Gender perceptions of work-life balance: management implications for full-time employees in Australia

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Abstract
This study reports on gender perceptions of work–life balance based upon a qualitative study carried out among 437 full-time working men (N=245) and women (N=192) in the Australian workforce in 2008. The participants were randomly selected from a wide range of occupations, and their perceptions of: (a) non-work issues; (b) work–life conflicts; (c) organisational support for WLB; (d) desired WLB options; and (e) management treatment were investigated. Findings indicate significant gender differences in all areas studied. As this research provides a holistic view of the different gender perceptions of WLB, the findings have important implications for mobilising workplace support for men and women.

Keywords
Australia, full-time employees, gender inequity, work–life balance

The purpose of this article is to examine the gender perceptions of work–life balance (WLB) using the theoretical lens of the ideal worker norm. A total of 192 women and 245 men from across a wide range of occupations were randomly sampled and asked about their perceptions of: (a) non-work issues; (b) work–life conflicts; (c) organisational support for WLB; (d) desired WLB options; and (e) management treatment. Consistent with the findings of earlier studies, we found that the ideal worker norm still exists and is deeply embedded in Australian workplaces, affecting both men's and women's working and non-working lives. Findings further indicate significant differences between men's and women's perceptions in all the areas investigated. Given the enduring

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existence of the ideal worker norm, we advocate the use of gender-sensitive management principles and WLB policies that address men's and women's specific needs and also assist the workplace to eventually move away from that norm. By providing a holistic view through a gender lens of the ways in which both genders perceive WLB, the findings have important implications for mobilising appropriate workplace support in relation to reducing gender inequity amongst full-time employees.

1. Introduction

The Australian workforce, along with those in many other nations, is facing challenges in dealing with gender inequality, along with excessive work demands and work intensification (Abhayaratna et al., 2008; Bailyn, 2006; Pocock et al., 2010). The gender inequality in Australia is further highlighted by the Gender Development and Gender Empowerment Indices, in which Australia – despite being ranked second among the 47 countries with regard to its high human development indicators – was ranked 18th in gender inequality (Human Development Report, 2011). Using the theoretical lens of the 'ideal worker norm' and adopting a holistic approach by listening to the voices of full-time working women and men in the Australian workforce, this article examines the gender perceptions of: (a) non-work issues; (b) work–life conflicts; (c) organisational work–life balance support; (d) desired work–life balance options; and (e) management treatment, to inform gender-sensitive management initiatives. The theory of the 'ideal worker norm' identified by Bailyn (1993) and subsequently developed by Williams (1999) is particularly relevant for this study, as it explains the trend of increasing challenges experienced by full-time working women and men in keeping up with their full-time occupations as well as caring for their dependents (such as children, parents or people with disabilities) and maintaining other non-work activities.

The 'ideal worker norm' refers to the organisational norm or assumption that all employees' non-work responsibilities are taken care of by a spouse, so that they can work full-time and overtime with little or no time off for care (Bailyn, 1993, 2006; Williams, 1999). Essentially, the concept of an ideal worker norm is problematic as it creates bias against employees with care giving responsibilities, in the sense that those subjected to the norm are limited in their capacity to care, exposing themselves to a disabling contradiction between their work and personal needs and/or desire to care (Bailyn, 1993, 2006; Williams, 1999).

In the US context, Williams (1999) highlights that work and non-work conflicts are expected to occur in all occupational groups, as the 'ideal worker norm' tends to reign across industries and occupations within society. Similarly, research suggests that the 'ideal worker norm' is also prevalent in Australian organisations, overlooking the fact that the workplace consists of employees with diverse career orientations, personal needs, obligations and interests in life (Bailyn, 1993; Pocock et al., 2010). Without organisational sensitivity to employees' personal concerns, Bailyn (2006), Williams (1999) and other scholars (e.g. Pocock et al., 2010) argue, current work–life balance (WLB) management will continue to produce gender inequality and counterproductive organisational performance. Notably, the 'ideal worker norm' within organisations tends to reinforce men's 'breadwinner', full-time working role and women's 'housewife' (or care giving) role, in which she takes part-time or unpaid work in order to provide care. This leads to the different challenges that men and women face in managing their work and non-work lives (Bailyn, 1993; Williams, 1999). It is further argued that not only is the concept of the ideal worker norm gendered; the motherhood norm is also 'gendered due to the expectations that women should make family commitments and perform most unpaid care, and particularly childcare, in the home' (Bardoel et al., 2011: 158). These expectations further create challenges for full-time working women and explain the greater

number of mothers working part-time in Australia (Pocock, 2005). The motherhood norm also implies that caregiving commitments will be seen as more relevant to a female employee by her co-workers and superiors (Drago et al., 2006). Bardoel et al. (2009) further confirm that in Australia, women working part-time tend to be involved in a greater share of the housework and childcare in comparison with women in the US. This makes caregiving among men less acceptable and means women are more strongly subjected to the ideal worker norm (Bardoel et al., 2011).

Based upon the theoretical framework of the 'ideal worker norm', we acknowledge the assumption adopted in this article that the different genders comprise separate, dichotomous social groups – regardless of their social identities – experiencing different socially constructed dilemmas in managing WLB (Ely and Padavic, 2007; Gerson, 2004; Smithson and Stokoe, 2005). Therefore, in order to make sense of the socially constructed gender needs for WLB, this study asks multi-dimensional WLB questions about participants': (a) non-work roles; (b) work–life conflicts; (c) organisational support; (d) desired WLB options; and (e) management treatment. In doing so, this study addresses the following concerns in WLB research and practice.

First, although the WLB literature recognises the importance of examining the WLB needs of different social groups (Kossek, 2005: 102; Lyonette et al., 2007: 238; Perry-Jenkins, 2005), little research has examined the needs of different social groups and their desired managerial support (Atkinson and Hall, 2009; Emslie and Hunt, 2009; Lyonette et al., 2007; Toth, 2005). Previous research findings indicate that contemporary organisations tend to promote a one-size-fits-all approach to WLB options, neglecting the possible dimensions of the socially constructed needs of different social groups (Bianchi et al., 2005: 23; Emslie and Hunt, 2009; Kossek, 2005). Although more WLB studies have been undertaken on gender than on other social groups, multi-dimensional WLB of full-time working women and men remains under-researched. This study aims to fill this gap. We argue that only by understanding the socially embedded needs of full-time working women and men can their different needs for WLB can be confirmed and identified.

