

Quality Part-Time Work – the Victorian experience

Learnings from Workforce Victoria's Quality Part-Time Work Project

Abstract

This paper reports on the methodology and outcomes of Workforce Victoria's¹ Quality Part-Time Work Project. Part-time work is one of the most frequently used flexible work arrangements in Australia to support work/family balance. However not all of these part-time work arrangements offer 'quality' work. And with the push from both employers and employees for more flexible work arrangements, the availability of quality part-time work has become a more pressing issue. Drawing on data analysis, a literature search and agreed industry best practice case studies, the Quality Part-Time Work Project investigated the characteristics and barriers to the creation of 'quality' part-time work in different sectors. The outcome was a partnership between government, employer organisations and unions to develop and promote industry agreed guidelines across the hospitality, retail, local government, law and nursing industry sectors on how employers might create and better manage quality part-time work.

Introduction

The Victorian government committed itself to conduct targeted research on work and family balance issues of significance to Victorian industries and businesses, as part of the Action Agenda for Work and Family Balance (Victorian Government 2003).

The Quality Part-Time Work Project formed a major part of this research. Undertaken within Workforce Victoria, it began in July 2004 and aimed to provide guidance to Victorian employers on how they might enhance the quality of the part-time work they provide to assist workers with family responsibilities.

In order to ensure industry ownership of the Project and particularly of its outcomes, a partnership model was adopted. The partners were employer organisations, unions and individual employers, and Workforce Victoria.

The Project was undertaken in 2005/2006, with its outcomes promoted at a time when the impacts of the federal government's Work Choices legislation were becoming more apparent. This meant particular challenges for the union, employer and government partnership, but with good will and smart management, outcomes were successful.

For the purposes of the Quality Part-Time Work Project a part-time worker was 'an employee working less than full-time hours'.

¹ Workforce Victoria was previously known as Industrial Relations Victoria. The name change occurred in late 2008.

Project Process and Outcomes

The Quality Part-Time Work Project was undertaken in five stages. For the most part these stages were sequential, but in some cases, such as with the development of the partnerships, they were undertaken concurrently.

Stage 1 Statistical overview of part-time work

This stage of the Project included a statistical overview of part-time work across Australia and within Victoria. This was important in describing the nature and extent of part-time work. The data was sourced mainly from the Australian Bureau of Statistics labour force survey and provided valuable background information for consultation and identified the industry sectors for focus.

In summary the data showed that:

- almost one-third (29 per cent) of employed persons work part-time;
- just under half (46 per cent) of all employed women work part-time;
- women make up just under three-quarters (70 per cent) of all part-time employed persons;
- employed women aged 25-54 years with dependents make up just over a quarter (28 per cent) of all part-time employment;
- employed women aged 25-54 years without dependents constitute one fifth, (20 per cent) of all part-time employment across Australia;
- men's share of part-time work is increasing, the ratio of male to female employed persons working part-time has steadily increased from 1:6 in 1978 to 1:3 in 2004;
- well over four-fifths (85 per cent) of employed men working part-time were employed on a casual basis, as were well over half (55per cent) of all employed women working part-time;
- the most common main reason for working part-time was going to school, college or university (23.4 per cent), followed by caring for children (23.1 per cent) and a preference for part-time work (21.4 per cent).

Stage 2 National and international literature review

This stage consisted of a literature review that found the following concerns for the quality of much part-time work:

- increasing casualisation;
- limited working hours and a preference by many workers for more hours.
- 'traditional' work culture which devalued part-time work and the workers who undertook this work;
- gender segmentation;
- limited access to training and promotion;
- difficulty of moving between part-time and full-time work.

Stage 3 Forming the partnership

This stage focussed on the development and formation of the partnership between government, unions, employer organisations and other key stakeholders to progress the quality of part-time work.

The first task for the partnership was to agree on the characteristics of a quality part-time job, as well as to suggest best practice in 'quality' part-time work.

The following were agreed as the characteristics of 'quality' part-time work:

- can be accessed at all occupational levels (from the shop floor to management) and is available to both men and women;
- has the same protections as full-time work in respect to job protection, predictability of hours and protection against discrimination; - predictability of hours was seen as particularly important;
- has pro-rata wages and access to all the benefits full-time workers receive;
- includes access to training and promotion;
- includes the potential for the person in the job to transfer back to full-time work, should they desire because the need to work part-time changes over the life course;
- ensures the worker is included in the workplace culture and work group, and also that the part-time worker does not end up with the bits and pieces and shifts no one else wants;
- recognises that people have a life outside work.

