

Leading retailers provide for work/life balance.

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Our study revealed that addressing work/life balance is a key challenge for the industry.

Over the last decade increasing attention has been paid to the significant benefits that family-friendly practices can bring to the workplace.

Studies have shown that employers benefit from work/life practices through:

- an increased ability to attract staff
- reduced labour turnover
- reduced absenteeism
- increased productivity, and
- higher staff morale, satisfaction and loyalty.

'Work/life balance' isn't just about enabling women to manage their jobs and their families – although this is an important aspect. It is about looking at working patterns so that all employees can fully contribute without short-changing their workplace or their other responsibilities.

Family-friendly working arrangements make sound business sense.

People's approach to balancing their work and family responsibilities varies according to what point of their life-cycle they are in.

Work and Family Awards

The Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry (ACCI) National Work and Family Awards is an annual event that recognises best practice in family-friendly workplaces. They are open to any workplace, whether large or small, progressed or just starting, that is helping employees balance their work and personal lives. Further information can be found at www.dewr.gov.au/workplaceRelations/workAndFamily/default.asp

Benchmarking data

Our survey found that almost a quarter of all retailers believed that a major reason for staff leaving their company was to seek more supportive work/life conditions.

For retail outlet staff:

- 93 per cent of retailers offer part-time work
- 70 per cent provide family/carer's leave
- 57 per cent have flexible start/finish times
- 56 per cent say that rosters are negotiable to cater to staff's work/life situation
- 37 per cent offer school-term employment
- 27 per cent have flex-time
- 31 per cent have implemented job share arrangements
- 14 per cent have self-managed rosters
- 13 per cent allow working from home, and
- 9 per cent provide paid (or part-paid) maternity leave.

“ Our staff meetings always address the issue of how we can assist staff to have a healthy work/life balance. ”

Manager, Esprit

International comparisons

ASDA Superstores is one of the UK's leading grocery and clothing chains, with 240 stores, employing a total of 100 000 employees. Approximately 73 per cent of employees are part-time.

ASDA's wide range of working practices includes:

- child care leave – available for parents to stop work for a short period before the summer holidays, returning later with continuous service and maintained benefits
- shift swapping scheme – available for employees needing to be absent from work for family or domestic reasons
- school starter scheme – allows parents to take a half day holiday on their child's first day of school
- sabbaticals – up to 3 months unpaid leave, regardless of job status of length of service, for all staff over 50 years old, and
- paternity leave – provided to all male employees regardless of length of service.

Research carried out by Sainsbury's supermarkets in the UK revealed that work/life issues were as important to employees, if not more important, than salary (DFEE 2000).

Best Practice – Work and Family Initiatives Guide summarises key features and family-friendly measures that are in place in organisations that were finalists or winners of National Work and Family Award in 2000 and 2001. It also provides examples of family-friendly provisions in federal certified agreements. It is available from the Work and Family Unit - Ph 02 6121 7742 or email: workandfamily@dewr.gov.au

Australian stories

Mistearl enabled a team leader to move to an outlet closer to her home. This cut down on her travelling time, and meant that she could look after her children after school.

Lone Star Steakhouse and Saloon recently relocated a lead manager, whose family chose not to move due to the children's schooling. Lone Star pays for the manager to visit his family regularly throughout the year. When families do move, Lone Star pay for all relocation expenses for the family, including for pets.

Spotlight offers job-share to managers. And managers are able to take sabbaticals or extended leave funded by profit-share payments.

“ I work on a 3 day, 12 hour shift basis. These hours are chosen by me and they suit me fine. I have a hobby which I dedicate my time to for the four days I have off a week. ”

Employee, Baristas Coffee Shop

“ When a member of staff has undergone personal issues which has prevented them from working productively, we have provided paid leave so that the employee can go and deal with their problems and return to work. ”

Manager, Eurest

Some of **Lowe's** casual employees can work from 10am to 2pm. This provides both managers and staff with certainty, and is ideal for workers with school-age children.

McDonald's and **The Body Shop** provided unpaid maternity leave to their casual employees before this was introduced as a condition of employment for those under federal awards, following the test case in the Australian Industrial Relations Commission.

Return from maternity leave

Women leaving the workforce for childbearing reasons cost the retail industry millions of dollars in lost skills. By the time a woman leaves to have her first child she may have notched up years of experience, within the industry, and within your business.

Increasingly, Australian retailers are asking:

- can we really afford to lose those skills and experience?
- do we want these skills to be harnessed by a competitor?

A commonly used indicator of family-friendliness within an organisation is the rate at which women return from maternity leave, and the length of time they remain within the organisation. The more effective work/life initiatives are, the better these rates tend to be.

“ All managers that have gone on maternity leave have returned. ”

Senior Manager, Lonestar

International comparisons

In the UK a number of retailers report impressive improvements in their return from maternity leave rates, following the implementation of work/life initiatives.

At Littlewoods 98 per cent of staff on maternity leave returned to work.

Sainsbury's return rate has improved from 42 per cent in 89/90 to 84 per cent in 98/99, saving them hundreds of thousands of pounds.

The Guide to Evaluating Work and Family Strategies outlines a process to evaluate strategies and their impact on outcomes such as employee retention, return from parental leave and work satisfaction. It is available from the Work and Family Unit: Ph 02 6121 7742 or email: workandfamily@dewr.gov.au

Benchmarking data

Our survey found:

- only 41 per cent of Australian retailers keep records on the number of women who return from maternity leave.

In these companies their records show that:

- on average, 73 per cent of women return to work from maternity leave, and
- 63 per cent of staff who were once on maternity leave are with the same business 12 months after returning to work.

Esprit's work and family policies make a positive contribution to the development of the company's culture. This assists with recruitment as staff speak with others and spread the word on the Esprit culture – characterised as fun and fresh. As part of its effort to introduce more family friendly working arrangements, Esprit staff can use maternity leave over 3 years and staff returning from maternity leave can take up part-time positions. To build on the success of these policies, Esprit introduced paid maternity leave to attract and retain valuable staff and cut down on recruitment and training costs. Esprit offers 12 weeks paid maternity leave.

Staff and management meetings address the issues of how the company can assist staff to have a healthy work/life balance. A number of staff, including those at management level, are operating on flexible hours. Managers are flexible about staff having time off to participate in parent-teacher meetings and other family-related responsibilities.

For more information on implementing a work and family program visit the Work and Family Unit:
<http://www.dewr.gov.au/workplaceRelations/workAndFamily/default.asp>