

## **One size fits one: Customizing work through manager-employee exchange**

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### **Abstract**

While prior research has addressed how collective workplace outcomes are negotiated between employers and trade unions, less attention has been afforded to the 'everyday', micro-level exchanges between managers and employees in adjusting work, alongside the 'standard' terms and conditions set out in employment contracts. Building on previous work on idiosyncratic deals and requests for flexible scheduling, this article presents the findings from a survey of Australian parents which addressed manager-employee exchanges which led to customized work arrangements. The survey examined the frequency with which various employment terms and conditions were negotiated, who initiated the interactions, where they occurred, and the extent of perceived compromise. The study revealed that manager-employee exchanges occur frequently in the context of roles in nuclear and extended families, and are influenced by the parameters around which formal childcare and educational settings function. Women rated the exchanges as more important than men, but men and women were similarly comfortable with the interactions and satisfied with outcomes. The findings have important implications for managers and organizations in terms of balancing the goals of efficiency with employees' preferences for workplace flexibility and other terms beyond those which are standardized.

**Key words:** customized work arrangements, flexibility, manager-employee exchange, work and family, employment relations, right to request.

## **One size fits one: Customizing work through manager-employee exchange**

Paula McDonald and Keith Townsend

Customizing, shaping or modifying the 'standard' terms and conditions of employment appear to be increasingly frequent and complex practices in contemporary organizations. The shift towards the destandardization of work has occurred in the context of ideological shifts from collective to individualized cultures, more flexible, contractual agreement making (often, but not exclusively in the employer's favour), the growth of the knowledge economy, and the reduction of the legitimacy of trade unions. Legislative and institutional arrangements are important when considering modifications to work because they provide some protection and choices for employees. However, changes to the timing and location of work and on-the-job tasks (Dick, 2009; Rousseau, 2001; Wrzesniewski and Dutton, 2001) - or what we refer to in this paper as customized work arrangements - also requires effective one-on-one interactions between managers and employees. While prior research has provided a useful understanding of how collective workplace agreements are negotiated between employers and trade unions (e.g. Walton, Cutcher-Gershenfeld and McKersie, 1994), more limited work has addressed how the terms and conditions of employment are individually customized through interactions between managers and their subordinates. Illustrative of empirical work in the area and on which we draw in order to frame the current study, is a growing body of literature on idiosyncratic deals and studies which address outcomes of requests for flexible work.

The current study builds on this scholarship by defining more broadly what constitutes customized work and by incorporating aspects of the process of manager-employee exchange. The paper firstly locates the focus on customized work arrangements within existing literature addressing flexible workplace scheduling and ideosyncratic deals. Customizations, as defined here, include provisions typically addressed in studies of workplace flexibility (e.g., part-time work; parental leave), but also other adjustments including travel requirements, start and finish times and job-specific responsibilities. The empirical section of the paper presents the findings from a survey of Australian parents which examined the frequency with which various employment arrangements were adjusted across a range of workplaces, who initiated the interactions, where they occurred, and the extent of perceived compromise. We targeted parents for the study because transitions associated with changing social and familial circumstances in early parenthood often involve a series of changes to the timing, location or functions of work, thereby providing targeted insights into how managers and employees influence the spatial and temporal boundaries of work (Rau and Hyland 2002). The outcomes of such exchanges have significant consequences for individuals and organizations in balancing the goals of business efficiency with employees' need to fulfill multiple roles and minimize work-life interference. Research demonstrates, for example, that conciliatory exchanges around workplace flexibility has implications for employee wellbeing, job satisfaction, organizational citizenship behaviours and turnover intentions (Anand et al 2010; Beauregard & Henry 2009; Buzzanell & Liu 2007; Hornung et al 2008).

### **Customizing work through formal flexibility provisions**

Despite well conceived policies around flexibility which aim to accommodate the integration of multiple life domains, the organization of work around the unencumbered 'ideal worker' has remained largely unchallenged (Charlesworth & Baird 2007). Consequently, many who work long hours feel anxious about the impact of their hours on themselves and their intimate relationships (Pocock, 2000). Further, individual employees have different preferences for the

integration versus segmentation of work and non-work roles (Ashforth et al 2000) and workplace flexibility has different meanings at different occupational levels (Charlesworth, 1997; Harley & Whitehouse, 2001), affecting the extent to which work-life pressures are alleviated or intensified (Presser 2003). Across different workplaces, employees have variable access to flexible work provisions espoused in formal policies and even when they are able to do so, they may face career penalties as a consequence (Allen & Armstrong, 2006; Perry-Smith & Blum, 2000).