Second, the predominantly part-time working status of women across OECD countries (Abhayaratna et al., 2008) has been recognised as a major source of gender inequality in the workforce, exposing women to greater risk of job insecurity and bullying, lack of voice and fewer work entitlements (McDonald et al., 2005; Pocock, 2005; Warren, 2001). This is further reflected in the percentages of part-time and full-time female employees in Australia. For instance, according to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (2012), the participation rate of women in the total part-time workforce is 70.53% – almost double the 35.16% participation rate of women in the total full-time workforce. Therefore, this study strategically examines full-time working women's and men's working and non-working lives to identify any gender inequalities in relation to achieving WLB in the context of the Australian workforce, and also to explore whether or not the ideal worker norm still exists in contemporary organisations.

Third, the trends towards excessive working hours and increasing work intensification are threatening the health of the Australian workforce and also the social relationships within families, businesses and communities (Pocock, 2005). The Australian work–life index (2010) indicates that 'a substantial proportion of Australian workers, around one-quarter, often or almost always feel that work interferes with their quality of life by reducing their capacity to engage in activities outside work' (Pocock et al., 2010: 30). Thus, an examination of the non-working and working lives of full-time working women and men, from a holistic perspective, is likely to mobilise workplace support for both genders, illuminating new implications for management.

Finally, while considerable research has examined the work–family balance of workers, this study examines the balance between their working and non-working lives. In the context of this study, we define 'work' as working standard hours from 9am to 5pm in workplaces. While family

and household responsibilities constitute the most important component of non-work lives, for the purpose of this study, we acknowledge that employees also have multiple non-work activities in addition to their family and household responsibilities, such as personal relationships, community care and recreational activities (Pocock et al., 2010).

This paper is organised as follows. First, a brief review is given of the gender/WLB literature, gendered work–life conflicts and the under-utilised WLB options within the Australian workforce. The methodology is then discussed. After this we analyse our findings and the management implications of the study.

2. Gender and work–life balance

In 2012, the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) data reported that women's participation rate in the Australian labour force is 59.4% (ABS, 2012). Although some research indicates that men tend to spend more time at work and engage in more unregulated work hours than women (Bergman and Gardiner, 2007; Blunsdon et al., 2005), a considerable body of research contradicts this to show that that women spend as much time at work, and also engage in more domestic and family duties than men (Bergman and Gardiner, 2007; Blunsdon et al., 2005; Lewis, 2009; Moen and Yu, 2000; Swanberg et al., 2005; Toth, 2005). Amongst Australian women, this trend has increased significantly in the past decade (Hosking and Western, 2008). This suggests that women are more likely to have a greater sense of dual responsibility, thus leading to conflicts associated with their work and care giving roles, which prevents them from performing as ideal workers. Notably, the Household, Income and Labour Dynamics Wave II Jan 2004 Release (2002) indicated that a considerable proportion of Australian women (31.3%) cited caring for children as their main reason for working fewer than 35 hours per week, whereas Australian men's main reason for working fewer than 35 hours per week was attendance at school, college or university (Watson & Wooden, 2004). This further confirms the prevalence of gendered motherhood norms in Australia, as suggested by Drago et al. (2006).

Furthermore, a recent study by Pocock et al. (2010) on the Australian Work and Life Index (AWALI) reported that men tend to work longer hours than women, yet women (both part-time and full-time workers) experienced more time pressure than men. Notably, full-time working women (especially working mothers) reported greater time restriction (32%) and time pressure (64.8%) than full-time working men's time restriction (29.7%) and time pressure (50.1%). Time pressure reported by full-time working women increased from 59.4% in 2007 to 64.8% in 2010, while time pressure for full-time working men decreased from 53.2% in 2007 to 50.1% in 2010.

These differences between men's and women's working patterns have been mainly attributed to women continuing to spend significantly more time on care and in unpaid work (e.g., family, school, home and community activities) than working men, despite women's significant increase in workforce participation since 1986 and the compensating decline in men's workforce participation (Craig and Mullan, 2009; Pocock et al., 2010). Reinforcing the serious nature of this problem for full-time working women, Pocock et al. (2010) reveal that women have consistently reported higher work–life interference per hour worked, more dissatisfaction than men when working for more than 35 hours per week, and a greater preference to reduce their work hours than men. Considering that the rate of Australian employment participation is ranked tenth amongst the 30 OECD countries, which is partly attributed to the much lower rate of women's participation than is the case in many similar OECD countries

(Abhayaratna and Lattimore, 2006, cited in Pocock et al., 2010: 9), Australian organisations require greater sensitivity to meet the needs of full-time working women.

The discussion above suggests that the ideal worker norm still prevails in most Australian workplaces, reinforcing gender inequality in workplaces (Drago, 2007). This phenomenon is also attributed to the fact that there are gender differences in undertaking family work, as well as different cultural expectations of mothers and fathers (Hays, 1996; Townsend, 2002). As indicated earlier, the expected behaviours of the ideal worker include working long hours, not being tied to family work, and being able to relocate for career advancement (Drago et al., 2005). Under this sort of behavioural norm, it is not surprising that working women are less likely to pursue a pattern of continuous full-time employment and tend to miss out on reaping the rewards of being an ideal worker (Drago et al., 2005).

The ideal worker norm in organisations, despite creating bias against care giving, potentially encouraging excessive working hours and increasing work intensification, tends to form the basis for rewards and promotions by those 'who demonstrate ideal worker performance and expect it of others' (Blair-Loy, 2003; Drago et al., 2005: 4). Not being an 'ideal worker' in the workplace, therefore, has reverse implications for working women (and men who desire to engage in care giving) regarding their career advancement to positions of power and authority (Drago, 2007).

WLB policies established by governments and organisations tend to allow women (particularly those with dependent children) to work fewer hours in order to increase the time available for their family and other responsibilities (Fair Work Ombudsman, 2011). This trend, however, has raised concerns that increased employment of women in part-time positions represents a major source of gender inequity in the workforce, significantly disadvantaging women from advancing their careers (Bailyn, 2006; Lewis, 2009; McDonald et al., 2005; Pocock, 2005; Williams, 1999). Full-time working women who desire to care for their dependents often find themselves on the 'mommy track' or a career path that offers flexibility at the expense of career advancement (Williams, 1999).

In short, while both full-time working women and men are working extended hours, presenting a serious imbalance between work and non-work hours (Lewis, 2009; Pocock, 2005; Toth, 2005), the effects of work–life imbalance on full-time working women in Australia seem to present more serious concerns.