A further key part of the initial consultation with industry was the decision based on the results of Stage 1, to focus on the industries with the greatest concentrations of part-time workers. These were:

- health, with a focus on nurses;
- retail;
- hospitality;
- local government;
- law.

This meant that the focus for the partnership narrowed to the unions and employer organisations represented within these five industries.

The development of case studies of quality part-time work within organisations in these five industry sectors was important to show that it could actually be implemented. These organisations were suggested by either the relevant employer organisation or the union. They were then double checked with each party to ensure that both the union and the employer organisation recognised them as best practice.

Stage 4 Quality Part-Time Work Industry Round Table

This stage involved the Minister for Industrial Relations convening a round table and inviting representatives from employer organisations and unions from the five targeted industries to meet and discuss action to address quality part-time work.

The Round Table included presentations from Dr Colette Fagan (Co-Director of the European Work and Employment Research Centre). Dr Fagan's presentation enabled partnering organisations to discuss the international dimensions of quality part-time work.

One of the agreed best practice employers also presented at the Round Table, to demonstrate how quality part-time work could be implemented in practice.

Significantly the Round Table enabled the partnering employer organisations and unions to commit to the development of a set of five industry specific guidelines to promote the quality of part-time work.

Stage 5 Industry endorsement of the guidelines for quality part-time work

This stage involved the partners endorsing the guidelines, with the inclusion of all relevant employer organisations and union logos on the final publications.

For all partners, this stage of the process involved patience, flexibility and time, as agreement to the content of each set of guidelines by as many as six partners was important to ensure collective commitment and ownership of the outcome.

The guidelines were launched by the Minister for Industrial Relations in November 2005. Participating employer organisations and unions then included the guidelines on their web sites and actively promoted them to their members through newsletters, forums and training sessions during 2006.

Learnings from the Project

In an environment where the role of state government can only rely on a co-operative approach to implement workplace reform, the partnership approach as adopted within the Quality Part-Time Work Project becomes even more significant. In order to assess the effectiveness of this approach a random survey of participating employer organisations and unions was undertaken. The following section includes comments from partnering organisations regarding opportunities or 'the things that worked well' and challenges or 'what could have been improved on' when undertaking such a project.

Project Opportunities

The partnership approach between unions, employers and government

(The) partnership exercise with industry & unions with IRV leading the way in areas not previously debated (was something that worked well) Union representative

The partnership approach meant that there was consensus across the various industry groupings about the need for quality part-time work, what actually constituted quality part-time work and what was included as best practice in the various industry case studies.

Commitment as a partner in the Project also meant a greater likelihood that the employer organisations and the unions, as well as government, would promote the concept of quality part-time work, as in a time of diminishing government opportunity to regulate, partnerships are very important. For example the relevant Quality Part-

Time Work Industry Guideline appeared, and in most cases, still appears on each of the participating employer organisation and union websites (14 in total), as well as Workforce Victoria's website.

The contacts and networks established through the partnership were also invaluable in progressing other projects within the work and family balance area of government's agenda. For example Guidelines for Employee Choice Rostering to take into account a need for work and family balance in the licensed clubs sector were subsequently developed and agreed by Clubs Victoria and the Liquor Hospitality and Miscellaneous Union, and Guidelines for Employee Choice Rostering in Retail were developed by the Master Grocers Association and have been promoted nationally.

Promotion of practical examples

Despite Work Choices, there are still opportunities for best practice. Union representative

Practical examples from agreed best practice workplaces were critical in demonstrating that quality part-time work was possible and ensured that both employers and employees could see that quality part-time work could actually work in practice.

Customisation to particular industries

The best things about the project were the clear articulation of the necessary workforce imperatives predicating part-time work for nurses, illustrative quotations and the final practical guidance about how to respond to requests for part-time work. Employer organisation representative

There were five sets of industry guidelines developed and agreed within the partnership. Each was customised to a particular industry – health, retail, hospitality, local government or law. This meant that each was seen as relevant to a particular industry constituency, and each could focus on particular factors of importance to that industry.