Conversely, research clearly demonstrates that effective access to conditions which facilitate employees' non-work responsibilities has a significant and positive impact on individuals and organisations. This is because the use of and satisfaction with work schedule flexibility is linked with greater job satisfaction, loyalty and organizational commitment (Hornung et al 2008) and the ability to work longer hours before workload negatively impacts balance (Hill et al 2001). Enhancing access to flexible scheduling is also thought to offer organizations competitive advantage by enhancing perceptions of anticipated organisational support (Casper & Buffardi 2004); increasing work effort and positive job-related attitudes (Beauregard & Henry 2009); increasing organizational commitment; and reducing turnover intentions (Halpern 2005). Managerial support, as a component of the broader climate of an organization, is a key factor which moderates the link between work-life integration policies and employees' use of such practices (Hornung et al 2008; McDonald et al 2008). For example, a study of workplace conflicts over maternity leave revealed that women who were assertive about their needs, presented multiple perspectives and focused on mutual interests, were more likely to feel encouraged about their organizations on their return to work (Buzzanell & Liu 2007). However, these outcomes were contingent on supervisor support and the extent to which they maintained an ideal worker image in the interactions with their managers (*ibid*). Hence, research points to manager support as a critical moderating factor between organisational policies and positive organisational outcomes (e.g., Parker & Allen 2002),

'Right to request' legislation, a formal safeguard in terms of gaining access to workplace flexibility, has been a long-established provision in Europe (DBERR 2008), but has only recently been passed in Australia. The Australian legislation allows employees to request variations to work arrangements and demands employers seriously or reasonably consider the request, only refusing on business grounds (Charlesworth & Campbell 2008). When successful, the right to request provides some aspect of control to employees over the configuration, length, timing and predictability of paid work hours which has been demonstrated to reduce work-life pressures (Pocock et al 2008). Despite these benefits, studies suggest opportunities to access and utilize measures such as parental leave, annual leave and reduced hours arrangements, are not universal and more variable and uncertain than might be expected from a reading of formal provisions and entitlements (Holt and Grainger, 2005; Pocock et al 2009; 2010; Whitehouse 2005). There is currently also little evidence that employees perceive access to these practices as entitlements, but rather as favourable treatment (Beauregard & Henry 2009).

Hence, even 'rights' to adjust standardized arrangements, which are enshrined in right to request legislation or other formal industrial agreements, have limitations in their enactment. Critics argue that despite its goals, right to request legislation is a 'light touch' regulatory measure (Pocock, et al 2009) which conceals asymmetrical power relations between business and employees (Fleetwood, 2007), and which has weak compliance mechanisms and availability only to narrowly defined groups (Bambray, et al, 2008). While most studies in the area consistently demonstrate the ascendancy of customized work arrangements as supplemental to standardized employment, their focus is generally on a narrow range of working conditions. In contrast, this study seeks to examine the extent to which other important aspects of work are

customized, including travel requirements, start and finish times, relocation, employee bonuses, contracts, job responsibilities and development opportunities.