Nevertheless, past research has repeatedly confirmed that a positive experience in either work or non-work roles helps reduce employees' stress and work–life conflict and increases productivity (see Barnett et al., 1992; Hammer et al., 2004; Perry-Jenkins et al., 2000; Pocock, 2005; Rice et al., 1985). Notably, the work–family enrichment model established by Greenhaus and Powell (2006) underscores the inter-dependent nature of work and non-work roles in enriching both life dimensions. For example, Rothbard's (2001) study of 790 employees found that women gained their feeling of enrichment from the family-*to*-work direction, whereas men gained their feeling of enrichment from the work-*to*-family direction. In other words, women's positive experience in a family role spilled over into their work role, and men's positive experience in a work role spilled over into their family role (Pleck, 1977). Although inconsistent results have been found in the direction of the work–family interface, few studies have confirmed gender differences in how work and non-work influence each other (Grzywacz and Marks, 2000; Kirchmeyer, 1992; Kossek and Ozeki, 1998; Rothbard, 2001). Hence, this study addresses gender differences in the inter-dependent nature of the work and non-work interface, which have important management implications.

3. Gendered work–life conflicts

To date, work–life conflicts have been defined as an inner role conflict of workers, in which their participation in one role makes it difficult to participate in another (Greenhaus and Beutall, 1985). Although empirical findings on the relationship between gender and work–family conflict have been inconclusive (see Parasuraman and Greenhaus, 2002), some research indicates that there are significant gender differences between work–life conflicts, which are attributed to different societal role expectations and behavioural norms (Duxbury and Higgins, 1991; Gutek et al., 1991; Watts, 2009). For example, the ideal worker norm supports the behavioural norm of women engaging more in family roles than work roles and men engaging more in work roles than family roles, despite their similar work demands (Atkinson and Hall, 2009; Bailyn, 2006; Shelton and John, 1996). In the literature, work–family conflict (WFC) has been disaggregated into two components: work interfering with family (WIF) and family interfering with work (FIW) (Gutek et al., 1991). Gutek et al. (1991) further confirmed gendered work–life conflicts, in which women reported more WIF conflicts than men, despite spending the same number of hours in paid work as men. Further, women reported the same level of FIW conflicts as men despite spending more hours in family work than men, underscoring their psychological orientation towards family responsibilities, driven by societal and gender expectations.

As discussed, both genders are susceptible to gender bias in perceived work–life conflicts and possible mismanagement by their organisations to the point that, without sensible management intervention, women will continue to experience inability to fully engage in work, and men will continue to experience inability to fully engage at home (e.g. Hellerstein et al., 2002; Morrison and Von Glinow, 1990; Williams, 1999). This reflects a vicious cycle of different gender roles, different social expectations of gender roles, and women's and men's gendered self-images of their roles in life (Crompton et al., 2007). Therefore, we posit that research searching for gendered work–life conflicts in multiple dimensions is an essential step toward breaking this cycle. Further implying the importance of gender sensitivity in understanding employees' work–life conflicts, Drago's (2007: 57) study extended the notion of gender/work–life conflict by drawing our attention to the 'new gender gap' – a reference to the 'growing divide between women who achieve workforce success and those contributing to low paid or unpaid work in society'. This new gender gap is directly attributable to the ideal worker norm, which poses various implications for full-time working women in the workforce. The 'new gender gap' separates those women who serve as ideal workers from those who care, and also explains the increasing pay gap between 'mothers' and 'non-mothers'. The new gender gap also forces full-time working women to rely on bias avoidance behaviour – strategies to minimise or hide family commitments – in order to achieve career success (Bardoel et al., 2011; Drago et al., 2006). They do so in multiple ways – for example, by not taking up existing WLB options, delaying childbirth, limiting the number of children they have, or separating their home and work lives and prioritising work once they have children (Drago, 2007). Although bias avoidance behaviour is adopted by both men and women, it is more commonly practised by women. Thus, the work and non-work struggles or compromises that full-time working women experience are significant. Bias avoidance behaviour can be both productive and unproductive. Productive types of behaviour 'free up more time and energy for a career', while unproductive types 'involve hiding or covering up caregiving commitments' (Bardoel et al., 2009: 158). In their comparative study of US and Australian samples, Bardoel et al. (2009) further report that the Australian sample, respective of gender, reported significantly higher levels of unproductive bias avoidance than the US sample. This can be partly attributed to the political, economic and institutional factors that influence work–family issues, as well as to contextual issues.

Potentially as a result of the 'ideal worker norm', the 'new gender gap' and 'different gender role expectation' within the Australian workforce, women's work participation at the managerial level (29.8%) is significantly lower than that of men (70.2%). They also experience pay inequality (in 2010, on average, they were paid 18% less than men) and less career progression (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2010; EOWA, 2009; Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission [HREOC], 2008). These statistics suggest that gender inequality is being experienced by working women and that they are not adequately supported by managers in handling their gendered work–life conflicts. In addition, we expect that women need greater management support to manage their work–life conflicts due to their different biological make-up (Gerson, 2004) and their different mental modelling, which tends to integrate work and family, while men tend to segregate work and family issues (Andrews and Bailyn, 1993; Crosby, 1991; Pleck, 1985). By taking a multi-dimensional approach to uncovering gendered work–life conflicts (or to identify gendered needs for WLB), this study aims to find more gender-sensitive solutions to minimise women's and men's work–life conflicts.

4. Under-utilised WLB options

Despite the rhetoric of the importance of WLB policies and practices seen in the literature, in reality, they are under-utilised by employees (Allen, 2001; Anderson et al., 2002; McDonald et al., 2005; Thompson et al., 1999), indicating a major gap between the theory and practice of WLB. For example, WLB research in Australia found 50% of studied organisations ($N = 358$) reported that fewer than 20% of their employees used their WLB policies, practices and programmes, and only 6% reported that 80% of their employees used the organisations' WLB options (De Cieri et al., 2005). The major barriers for employees taking up those options were identified as a lack of communication to employees about WLB programmes, insufficient involvement of and communication with senior managers, supervisors' negative attitudes toward WLB alternatives, and excessive work demands experienced by employees (De Cieri et al., 2005). Although these findings came from HR managers' or specialists' perspectives, they clearly reveal that employees in Australia are struggling to take up their WLB options. The under-utilisation of WLB can partially be explained by the bias avoidance behaviour adopted by both men and women, which forces them not to utilise the existing policies and programs for fear of being penalised in their career advancement (Drago, 2007). However, data between 2006 and 2008 indicate an upward trend in utilising WLB options across all workplace groups, which is more apparent in small workplaces (Working Families Council, 2009). A comparison of work and family entitlements reported in the 2006 and 2008 Victorian Workplace Industrial Relations Surveys found notable improvement in the provision of leave for work and family matters across workplaces. This improvement was mainly reflected in an increase in the proportions of workplaces offering a formal work and family policy – from 29.5% in 2006 to 49.7% in 2008 for workplaces with more than 20 employees; an increase in maternity leave from 25.8% to 31.1%; more paid and family carers' leave; and an increase in the use of flexi-time for work and family purposes (Working Families Council, 2009).

