turn to the importance of flexible working arrangements. Flexible working arrangements are no longer considered just a perk for employees; they are a crucial business strategy to help encourage workforce diversity and increase employee happiness and productivity.

That's why we have created this whitepaper. We aim to highlight attitudes towards flexible working arrangements and explore how to overcome barriers to implementing a flexibility-at-work agenda, while providing practical recommendations on how to apply flexible work policies to attract and retain talent.

For the purposes of this whitepaper, a flexible working arrangement means taking a different approach to traditional ways of working, and may involve job redesign, changes to hours of work, or changes in patterns or location of work to better meet employee and business needs.

I hope you find it useful.



**James Nicholson**  
Managing Director - ANZ  
Robert Walters

## METHODOLOGY

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This whitepaper is based on the findings of research undertaken by Robert Walters.

To conduct this research, Robert Walters surveyed almost 500 hiring managers and over 1,500 professionals across Australia and New Zealand.

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## INTRODUCTION

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This whitepaper examines attitudes towards flexible work arrangements by different workforce demographics and size of employer, offering practical recommendations on how organisations can embrace and benefit from flexible work policies.

Specifically, this whitepaper explores:

- Preferred flexible work arrangements and common drivers
- The impact of flexible work arrangements on productivity and engagement
- Barriers to implementing flexible work arrangements
- Flexible work arrangements as an attraction and retention strategy

## PREFERRED FLEXIBLE WORK ARRANGEMENTS AND COMMON DRIVERS

The flexible work arrangements ranked most desirable by employees were flexible start/end times (81% of respondents), the option to work from home (68%) and compressed work weeks (47%). Overall, the main drivers for securing flexible work arrangements were family and childcare responsibilities (38%) and health and wellbeing (38%). Interestingly, family and childcare responsibilities topped the list of drivers among men (40%), with female respondents more driven by health and wellbeing (41%) than any other factor.

From a generational perspective, family and childcare responsibilities were the primary driver for the Generation X (35 – 50 year olds) demographic at 47%, followed by health and wellbeing (31%). Among Generation Y professionals (20 – 34 year olds) family and childcare responsibilities were equally as important as health and wellbeing (37% each). However, for the Baby Boomer generation (51 – 60 year olds), the majority of respondents (53%) indicated that health and wellbeing was their main reason for seeking flexible work arrangements, followed by travel distance (22%).

**Chart 1 - Most desired flexible work arrangements (respondents selected up to three)**

Flexible start/end times		81%
Option to work from home		68%
Compressed work weeks		47%
Option to work in a range of locations		23%
Part-time work structure		15%
Sabbatical leave		7%
Job-share work structure		5%
Annualised hours		5%





## Key learning #1 – Customisation is key

To successfully implement flexible work policies, organisations must assess the diversity of their workforce and understand that different employees may desire flexible work arrangements for a variety of reasons. One method that can be used to achieve this are employee surveys. After identifying specific worker demographics and drivers, employers can then plan flexible working policies to ensure the arrangements are customisable, rather than offering a ‘one-size-fits-all’ solution.



## Key learning #2 – Balancing career and family is not gender specific

With increasing numbers of women returning to the workplace after taking maternity leave, family and childcare responsibilities have become more equally shared between both genders. Organisations must therefore recognise that in order to encourage and support gender diversity in the workplace, flexible working arrangements are necessary for both males and females as men continue to play a larger role in the day-to-day management of their family needs.

Chart 2 - Main drivers for flexible work arrangements

### Family and childcare responsibilities:

35% Female



40% Male



### Health and wellbeing:

41% Female



35% Male



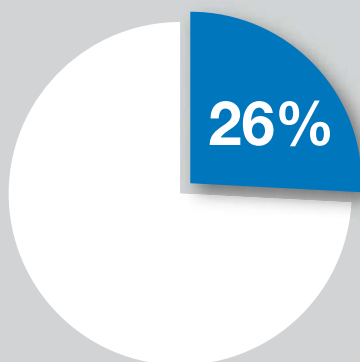
# THE IMPACT OF FLEXIBLE WORK ARRANGEMENTS ON PRODUCTIVITY AND ENGAGEMENT

When asked if they believed that flexible work arrangements would increase employee productivity, only 26% of employers answered 'yes, definitely', while a fifth answered 'not at all' (20%). Small and medium sized organisations were most likely to be sceptical about flexible work arrangements driving productivity (28% and 29%). Conversely, only 15% of public sector employers believed that flexible work arrangements did not drive productivity at all.