### **Ideosyncratic deals and customized work arrangements**

The current study builds on notions of idiosyncratic deals (or i-deals) which refer to situations where employees seek out and bargain for personalized employment conditions that satisfy their needs and preferences (Hornung et al 2008). I-deals are distinct from ‘job crafting’, where employees knowingly making spontaneous, unsupervised changes to work (Lyons, 2008; Wrzesniewski and Dutton, 2001) and are characterized by special conditions which differ from those which are ‘standard’ and from those of peers doing similar work. They are intended to benefit both the employee and the firm by giving a valued worker something not otherwise obtainable through the firm’s standard structures (Hornung et al 2008; Rousseau, 2001; Rousseau et al 2006). From the perspective of social exchange theory, positive workplace relationships lead to strong links between i-deals and organizational citizenship behaviours (Anand et al 2010) because employees garner economic and socio-emotional resources through their interpersonal work relationships (Blau 1964; Cropanzano & Mitchell 2005). The best known norm or rule of social exchange is reciprocity; when the quality of employees’ social exchange relationships are positive or when they are treated favourably, they will be willing to act to benefit other parties, such as through increased commitment (Blau 1964; Beauregard & Henry 2009). However, Molm (2006) points out that in the mutual dependence underlying social exchange relations, actors’ interests partially correspond and partially conflict, meaning that parties benefit in inverse proportion to what each gives the other. This framework is highly relevant to the customization of work, where employee-manager relationships are interdependent but organizational and individual goals may be in conflict.

Work to date on i-deals has focused on the details of the arrangements themselves, and their outcomes. The current study extends this focus through an examination of the social/familial/workplace circumstances which prompted the customizations and the extent to which employees perceived a benefit from the exchange. An example of research addressing i-deals is Dick (2009) who explored professional, employee-led, reduced-hours working. She found that such arrangements shift power from the manager to the worker and challenge norms associated with workload distribution, work patterns and work-flow. We distinguish customized work arrangements from i-deals in several ways. Firstly, while i-deals explicitly differ from standardized arrangements in a workplace or work group (Hornung, et al 2008; Rousseau 2001; Rousseau, et al 2006), this study explores facets of work which may be consistent with the minimum standard employment conditions set out in contracts or awards (e.g. four weeks annual leave, maximum weekly hours), but which reflect variations to provisions in terms of timing, location or job tasks.

Second, while i-deals are defined as those which are distinct from comparable employees, we consider customized work arrangements as those which impact individual workers, regardless of whether the arrangements are distinct from co-workers. Indeed, it is likely that requests for identical working conditions may be initiated in different ways by different employees, but similar requests may be met with different responses depending on organizational policy, cultural practices or managerial attitudes. Hence, the study addresses manager-employee exchanges in the context of individual/ organizational circumstances, needs and preferences, irrespective of the arrangements of co-workers. A third differentiation between the definition of customized work used here and previous research on i-deals is that customized work may not demonstrate obvious benefits for *both* employee and manager/ organization, but rather, may

involve obvious benefits to only one party, at least directly or immediately. Finally, authority in organizing processes is multidirectional (Simon 1997); hence this research addresses customizations that are reported as being either manager-initiated (top-down), or worker-initiated (bottom-up) (Hornung et al 2008).

## Methods

### *Sample and procedure*

Surveys were distributed via an early childhood education organization which operates over 400 kindergartens in Australia. The organization is a community-based, not-for-profit entity which receives significant government funding but charges parents around \$15 (AUD) per day. The method of distribution and the survey instructions allowed for either parent (where there were two parents) to complete the survey. Eighty two percent of the 432 surveys available for analysis were completed by women/mothers (354 women; 78 men). An analysis of the 124 different postal codes from returned surveys indicates the sample resided in both metropolitan (70%) and regional areas (30%). Completed surveys were returned via centre directors to the central office.

To be eligible to complete the survey, respondents needed to be employed 10 hours or more per week and to be responsible for at least one dependent child. While our overall response rate was around 15 percent, the employment criteria meant that parents not in paid work who received a survey were not eligible to participate. In general, our sample was more highly educated and earned higher incomes than the Australian average (47% held a bachelors or higher tertiary degree and the mean household income of the sample was \$136,034). Respondents were also predominantly from two-parent households (95%), from English speaking backgrounds (96%) and employed as professionals/ managers (57%). However, the sample was relatively diverse on measures of employment status (30% full-time, 43% part-time, 17% casual<sup>1</sup>, 4% home based work, 6% self-employed), number of hours worked (mean 27 hours, SD = 14.61) and number of children (10% one child, 60% two children, 22% three children, 8% four+ children). Male respondents were employed, on average, for approximately twice the number of hours per week as female respondents (43 hours and 22 hours respectively).