However, WLB research repeatedly confirms that employees' take-up of formal WLB options is often left to managers' and supervisors' discretion, and they can easily manipulate employees' access to these options (Allen, 2001; Anderson et al., 2002; King, 2004; Kossek, 2005; Thompson et al., 1999). Also, consistent with the implications of the ideal worker norm, several studies indicate that employees often perceive WLB policies are for women and, therefore, women with dependent children continue to take up part-time working options while men keep their full-time positions (Atkinson and Hall, 2009; McDonald et al., 2005; Smithson and Stokoe, 2005). Research

further confirms that men tend to give higher priority to their work than to their family; this reduces their propensity to take up WLB policies such as flexible working options, because of their gender expectations and organisational career culture (Atkinson and Hall, 2009; Gregory and Milner, 2009; Sheridan, 2004; Smithson and Stokoe, 2005). Similarly, based on a study of nurses and their families, Lindsay et al. (2009: 661) argue that 'just as the breadwinner model is being modified […] so too is the maternalist culture of care', where women are considered important but as secondary breadwinners, while men are considered important but as secondary carers. This is also in line with the gendered expectations of motherhood norms as suggested by Drago et al. (2006).

Against this backdrop, our study seeks to fill the gap in the gender/WLB literature and to uncover the holistic WLB needs of full-time working women and men in the Australian workforce by examining multiple attributes of WLB, namely: (a) non-work issues; (b) work–life conflicts; (c) organisational support for WLB; (d) desired WLB options; and (e) management treatment.

5. Methodology

We have adopted a qualitative methodology as there has been only a small amount of research conducted to examine gender perceptions of working and non-working lives of employees in the Australian context, making the qualitative method appropriate for this study (cf. Miles and Huberman, 1994). We used telephone interviews, which were supplemented by an online survey to enhance the response rate. A total of 437 full-time employees participated in the study in 2008, representing 192 women and 245 men. We ensured that each occupational group included at least 40% women. By utilising the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) data (2009), we sought to capture representative perspectives of both genders in the Australian workforce across the four most-populated states in Australia (i.e. NSW, 29.9%; QLD, 23.8%; VIC, 27%; SA, 19.2%). We compared our data with the ABS data by calculating the percentage of each occupational group in the ABS data. We randomly sampled full-time (+40 hours per week) working participants in the following major occupational groups: (a) Managers (N=107, 24.5%, compared with 22.8% in ABS population data); (b) Professionals (N=120, 27.4%: 31.9% in ABS); (c) Clerical and Administrative Workers (N=112, 25.6%: 20.3% in ABS); (d) Machinery Operators and Drivers/Labourers (N=56, 12.8%: 12.5% in ABS); and (e) Technicians and Trade Workers (N=42, 9.7%: 27% in ABS).

In comparison with the ratio of each occupational group reported by the ABS data reported in the year 2008 (May), our sample more or less represented an equivalent ratio except in the case of technicians/trade workers, which was considerably less than that of the ABS data. In our sample we ensured, however, that the labour-intensive group, which includes technicians/trade, machinery operators and labourers, was equally represented (21.1%). Consequently, 336 participants worked in the service industry and 101 participants worked in the manufacturing industry.

In our sample, 90% of participants had been employed for more than one year in organisations with more than 100 employees. The age groups of the participants ranged from 21–30 (17.4%); 31–40 (26.7%); 41–50 (31%) and 50 years old and over (24.9%). The average work tenure category was between 5 and 10 years. The participants' educational backgrounds included high school attendance (38.8%); TAFE (28.8%); university undergraduate degrees (21.4%); university postgraduate degrees (10.7%) and PhDs (0.4%). Income ranges were < $40,000 (15.8%); $40,001–$70,000 (54%); $70,001–$100,000 (20%) and > $100,000 (10.2%).

5.1. Procedures

We used telephone interviews and an online survey to avoid disclosure of observable gender differences and thus minimise the observable bias of interviewers (Strauss et al., 2001). The

participants were first randomly selected from a database created by Bloomberg (an informational service company for business) and then interviewed by telephone. The potential participants were targeted on the basis of their self-reported occupation, full-time employment status, organisational size (> 100 employees) and duration of full-time employment (>one year). Approximately 1700 phone calls were made, with an approximate 9% response rate, which resulted in 156 responses from the telephone inquiries. The low response rate was due to telephone calls made during work hours. Once the consent of participants was obtained, the researchers made an appointment for a telephone interview or conducted the interview on the spot. Due to the acute working schedules of the participants, a structured questionnaire was used to complete each telephone interview within 15 to 20 minutes. The structured questionnaire (used in both telephone interviews and online surveys) allowed us to utilise pre-determined questions in relation to our core questions. In addition to the demographic components, the questions focused on: (a) non-work issues; (b) work–life conflicts; (c) organisational support for WLB; (d) desired WLB options; and (e) management treatment, and were primarily open-ended, allowing the respondents to express their views. All participants were assured of anonymity and advised of their ability to withdraw at any time.

Since it was difficult to access labour-intensive workers (i.e. machine operators, drivers, labourers and administrators) by telephone, and because of the low response rate experienced by telephone sampling, an online survey, administered by a professional online data-collection company, was also utilised to increase the sample size. The online survey, using the same structured questionnaire used in the telephone interviews, added 281 responses across all groups, giving a total of 437 participants. The potential participants were targeted on the basis of the same criteria as our telephone interview. The online data-collection company also helped us with equalising the representation of major states, major occupational groups, income earnings and gender.

5.2. Qualitative analysis

The resultant amount of qualitative data permitted us to quantify and verify common phrases and sentences through a data coding process. The two independent coders (i.e. the author and a research assistant who had studied psychology at a postgraduate level) met to take notes at each step of the analysis to capture the main themes. Under each question, the coders analysed the women's and the men's data separately and identified common content categories using coding procedures. They performed content analysis on the verbatim responses by developing codes and categories to establish the major themes in each dimension. The goal was to find emerging themes in the data by identifying and categorising patterns in the data (Guba and Lincoln, 1981; Krippendorff, 1980; Miles and Huberman, 1994). The coders took a step-wise analysis approach and examined the data to find the units of information that came directly from the phrases, sentences or entire paragraphs. Owing to the short duration of each interview granted by participants and the nature of the written online responses, the units of information were often in phrases and sentences rather than paragraphs. Inter-rater reliability between the two coders was approximately 80%. In cases of disagreement between the coders, the coders discussed the response until common agreement was reached. As a result of the researchers' thematic analysis and a visual mapping exercise (Plowman et al., 2007), gender-sensitive approaches to WLB management were established.

5.3. Findings

Significant gender differences between the perceptions of men and women were found in all the areas investigated, which included: (a) non-work lives; (b) work–life conflicts; (c) organisational

support for WLB; (d) desired WLB options; and (e) management treatment. The findings related to each area are discussed below.

