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Title: Changing Times - support and resistance for new working-time arrangements in a blue-collar workplace

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Changing Times - support and resistance for new working-time arrangements in a blue-collar workplace

Working time arrangements are one of the key determinants of an employee's ability to balance or combine work and family demands. While traditional working time norms and the full-time job remain entrenched in many male-dominated workplaces and occupations, they are also under challenge as workforce demographics and expectations shift. The paper draws on an action research case study of the introduction of more flexible work arrangements in such a workplace. In Waterworks, the sewerage and water treatment plants of a large Australian utility, working time norms remain grounded in the full-time male breadwinner model. Waterworks is densely masculine (Lewis 2007), with only one in seven of the employees in these worksites being women. Work in these sites was, and still is, characterised as 'shovel and shit' jobs and certainly no place for a woman. Yet, technological change has automated many of the processes. Furthermore, the need to respond to the slowly increasing number of women and the contemporary pressures to recruit and retain a more diverse and inclusive workforce prompted management to investigate the implementation of alternative working arrangements, many of which were provided for in industrial agreements and organisational policies. Specifically, the issue was part-time work for women returning from maternity leave, but the research uncovered a broader interest in changing working time norms. The paper critically examines the factors explaining the support for and resistance to changing working time and work organisation.

The research project was initiated by a female manager in response to one of her female employees, who requested part-time work on return from maternity leave. The interest in alternative working time arrangements by both the manager and employee had grown out of previous research on the 'dual agenda' (see Charlesworth and Baird, 2007) undertaken in the organisation - research which set up a gender awareness and which, in this instance, became a catalyst for change. The subsequent research, presented in this paper, adopted the 'Dual Agenda' theory and a form of the Collaborative Interactive Action Research method of Rapoport et al (2002). The aim of the project was to investigate the factors that promote and/or impede the achievement of workplace flexibility, part-time work, gender equity and organisational effectiveness at Waterworks. Extensive interview, observation and documentary data were collected and interviews were undertaken with 54 employees and managers (representing 20 percent of the workforce) over a period of ten weeks. This was then reported back to them for their input and comment. The research process and findings highlighted the need for alternative working time arrangements, not only for women but also for men with a variety of family and personal circumstances.

Using the foundation concepts of 'ideal worker' and ideal work organisation (Williams, 2000) to guide the field work and interviews the research found there was both support for, and resistance to, the implementation of part-time work and indeed for changing working time arrangements more generally at Waterworks. The paper elaborates on the support for change and illustrates how this support came from many

men and women, and from managers and employees, who faced a range of work-life and work-family pressures. In particular, making Waterworks more family friendly was seen as a vehicle for attracting more women and increasing the number of gender mixed teams at Waterworks. This was especially valued by both employees and managers as gender mixed teams were seen as a way of improving work performance, social relations and occupational health and safety as well as providing for a more women-friendly work environment. At the same time, initiating and leading gender equitable organisational change in a male dominated working environment, may be highly contentious, drawing resistance from not only managers but employees and unions as well. The paper explains the ways in which this resistance was manifested. There was concern expressed by managers about the staffing of the treatment plants if existing work practices and organisation were altered. There was also resistance from a number of men in the more male-dominated work teams to what they saw as management-initiated change. In particular, the research process saw a re-emergence of questioning about the suitability of women in what was is still viewed in Waterworks discourses as a 'dirty' workplace, despite technological change.

The outcome of the research project was to present a series of recommendations that could be acted upon by management to improve gender relations in the plants; to address issues of inequity and discrimination and to make part-time work more viable. While progress on implementing the changes is slow, there is genuine support for the changes from some employees, middle and senior management and the seeds of a more receptive work and family culture are discernable. The research demonstrates the complex iterative change process in many dual agenda projects and the importance of understanding the significance of working time norms not only for women's work and family life, but for also for men's changing circumstances and working lives.

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