Effectiveness of the project process

We now have the Quality Part-Time Work Guidelines on our website. They have been incorporated into the discussions we are having around work flexibility issues. Employer organisation representative

The project process began with a review of data. This was educational for all involved and demonstrated the extent of part-time work. The literature review that followed indicated that there were problems with the quality of much of the part-time work and also that there were means to promote better quality part-time work.

Including the development and agreement of the Guidelines within the project process also meant there was a tangible outcome which would live on after the Project conclusion.

Throughout the Project, all participants, including government ensured that resources and time were available for consultation, promoting and developing the industry partnership. This commitment was invaluable in achieving an agreed finished product.

Round Table with Minister

The Quality Part-Time Work Round Table brought together unions, individual employers and employer associations in the five targeted industries. This reinforced the notion of partnership as a central theme as it provided an opportunity for constructive discussion around industry groupings.

Ministerial involvement reflected the Victorian Government's commitment to promote quality part-time work. And this was reinforced by the Minister's launch of the agreed guidelines at one of the best practice organisations.

Barriers and Sticking Points

Timing of the Project

Better timing – new IR legislation sometimes cut across project (employer organisation)

The timing of the Project and its concurrency with the Work Choices debate and subsequent implementation was not something that could have been envisaged when the Project began, however it had a real impact on the time required to ensure that the partnership was positive and agreement was reached on what constituted quality part-time work and the content of the final guidelines. It also meant that in some cases partnerships were difficult to uphold in the implementation of the guidelines.

Showing how it works in practice

(We could have) got some of our smaller members to speak with you.
Employer organisation representative

Each industry guideline has three or four practical examples of how quality part-time work is implemented at particular workplaces. While these practical examples are invaluable, a greater spread across the industry may have been beneficial.

How to get the message out

Well, maybe (we) should have given you the first half hour at one of our training sessions, where you have a captive audience...and a varied audience... Employer organisation representative

While training and information forums were undertaken in law, local government and hospitality, to get the message out to many workplaces, more of these are needed. Subsequently Workforce Victoria, through the Working Families Program funded the

Australian Services Union to undertake a series of workshops across local government with the focus on promoting quality part-time work. This was an invaluable opportunity to promote quality part-time work across an industry.

Where to next for Quality Part-Time Work?

The Quality Part-Time Work Project was not an end in itself. Increasing the quality of part-time work is an ongoing process. The following activities currently undertaken by Workforce Victoria in partnership with employer organisations, unions and other key stakeholders focus on this aim.

Further promotion of the guidelines

Regional work and family forums co-hosted by Workforce Victoria and local government ensured that the guidelines were promoted in regional Victoria. Regional consultation undertaken as part of the Work and Family in Regional Victoria Pilot Project funded by Workforce Victoria and Regional Development Victoria and undertaken by RMIT University also enabled promotion of the guidelines. This pilot project resulted in a successful application for an Australian Research Grant which will also offer opportunities for further promotion

ways2work toolkit

In 2007/08, Workforce Victoria developed an on-line toolkit to assist parents and carers return to work. The Quality Part-Time Work Guidelines form an important part of *ways2work* content.

ways2work has been vigorously promoted through the network of maternal and child care centres and kindergartens, as well as niche publications. All students starting school in 2009 received an information pack, including information with links to the *ways2work*

Encouraging partner organisations to continue to promote quality part-time work

As part of the Action Agenda for Work and Family Balance, funding was made available through grants to small and medium sized workplaces to encourage innovative work and family policy and programs

Round three of the grants program focussed on promoting quality part-time work and included the development of industry agreed guidelines for employee choice rostering in the licensed clubs sector and the development of a model job share and part-time work policy for local government. A further round enabled workshops to promote quality part-time work across local government, as well as the development of guidelines in the supermarket sector of the retail industry.

Conclusions

In 2009 the quality of part-time work is even more important as workforce demographics mean that increasing numbers of older workers may wish to cut back on hours, and younger workers wish to move back into work after time with family

responsibilities. The impact of the global financial crisis also means cutting back hours may be an alternative to retrenchment.

The challenge is to make sure that any part-time job is a quality part-time work arrangement.

Major conclusions reached from the Quality Part-Time Work Project are that:

- Evidence based projects are very important to gaining agreement and active participation around promoting quality part-time work, particularly within a partnership of those with often very different views.
- Partnerships do work in promoting quality part-time work but patience and trust are required to develop the partnership.
- It is important to ensure that there are tangible outcomes (the guidelines) from any partnership to promote quality part-time work rather than just a token commitment.