5.3.1. Gender difference in non-work lives. While family and friends were the main non-work features reported by both men and women (Men = 110, Women = 93), there were major differences in their perceptions of how they spent their non-work time. Women reported a much narrower range of sport activities, such as regular gym attendance, and significantly more home-oriented activities than men did. On the other hand, men's non-work activities involved a wider range of social activities, such as golf, cycling, football, the gym and sailing.

Table 1 provides a detailed summary of the non-work roles of women and men. It confirms previous research findings about men's wider range of social activities than that of women in Australia (Blunsdon et al., 2005), and the predominance of women's household duties (Halford et al., 1997; Tang and Cousins, 2005). Notably, women's lack of time and narrower range of social activities indicate that their non-work time is considerably more restricted than men's, implying women's greater social immobility. Furthermore, the fact that women spend a lot more time on housework and with their families confirms the gendered social expectations, the behavioural norms of women and, possibly, the ideal worker norm in organisations, necessitating women's engagement in the family role to a greater extent than that of men.

5.3.2. Gender difference in work–life conflicts. While both genders expressed work-related (rather than non-work related) conflicts in relation to their experience of work–life conflicts, a major contrast in their perceptions of work-related conflicts was found. According to the gender role perspective of WFC (Gutek et al., 1991), gender affected perceived work–family conflicts according to traditional gender roles (i.e. men for work and women for family). Our findings support this perspective, in that men were more focused on reporting work-related conflicts than women, and women were more focused on reporting their struggles in juggling their work with their non-work activities (e.g. household duties).

In our finding, the first major contrast was that men reported significantly higher work-related conflict in relation to their longer working hours 'beyond the call of duty' (N = 93; 40% of the total sample of men) than did women (N = 28; 14% of the total sample of women). As expected, representative quotes from the men were: 'Working sometimes 12–14 hours some days really catches up to me after three consecutive days/nights; work quality drops considerably and so does tolerance levels' and 'Work is making too many demands, to the point that I am looking at other opportunities to ensure that life balance is not impacted'. Recent research found that extra hours spent at work by employees tend to correlate with extra negative spill-over from work to home (White et al., 2003). Thus, men's long working hours seem to act as a catalyst for their work–life imbalance, which produces a vicious cycle of the depleting nature of work and non-work roles. This interpretation was supported by a recent study by Pocock and colleagues (2010), and also partially supported by a study which found that fathers who regularly worked weekends or had irregular working hours experienced significantly greater work–family conflict than those who had a more standard work schedule (Hosking and Western, 2008). The issue of men's long working hours can possibly be attributed to the underlying notions of the ideal worker norm and bias avoidance behaviour (Drago, 2007) adopted by men. Men engaging in long hours of uninterrupted work might be proving to their managers that they are ideal workers. In doing so, they hide or neglect their family commitments for the sake of building their careers and receiving more rewards associated with being an ideal worker, such as quicker promotion and greater financial benefits.

Table 1. Summary of non-work-life patterns by gender

	Dimensions	Description	*n* =	Sample Accounts
Women	Family and friends	Seeing family as a whole: key word used is the home and family oriented; Catching up with friends.	93	Family orientation, housewife, mother, responsible for smooth running of the home, welfare of spouse and children. Catching up with friends.
	Gym and other general sport activities	Gym three times a week, often repeated.	44	Go to gym three times a week; participate in sporting or fitness-type activities.
	Home activities	Housework and home activities, e.g., gardening, relationship, cooking, relaxation.	43	Home duties. Gardening. Walking dogs. Shopping for home supplies. Relaxing at home, and enjoying family and friends at home.
	Insufficient time due to housework and families	Time taken by housework and families.	25	Time is very limited. Very busy with family commitments, children's activities, home maintenance and keeping up with study commitments.
	Social activities	General, not as specific, and active variances from men (e.g., movies, shopping, travelling, hobbies).	17	Pretty social; Quite social, Very social; socialising; socially based things; social networks.
	Study	Study part time	9	I study part time; I am currently studying for a postgraduate degree in Finance; time mostly spent at work or on studies.
Men	Family	Highly child-oriented (around sports) and seeing family in its various units.	110	Mainly filled with children's sporting commitments, driving them around and to these activities; have three boys who play sports so it's full on; playing with children.
	Wide range of social activities, majority sports	Wide range, e.g., golfing, cycling, football, gym, sailing, swimming, tennis, jogging, camping, going to the beach.	43	Some recreational sport, relaxing in the form of TV and occasional fishing; reading, writing, puzzles, internet, television, gardening, shopping, commuting, cooking, cinema, photography; wind-surfing and car restoration; sailing.
	Insufficient time due to work and social overload	Hectic, busy, not enough time; tired due to work and social activities overload.	28	Tired and trying to relax, try to make the most when away from work; Work overlaps. Unable to plan around shifts so marriage life suffers.
	Relaxation	Relaxing, doing what they want to do.	18	Very relaxed, doing all the things I want, very laid back, sport-oriented and relaxed.
	Entertainment	Internet, TV, movies, dining out, shopping, concerts.	22	Watch a lot of TV, movies, play games; Looking at different technologies, movies, TV and sports.
	Home maintenance	Duty	18	Repairs and DIY on my home; spending time renovating our home; care and maintenance of the family home.

In contrast to men's perceived work–life conflicts being associated with their long working hours, women indicated that their work–life conflicts occurred in the process of managing their non-work activities in conjunction with their standard working hours (see Table 2). This finding is consistent with the gender framework of WFC, which expects women to report more conflict in relation to holding two full-time jobs: work duties and home duties (Gutek et al., 1991). Findings also suggest that women's work–life conflict has been worsened by inflexible arrangements for working hours in their organisations (Shelton and John, 1996), as seen in the following representative quotes:

> Sometimes working 9–5 is annoying because all the shops and services are usually open 9–5, so it is sometimes hard to get to places I need to go such as a doctor, dentist or bank.

> Saturday is always spent doing grocery shopping, cleaning the unit, ironing, washing, dusting etc. I do not want to live in a dirty place, but the weekend goes by so quickly and by the time Monday rolls around again, I feel as if I haven't had much of a break.

> Hours of work are not really suited for family life but I have to manage around them. As children get older they require more attention.

These accounts indicate that women's conflicts are often associated with their attempts to simultaneously meet the demands of their household/family duties and those of standard full-time working hours, once again confirming the possible existence of the ideal worker norm and the bias it creates against care giving. This finding is surprising in the context of the rhetoric of flexible working arrangements offering options for non-standard working hours. Further, the lack of flexible arrangements for women also explains their differing experiences of work–life conflicts compared to men's. This interpretation is supported by a recent study in Australia which found that full-time working mothers experienced significantly greater work–family conflicts than part-time working mothers (Hosking and Western, 2008).

