

Coalition For Quality Flexible Work

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Fact Sheet 3 : Is flexible work good for low paid workers?

New Zealanders are working longer and longer hours and this is affecting the amount of time that parents can spend with their children and wider families, and causing stress and pressure for many people as they seek to juggle paid work and their family and other commitments. Some workers, who do shift work or work at night, are struggling to juggle family and other responsibilities. Other workers are forced to work part time to accommodate those responsibilities.

Many of these workers are low paid, working in service, caring or retail jobs. They often cannot afford to lose pay by reducing their hours, but need to work hours that enable them to juggle home and work life. The majority of workers in low paid work are women, who often also carry the bulk of family responsibilities.

Flexible working hours, which seeks to accommodate worker's other commitments and family lives, can assist workers in managing family and other responsibilities, while still retaining certainty of hours of work. Currently in New Zealand flexible working hours are more likely to be enjoyed by management and senior staff. The right to request flexible working hours should be available for all workers.

How can we make flexible working hours available to all workers?

- Many low paid workers have little bargaining power to achieve flexible working arrangements. Legislation would provide the right to request flexible working arrangements to all workers, including those who feel they have little power.
- Green MP Sue Kedgley's private members bill will provide a legal right to request flexible working hours for all employees and impose an obligation on employers to negotiate these requests seriously, and seek to accommodate them in their workplaces.
- Similar legislation in UK has been an overwhelming success and since it was passed eight out of 10 requests for flexible working hours have been granted, and a compromise reached in a further one out of 10 requests.¹

What does "Flexible Working Hours" mean?

- Flexible working hours can mean flexible start and finish times, working from home, reduced hours, working your total hours in less days, term time working and increasing unpaid leave.
- In New Zealand, employers who have introduced flexible working arrangements report that there are often no compliance costs or costs are outweighed by the benefits of retaining staff, improved morale, and increased productivity and less absenteeism.

¹ UK Department of Trade and Industry, 2004.

Why do workers need access to flexible working hours?

- 93% of 4,475 parents recently surveyed identified flexible working as the change that they would most like to see in workplaces.²
- Around 40% of workers regularly provide care for someone – 38% for a child or children, 5% for an elderly or sick relative and 3% for a sick spouse or partner.³
- 40% of workers have some or a lot of difficulty achieving a work-life balance. People with the highest levels of work-life conflict are more likely to be working long hours, varied hours and rotating shifts. They are also more likely to be working at night.⁴
- Workers need flexible working hours to better adapt to the significant changes in the labour market. There are now higher than ever levels of participation of female workers and in most families both parents are working.
- Many workplaces with low paid jobs have very high turnover. Flexible working hours attracts workers to stay in their jobs.

Who benefits currently from flexible working arrangements?

- Although there has been very little research into which workers already have access to flexible working hours arrangements, there is plenty of anecdotal evidence that the workers most likely to have flexible arrangements are management and senior staff.
- Department of Labour research shows that a wider range of flexible working arrangements are more likely to be offered to senior staff or management.⁵

Is there a danger flexible working hours could be used to reduce hours?

- The legislation provides the right to request flexible working hours to the worker – not the employer. A flexible working hours arrangement should give a worker more certainty, because the working hours arrangement will be clearly agreed between the worker and the employer.

What about shift workers?

- Many low paid workers, such as hospital service workers and caregivers, are employed in 24/7 industries on shift arrangements. Many of these workers also have family responsibilities. These workers are often subjected to random changes of roster. The legislation would provide the right to request some stability in hours and days of work.

“Establishing a right for workers to apply for flexible work is about creating a culture where the need to consider workers’ caring responsibilities is an accepted part of work culture and an obligation of the employer.”

Submission by the Service and Food Workers Union Nga Ringa Tota to the Transport and Industrial Relations Select Committee.

² New Zealand Equal Employment Opportunities Trust, 2005.

³ Quality Flexible Work: The New Zealand Experience, December 2006, Department of Labour

⁴ Quality Flexible Work: The New Zealand Experience, December 2006, Department of Labour

⁵ Quality Flexible Work: The New Zealand Experience, December 2006, Department of Labour