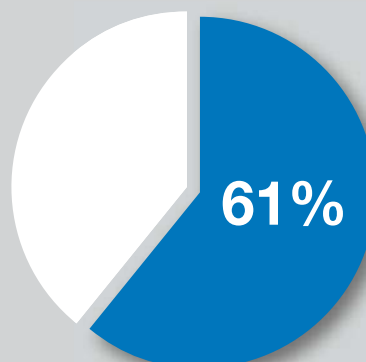
This contrasts with the results of the employee survey, where the vast majority of professionals (61%) asserted that flexible work arrangements would definitely increase their overall productivity. Only 10% of employees believed that flexible work arrangements would not increase productivity.

Encouragingly, the majority of employers and professionals agreed that flexible work arrangements could increase both employee loyalty and advocacy towards the organisation (64% for employers; 56% for professionals) and employee commitment to the job (52% for employers; 63% for professionals).

**Chart 3 - Percentage of employers who believe flexible work arrangements definitely increase productivity**



**Chart 4 - Percentage of employees who believe flexible work arrangements definitely increase productivity**







## Key learning #3 – Work/life balance increases employee loyalty and productivity

The survey shows that many employers overlook the benefits that can be reaped from flexible working arrangements.

For example, the majority of employers understand that flexible working arrangements increase employee loyalty and commitment, yet few recognise the connection between these factors and greater levels of productivity.

Employees who secure a more equitable work/life balance through flexible work arrangements are also likely to be less stressed, more satisfied with their work, and therefore more productive. Employees entrusted with the freedom to work the way they prefer also tend to enjoy a greater sense of responsibility and desire to perform their job well.

Employers (by size) who believe flexible work arrangements do not increase productivity at all:

	SMALL (0 – 19 employees)	28%
	<b>MEDIUM</b> (20 – 199 employees)	29%
	LARGE (200 or more employees)	17%
	PUBLIC SECTOR	15%



**52%**

of employers agree that flexible working arrangements increase employee commitment to the job

# BARRIERS TO IMPLEMENTING FLEXIBLE WORK ARRANGEMENTS

The biggest barrier to implementing flexible working arrangements – cited by 51% of employers – were concerns about not treating all employees equally. This was particularly the case for employers in the public sector (69%). Other barriers identified were ‘fear of employee abuse of policies’ (49%) and ‘difficulties with supervising employees under flexible working conditions’ (44%). In particular, small organisations were most concerned about employee abuse of policies (62%).

For employees, the top concern about utilising flexible work arrangements was ‘fear of negative perceptions of work ethic’ (51% of all respondents). Other key concerns were ‘fear of negative career consequences’ (43%), ‘fear of resentment from co-workers’ (38%) and ‘manager scepticism’ (36%). Those from Generation Y (56%) were twice as likely as Baby Boomers (27%) to be concerned about the negative impact of flexible working on their career prospects.

Another barrier to implementing flexible work arrangements is communication, with only 46% of professionals saying their employer actively promotes flexible work policies, and a quarter (25%) stating that their organisation never promotes flexible work policies.

**Chart 5 - Top three concerns of employers and employees regarding flexible work arrangements**

TOP THREE CONCERNS OF EMPLOYERS REGARDING FLEXIBLE WORK ARRANGEMENTS	TOP THREE CONCERNS OF EMPLOYEES REGARDING FLEXIBLE WORK ARRANGEMENTS
<b>1 51%</b> Concerned about not treating all employees equally	<b>1 51%</b> Fear of negative perception of work ethic
<b>2 49%</b> Fear of employee abuse of policies	<b>2 43%</b> Fear of negative career consequences
<b>3 44%</b> Difficulties with supervising employees	<b>3 38%</b> Fear of resentment from co-workers







49%

of organisations fear employee  
abuse of flexible working policies



#### Key learning #4 – Organisations need to create an open culture of flexibility





Simply having a flexible work policy is not enough; organisations must also create a culture where employees do not feel they will be disadvantaged by utilising flexible working arrangements. Employers must ensure that flexible working arrangements are visibly embedded in day-to-day operations and openly discussed both across the organisation and at a team level. Line managers should be encouraged to discuss flexible working arrangements with all team members to ensure that everyone is treated equally.



#### Key learning #5 – Employers and employees should agree on performance measures and monitor outcomes

To overcome a fear of abuse of flexible working policies and difficulties with supervision, both managers and employees should agree on expectations and measurements of success before establishing flexible working arrangements. Ultimately, these arrangements should be designed to enable employees to be accountable for their own results, motivating them to produce quality outcomes.