As Table 2 indicates, another noticeable finding was that men reported higher job-contextual conflicts ($N = 51$; 20%) than women ($N = 25$; 13%). This finding is not surprising given that men spent longer hours in work activities, which produced greater job-related work–life conflicts than for women. The finding of men's longer working hours and greater job-contextual conflicts than was the case for women also confirms the traditional gender role of men (Gutek et al., 1991). In spite of the many changes in gender roles in recent times, men's work-to-family (or life) conflicts seem to persist.

In summary, findings imply that the ideal worker norm, along with traditional gender roles, still prevails in organisations, affecting both men and women. This is leading to men working long hours and women struggling to meet the demands of both their household/family duties and standard full-time working hours. Although most Australian organisations have WLB policies that allow employees to leave after working their standard working hours, or to take time off when necessary (De Cieri et al., 2005), these findings indicate that neither gender adequately takes advantage of those flexible working options. This can be explained by their bias avoidance behaviours, as suggested by Drago (2007) – by minimising or hiding family commitments in order to achieve career success.

5.3.3. Gendered organisational support for work–life balance.

We found gendered organisational support is an issue that acts as a major source of gender inequality for full-time working women and men. Findings reveal that the focus of many of the men interviewed was on discretionary time, whereas for women the focus was on less flexible working arrangements. As indicated in Table 3,

Table 2. Work–life conflicts by gender

Major themes	Women	*n*=	Men	*n*=
Work hours	Work–life conflicts due to standard working hours (9am–5pm)	**70**	Work–life conflicts due to long working hours (beyond 9am–5pm)	**93**
	Issues of conflict:		*Issues of conflict:*	
	Long working hours	28	Lack of time with family and children	30
	Lack of family and self time	15	Unspecified sources	30
	Non-flexible working hours	10	Lack of hobbies/social activities	10
	Appointment clashes	9	Insufficient time to relax/rest	9
	Unspecified sources	8	Weekends taken up by work	7
			Inability to take holidays	6
			Personal appointments	1
Job context	Job characteristics	**25**	Job characteristics	**51**
	Issues of conflict:		*Issues of conflict:*	
	Changing work hours	9	Nature of the job	28
	Insufficient pay	8	Demanding shift	9
	Project deadlines	8	Insufficient pay	7
Negative work relations	Negative work relations	14	Negative work relations	15
	Issues of conflict:		*Issues of conflict:*	
	Relationship with supervisor/management	6	Relationship with supervisor/management	10
	Relationship with co-workers	8	Relationship with co-workers	5

we found that even though women reported having flexible working hours (i.e. the ability to leave work at any time), it was contingent upon their manager's support and/or formal organisational policies and norms. On the other hand, significantly more men had unconditional self-directed flexibility in arranging their working hours, as reported in the representative quotes below:

> My hours can be flexible and organised through an informal process.

> Allows me to take time for special family functions (i.e., kids' school functions or if children or wife is sick – I am able to work from home) – more of an informal arrangement which is not abused.

In contrast, women's greater conditional arrangements for working hours via formal managerial and organisational support are manifested in the following representative quotes:

> Although formal application is required, there's flexibility in hours.

> Availability of flexi-time which is formal and an understanding General Manager who allows a rec leave day in an emergency.

> They (managers) are flexible when it comes to having appointments, it's a give and take situation; we can leave early if we are on top of our work.

In our study, both genders reported formal support for WLB, namely, formal leave policies (e.g. annual leave, sick leave, maternity leave), special leave options (e.g. carers' leave, compassionate

Table 3. Gendered organisational support for WLB

Major themes	Women	n=	Men	n=
Totally flexible working hours	Self-directed, but subject to support from manager and/or formal policies and norms	15	Self-directed	56
Block-of-time leave	Recognition and practice of "discretionary block-of-time" leave	5	Recognition and practice of 'discretionary block-of-time leave' (Recognition *n*=21; Practice *n*=26)	48
Conditional flexibility	Conditional flexibility *Associated with:*	47	Conditional flexibility *Associated with:*	5
	Appointments	20	Give and take	5
	General flexible working hours, around starting and finishing times	27		
	Give and take	13		
Other flexible support	Other flexible support *Associated with:*	17	Other flexible support *Associated with:*	21
	Working from home	10	Working from home	13
	Perception of organisational culture	7	Rostering	8

leave, family leave, recreational leave and study leave), well-being programmes, counselling and employee assistance schemes. As stated, the focus of many of the men interviewed was on discretionary time, whereas for women the focus was on less flexible working arrangements. This is indicated in the following representative quotes from men:

> Letting me take holidays when I want and not set a time.

> Flexible about starting times, days in lieu, unlimited sick leave.

> Extra 10 day sick/carers' leave per year.

> Flexible work time, personal leave, no fixed start or stop times, independent work management …

In contrast, with a few exceptions, most women did not report the 'discretionary' block-of-time leave allowances reported by the men. Although there were many accounts of 'block-of-time leave', only five women reported having discretion in taking leave to meet their personal needs (*N* = 5), such as 'I have flexible working hours and can arrive and leave at what times I need to', 'I am free to leave work or not attend if the need arises. I can avail of leave or work extra hours' and 'Freedom to go to appointments as needed, on-site gym, children on site policy'. Examples of their 'non-discretionary or conditional block-of-time leave' are reflected in these accounts:

> Allowed to purchase extra leave (not always affordable) and have a rostered day off once a month but this may be cut out.

> Flexi-time – I can accumulate a certain amount of flexi-time when I am very busy and then take the time off during quieter periods. I can also use flexi-time to go to personal appointments.

> They encourage us to take time off work when we have built up too much flexi. There's a back-up system at work where every member of the team is trained in some part of another team member's role so that absence doesn't affect the standard of service.

> Gives flex days personal leave, recreation leave as time off if suffering from stress. Also has external counselling services that we can be referred to.

The finding of less flexible working arrangements for full-time working women, compared to those for full-time working men, further explains women's earlier accounts of greater work–life conflict in relation to their standard working hours, and their narrower range of social activities.

In summary, although past research indicates men's tendency not to take up formal flexible working options (Gregory and Milner, 2009), the findings of this study indicate that full-time working men tend to acquire significantly more informal flexible working arrangements, such as block-of-time leave and self-directed working hours, rather than formal flexible work options (no fixed start or stop times, extra sick/carers' leave and flexible working hours when needed, for example). This phenomenon provides greater advantages for men than for women to become ideal workers by '*flexibly*' working full-time or longer hours to progress their career toward a position of power, which gives them further authority to exercise discretionary block-of-time leave and working hours. In addition, our finding that men use block-of-time leave and self-directed working hours, rather than formal flexible work options such as extra sick/carers' leave and flexible working hours when needed, confirms the prevailing societal expectations and behavioural norms that view family and carers' roles to be the responsibility of women.

5.3.4. Gender preferences for WLB options. Table 4 reports gender perceptions of desired WLB options, along with practical implications. On the surface, both genders appear to have a common desire for more non-standard working hours, either through part-time work, a four-day week, a nine-day fortnight and/or time off in lieu. However, women reported a significantly greater preference to work on the basis of non-standard forms of employment ($N = 132$; 69%) than men did ($N = 64$; 26%). This finding also implies the existence of the 'ideal worker norm' in organisations, in which women are undertaking more unpaid care-giving responsibilities/housework than men, allowing men to behave as an ideal worker. Therefore, full-time working women report their greater preference to work on the basis of non-standard forms of employment. Nevertheless, based upon earlier accounts, we acknowledge that this phenomenon also encompasses the negative side-effect of the inflexible working arrangements being imposed on women that inevitably, in practice, influence them to want non-standard forms of employment. We argue that if women can obtain more flexibility in their working hours, as men do, fewer would give up their full-time working status, as happens currently in the workforce (Atkinson and Hall, 2009; Lewis, 2009; Sheridan, 2004; Smithson and Stokoe, 2005).

5.3.5. Management treatment. When participants were asked about management's treatment of them in relation to WLB, both genders indicated their desire for greater job-related sensitivity from managers, such as the provision of flexible and accessible work locations and more work resources such as digital devices. However, contrasting management treatment was reported between genders. Men reported excessive job demands from managers ($N = 55$; 20%) whereas women reported care and concern from managers about their whole life ($N = 52$; 27%). Men's perceived excessive job demands from managers and their earlier accounts of work–life conflicts relating to long working hours and job demands are consistent, and are in line with the 'ideal worker norm'. Representative quotes of men's accounts of managers making excessive job demands include:

Table 4. Gender preferences for WLB options and preferred management treatment

Themes	Women	n=	Men	n=	Practical implications	
					Women	**Men**
Work hours	Non-standard working hours *which include:*	132	Non-standard working hours *which include:*	64	Significantly more sensitivity required in granting flexible working hours for women as well as men	
	Part-time work	36	Four-day working week	35		
	Less than standard working hours	35	Part-time work	14		
	Four-day working week	33	Nine-day fortnight	3		
	Nine-day fortnight	17	40 home/60 office	3		
	Time off in lieu	6	50/50	9		
	50/50	5	Time off in lieu	3		
	Standard working hours	15	Standard working hours	30		
			Work less	25		
	Self-directed total flexibility	26	Self-directed total flexibility	27		
	General flexibility	34	General flexibility	26		
Procedure	Job sensitivity	114	Job sensitivity	118	Moderate work-contextual sensitivity such as working from home	High work-contextual sensitivity such as working from home, having better work locations and design, as well as well-being programmes
	Associated with:		*Associated with:*			
	Working from home	53	Working from home	33		Greater attention to job design and give employee an opportunity to negotiate job design in performance reviews
	Work location – closer to home	30	Work location – office location and design	22		
	External environment, well-being and relationships	3	External environment, well-being and relationships	24		
	More resources	20	More resources	26		
	Job design	19	Job design	31		
Preferred management treatment	Care and relational treatment	52	Reduction of job demands	55	Greater relational care and understanding from management about their whole life	Greater, more open communication about their jobs to assist them to manage their excessive job demands
	Unfair pay and leave indicating their desire for fair pay and leave	92	Unfair pay and leave indicating their desire for fair pay and leave	38	Significantly more sensitivity required in granting fair pay and leave for women than for men	

My employers continue to increase the demands at work. They sit in their offices devising ways to justify their jobs by creating more work for plebs.

They (managers) make extra demands and assume weekend and weeknight unpaid availability.

No help, no support and no advice … I have been left to my own devices to do my job.

On the other hand, we did not find a major theme relating to job demands from the women. Instead, managers' care and concern about their whole life rather than just their work emerged as a more salient issue. Representative quotes of the women's accounts are as follows:

Some have been understanding, some have shown their true colours and backstabbed, some just don't even care, but I've got to the stage where I just can't be bothered any more to say anything and just pretend my world is all happy and rosy.

My managers and supervisors are sympathetic and helpful if problems arise and help is needed to balance work–life conflicts.

I have been treated well but am unable to share personal problems which sometimes spill over into my work life (i.e. depression, loneliness).

Furthermore, women expressed significantly more perceived unfairness about their work outcomes, such as their pay and leave entitlements ($N = 92$; 48%) than men did ($N = 38$; 20%). This finding is not surprising, as significant discrepancies have already been reported in this study in relation to informal flexible working hour arrangements between genders. The finding also confirms the pervasive gender pay inequality in Australia and other developed nations (Chartered Management Institute, 2010; HREOC, 2008).

6. Conclusion and policy implications

Using the theoretical lens of an ideal worker norm, the article examined the gendered perceptions of WLB of 192 women and 245 men across the four most populated states in Australia. The findings of gender perceptions in relation to each dimension investigated, such as non-work roles, work–life conflicts, current organisational support, desired WLB options and preferred management treatment, confirm the existence of ideal worker norms in Australian workplaces, affecting men's and women's working and non-working lives. Findings suggest that full-time working women are significantly disadvantaged, face more challenges and lack freedom in managing their work and non-work roles. On the other hand, full-time working men continue to work excessively long hours and lack control over their job context. Full-time working women's significantly narrower range of social activities outside their work (gym once a week and housework, for example) and their conditional flexible working hour arrangements further confirmed their restricted life-styles.

Our research findings indicate that both genders attribute a major source of their work–life conflicts to work-related matters rather than non-work matters. In particular, women's work–life conflicts have been attributed to the conditions placed on their flexible working hours, lack of managers' care and unfair pay and leave entitlements, which can be partly attributed to the existence of ideal worker norms in the workplace. These findings, therefore, indicate that full-time working women need fair and equitable WLB options as well as management sensitivity to enable them to manage their work and non-work roles with greater flexibility. Once managers and

supervisors show greater sensitivity towards their socially constructed dilemmas, women will be able to balance their dual roles better, which will, in turn, positively affect their work productivity and career advancement (cf. Ahuja et al., 2007; Atkinson and Hall, 2009; Kossek, 2005).