Employees and employers should also engage in regular and open discussions about the ongoing effectiveness of the working arrangement, and feel comfortable to adapt as needed. However it is important that any reviews are not overly formal or supervisory, as this can implicitly discourage the flexible work arrangement and erode employee morale.

Employers (by size) who are most concerned about treating employees equally:		
	SMALL (0 – 19 employees)	33%
	MEDIUM (20 – 199 employees)	54%
	LARGE (200 or more employees)	46%
	PUBLIC SECTOR	69%



25%

of employees say their  
organisation never promotes  
flexible work opportunities



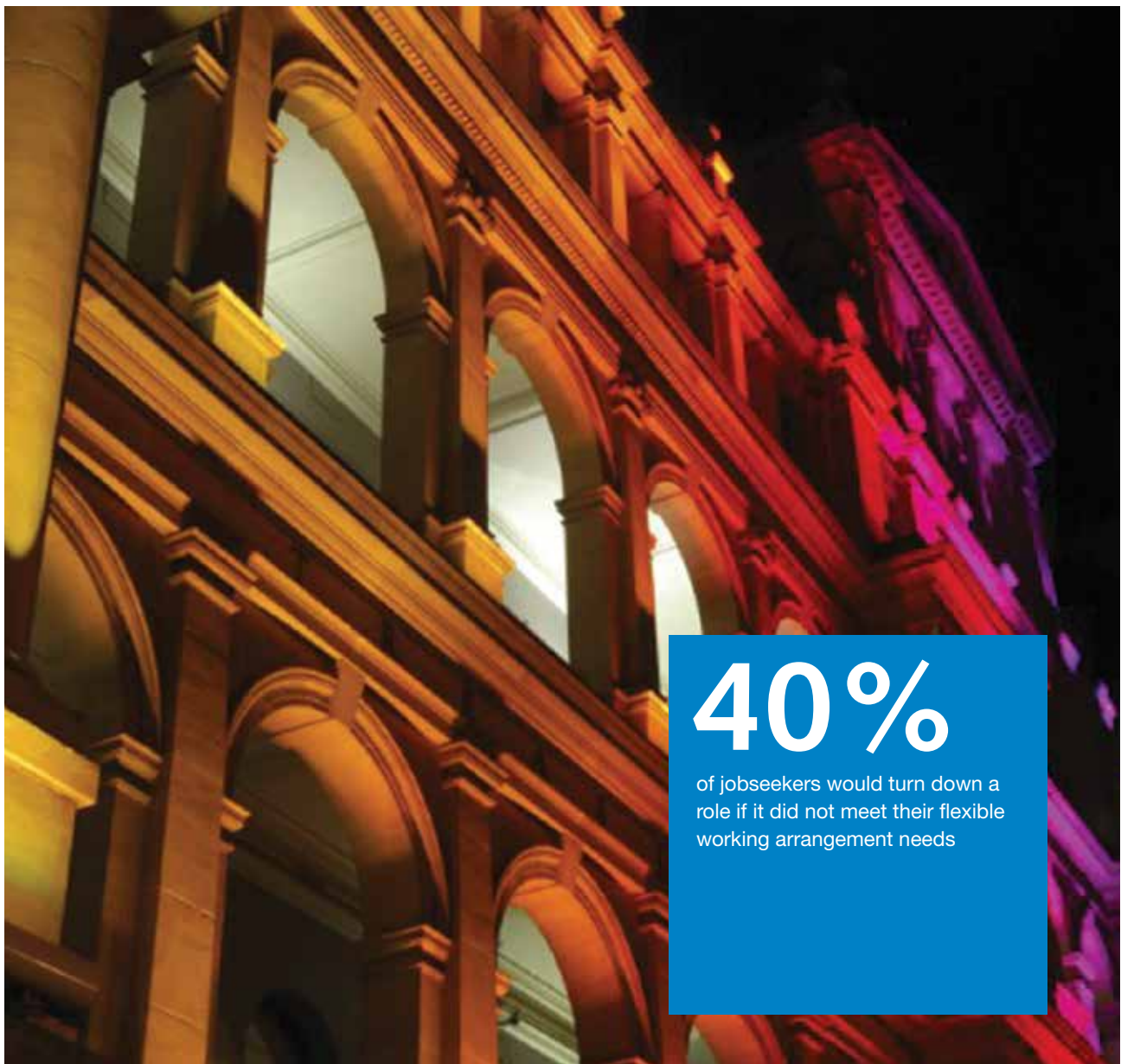
# FLEXIBLE WORK ARRANGEMENTS AS AN ATTRACTION AND RETENTION STRATEGY

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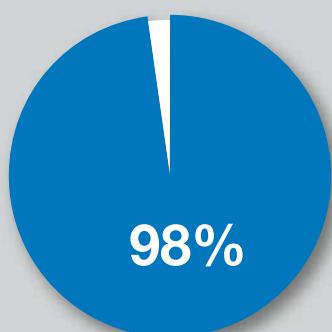
Almost all the employers surveyed (98%) believed that flexible work arrangements were either very important or somewhat important to jobseekers, which is consistent with employee sentiment (94%).