In light of men's work–life conflict being associated with long working hours and excessive job demands from managers – again, partly explained by ideal worker norms in the workplace – we emphasise the need for managers to give men greater control over how they manage the demands of their job. Moreover, considering the issues of fatigue and ill-health associated with long working hours and their depletion of quality of life (Sparks et al., 1997), managers need to step aside from the ideal worker norm and realise the importance of implementing standardised working hours for men. In order to give men more job-related discretion, we also propose a better job-focused performance review process and day-to-day work interaction. For example, managers are recommended to ask probing questions such as 'Are you satisfied with the nature of your job such as the job design, working hours and job expectations?' Once managers and supervisors show greater sensitivity to men's gendered dilemmas in relation to their job demands (including long working hours), we expect men to gain more control over their WLB, which, in turn, would lead to increased productivity (cf. Ahuja et al., 2007; Kossek, 2005).

Rather than focusing on further development of WLB policies, practices and programmes at the organisational level, we posit (along with other scholars) that the key to employees' attainment of WLB is management sensitivity to provide employees with a greater sense of control in managing their work and non-work lives within their given social context (Ahuja et al., 2007; Atkinson and Hall, 2009; Kossek, 2005). Managers' understanding of employees' gender needs will furthermore offer employees greater discretion to decide when, where and how their job is done, thus leading to greater work and non-work satisfaction (cf. Ahuja et al., 2007; McDonald et al., 2005). In addition, we see the importance of gender/WLB education and training for both managers and employees to break down the ideal worker norm in the workplace, facilitating both genders to co-create gender-sensitive solutions to enhance their productivity and live more satisfactory lives.

Based on the findings, we stress the need for managers to deviate from the ideal worker norm currently prevailing in organisations. This will also help in addressing the problems of bias avoidance behaviour adopted by both men and women and overcoming the pervasive gender inequality in the Australian workforce. As the ideal worker norm is deeply embedded in contemporary organisations, we acknowledge that this is easier said than done. For organisations to move away from the ideal worker norm will take time, requiring changes in organisational values and management principles. We therefore propose gender-sensitive management principles and WLB policies which will not only address men's and women's gendered needs but also assist workplaces to eventually move away from their expectations of the ideal worker norm. The findings of this study emphasise the significance of the 'principle' of management sensitivity in meeting the needs of diverse social groups: needs which are often not fulfilled by neutral WLB policies and practices (HREOC, 2008). Implementing gender-sensitive WLB management will help organisations to move away from adherence to the ideal worker norm and will also assist full-time employees to overcome the socially constructed gender dilemmas in their workplace, which would contribute towards healthier families, better social relationships and a more productive workforce.

Figure 1 indicates guidelines for implementing gender-sensitive WLB management principles and policies for full-time employees. To overcome the pervasive gender inequality in the Australian workforce and the enduring existence of the ideal worker norm, we recommend gender-sensitive

management principles which focus on: (a) creating a family-friendly culture in the workplace; (b) giving employees (both men and women) discretion in managing their total flexible working hours; (c) managers being more attentive to daily gendered needs, namely, job sensitivity for men (i.e., excessive job demands and working hours) and non-work role sensitivity for women (i.e., care and household responsibilities); (d) gender/WLB education and training for both managers and employees, to enhance men's and women's understanding of each other's lives and socially constructed dilemmas; e) job-sensitive performance review for men; and f) holistic life-sensitive performance review for women.

Our proposed gender-specific management principles will, in turn, translate into 'day-to-day' and 'general' gender-sensitive WLB policies in the workplace (See Figure 1). Examples of day-to-day gender-sensitive policies include (a) employees' self-discretionary flexible hours in order to

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Gender-sensitive WLB management principles

a) Create a family-friendly culture in the workplace
b) Employees (men and women) given self-discretion in managing total flexible working hours
c) Managers being more attentive to daily gendered needs, namely, job sensitivity to men (i.e., excessive job demands and working hours) and non-work role sensitivity to women (i.e., care and household responsibilities)
d) Gender/WLB education and training among both managers and employees to enhance men's and women's understanding of each other's lives and socially constructed dilemmas
e) Job sensitive performance review for men
f) Holistic life sensitive performance review for women
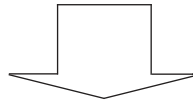
Day-to-day gender-sensitive WLB policies

a) Employees' self-discretionary flexible hours to break down the ideal worker norm, and allow men and women to feel free to work flexibly
b) Fix duration of full-time working hours for men in particular to stop their pursuit of being an ideal worker and reduce their tendency to compromise their non-work responsibilities

General gender-sensitive and neutral WLB policies

a) Fair pay and block-of-time leave entitlements regardless of gender, which allow women and men to exercise formal leave policies (annual leave, sick leave, maternity leave, for example), special leave options (carers' leave, for example)
b) Family-friendly policies (such as child care facilities, more discretion in managing flexible working hours and flexible work options for women)
c) Well-being programmes, counselling and employee assistance schemes, job sharing options

Figure 1. Gender-sensitive WLB management principles and policies for full-time employees.

break down the ideal worker norm, allowing both men and women to feel free to work flexibly; and (b) fixed duration of full-time work hours, especially targeted to men in order to prevent their pursuit of 'ideal worker' status and reduce their tendency to compromise their non-work responsibilities. The combination of policies (a) and (b) means that both genders are allowed to work flexibly during standard work hours without managers' approval and, simultaneously, are not working beyond the duration of full-time hours per day. These policies, however, will require organisations to have a proper merit-based reward and promotion procedure to make employees accountable for their task performance.

In addition to 'day-to-day' gender-sensitive WLB policies, the gender-specific management principles will also lead to 'general' gender-sensitive WLB policies. For example, these policies include: (a) fair pay and block-of-time leave entitlements regardless of gender, which allow women and men to exercise formal leave policies (e.g. annual leave, sick leave, maternity leave) and special leave options (e.g. carers' leave); (b) family-friendly policies (i.e. child care facilities, more discretion in managing flexible working hours and flexible work options for women); and (c) well-being programmes, counseling and employee assistance schemes, and job sharing options. We propose that implementation of these gender-sensitive management principles and gender-sensitive day-to-day and general WLB policies will eventually assist workplaces to move away from the ideal worker norm and decrease the bias avoidance behaviour practiced by both men and women in the workplace.

We acknowledge that our approach has certain limitations in its applicability to certain industries and occupations, such as construction workers and receptionists, who are required to be on site for fixed hours with little to no room for negotiation. We also acknowledge that the technicians and trade workers' sample was lower than the ratio reported by ABS population data. Further, our gender-sensitive management implications are limited as we did not examine other human resource management policies and practices such as rewarding and promotion experience of both genders. We call for future research to test the validity of our findings and explore the meaning of WLB for employees for each industry sector and occupational group. Nevertheless, by presenting a landscape of gender/WLB in the Australian workforce, we hope that the principle of gender sensitivity will guide practitioners to implement customised gender-sensitive WLB strategies for their full-time employees within their given organisational context.

Funding

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