The vast majority of professionals (88%) are more likely to consider a role if flexible work arrangements are advertised, and 40% would turn down a job offer if the organisation could not meet their need for flexibility. Furthermore, 70% of employees said they would be less likely to look for roles outside their current organisation if flexible working arrangements were available.

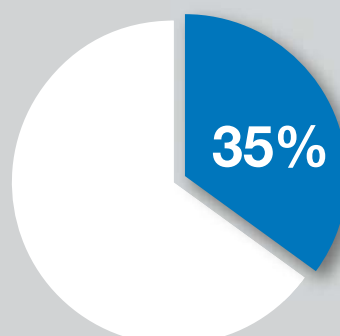
Yet despite these findings, only 35% of employers said they actively promote flexible working arrangements when advertising a new role. A quarter of employees also stated that promised flexible work arrangements were not promoted once they had started a new job, with 29% saying that flexible work arrangements were only promoted during on-boarding.



**Chart 6 - Percentage of employers who believe flexible work arrangements are very important or somewhat important to jobseekers**



**Chart 7 - Percentage of employers who actively promote flexible work arrangements when advertising a new role**







### **Key learning #6 – Organisations need to promote flexible working arrangements during the recruitment process**

As the competition for talent continues to intensify, employers need to look beyond traditional inducements such as remuneration to attract the best professionals. As flexible working arrangements become increasingly important to all professionals, organisations that promote flexible work policies throughout the recruitment process will have a stronger employer value proposition and therefore a greater competitive edge.

### **Key learning #7 – Flexible working arrangements are an effective talent retention tool**

Employees whose work/life balance needs are being met often feel more fulfilled and loyal to their employer, making them less likely to look for new job opportunities elsewhere. As we have seen, employers and employees agree that flexible work increases loyalty and commitment to the organisation, strengthening the employer brand and helping retain existing talent. It is therefore important that employers live up to expectations. Flexible working arrangements promoted during the recruitment process must be implemented beyond the on-boarding period.

#### **Employers (by size) who actively promote flexible working opportunities when advertising a new role:**

	SMALL (0 – 19 employees)	28%
	MEDIUM (20 – 199 employees)	26%
	LARGE (200 or more employees)	36%
	PUBLIC SECTOR	47%

## CONCLUSION

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In the modern workplace, flexible working arrangements are needed to accommodate changing societal norms and shifting family dynamics. But they can also give businesses a competitive edge by improving productivity, increasing employee happiness and engagement, and attracting the best talent.

There are a number of factors that contribute to successful flexible working arrangements;

### **Flexible working matters to all workers**

There isn't a single driver for wanting flexible working arrangements – the reasons vary according to gender and generation. Overall, however, changing family and social dynamics have substantially elevated the importance of this issue among a majority of professionals, regardless of their background.

### **Recognise the needs of your employees**

Customising flexible working arrangements to align better with the expectations of your workforce is likely to make them work better for your organisation.

### **Flexible working arrangements have an indirect effect on productivity**

While most employers don't believe flexible working arrangements increase productivity levels, they do agree these have a positive effect on employee loyalty and commitment to their job. It follows, however, that a more satisfied and loyal workforce is likely to be more productive.

### **Explore ways of removing obstacles to flexible working**

Our research shows that both employees and hiring managers fear the negative consequences of flexible working arrangements. Creating a workplace culture where these arrangements can be discussed, measured and adjusted openly will help alleviate these fears and allow you to reap the rewards that flexible working can deliver.

### **Deliver on your promises**

Offering flexible working policies on paper is not enough to make them work. They need to be actively promoted both during the recruitment process and afterward as a means of attracting and retaining talent.



## CONTACT US

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To discuss this whitepaper or your recruitment needs in more detail, please contact your Robert Walters recruitment consultant or **James Nicholson, Managing Director – ANZ**, on **+61 (0) 2 8289 3130** or **james.nicholson@robertwalters.com.au**.

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