### *Instruments and analysis*

The survey asked a series of questions about manager-employee exchanges at work in the previous 12 months. These were defined as situations where the respondent informally or formally discussed an issue, or signed a contract, in relation to their pay, working hours or other job conditions, with their manager, supervisor or employer. Respondents were firstly asked to indicate the types of job-related issues they had discussed. A list of 24 options was provided under five headings: pay (e.g. penalty/ overtime; annual salary), hours of work (e.g. changes to start/finish times; notification of work hours), time off/leave (e.g. annual leave; carer's leave), job tasks/responsibilities (e.g. altered duties; promotion), and workplace contractual arrangements (e.g. collective to individual agreement). An open-ended response option was provided at the end of each of these five sections. The fixed-response options were derived from a piloting process whereby a convenience sample of 20 parents was asked to generate, on the basis of their own experience, potential workplace negotiation scenarios. The survey was also

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<sup>1</sup> A casual employee is one who is employed at an hourly rate of pay and does not receive paid sick leave or paid annual leave.

pre-tested with a further 30 respondents through an equivalent childcare association to that used for the main survey.

Respondents were then asked a series of questions about 'the most important or significant exchange that has occurred in relation to your work in the past year'. Open-ended questions asked respondents to describe the nature of the work arrangement that was adjusted (e.g. wanted to change part-time weekly hours from 24 to 18 for six months), when it occurred (month/year), events leading to the exchange (e.g. vacation care arrangements are not working out), where it took place (e.g. manager's office; lunch room) and who (if anyone) also attended (e.g. union delegate). The open-ended question yielded 370 responses which were available for analysis. Subsequent fixed response likert scale questions asked respondents to indicate, with respect to this significant exchange, at what stage of employment it occurred (e.g. at the job interview), who initiated it (respondent, manager; mutual), how comfortable they felt during the process, how important the issues were, their satisfaction with the outcomes, the extent to which they had to compromise, the extent to which their manager/employer had to compromise, and their level of confidence in initiating changes in the future. The final section of the survey asked for demographic information pertaining to both the respondent and their partner.

Fixed response data were coded and entered into SPSS for analysis. Descriptive statistics, including percentages and cross-tabulations across categorical variables are reported. T-tests determined gender differences on responses for continuous variables (e.g. satisfaction, compromise). Data derived from open-ended responses about the most significant change to work arrangements and reasons for this, were transcribed and coded manually into discrete categories. Text related to significant changes to work arrangements (e.g., 'altered job duties'; 'reducing hours from full-time to part-time') were coded according to the fixed response categories in the first section of the survey, enabling comparisons between the frequency of all adjustments that had occurred in the previous year and those that were considered the most important. Text related to circumstances leading to these changes were coded inductively (e.g., 'changes to family composition or caring responsibilities'). Variations in these themes across demographic categories were also explored.

## **Results**

### *Types and frequency of workplace issues negotiated*

Respondents indicated they had customised multiple issues in their workplaces in the previous 12 months, with up to 17 different areas indicated for each individual respondent (mean 5.2). Male and female respondents indicated a similar number of exchanges in customising their work overall. The broader category 'Hours of work' was most frequently cited, with over three-quarters of the sample (77%) indicating they had discussed at least one aspect of their working hours with their line manager in the previous year. In decreasing order of frequency, exchanges related to 'changes to required days', 'changes to start/finish times', 'flexibility in working times', 'changing from full-time to part-time work or vice versa', 'overtime' and 'notification of working hours'. Table 1 details these findings.

Two other frequently cited subjects of customisation were Leave/time off (72%) and Job tasks (70%). Leave/time off included 'annual leave', 'carer's leave' and 'parental leave'. Job tasks included 'altered duties', 'promotion', 'new job', 'training' and 'performance'. Pay or salary-related subjects were less frequently discussed than Working hours, Time off or Job tasks. Slightly less than half the sample (45%) indicated they had negotiated at least one pay or salary-

related issue, including ‘hourly pay/annual salary’, ‘penalty/overtime rates’, ‘casual loadings’ and other financial benefits (e.g. superannuation, vehicle allowances, bonuses, sick pay). Employment contracts were by far the least frequently reported subject of manager-employee exchanges. Only 7% of the sample indicated a sub-category under this heading (see Table 1). Crosstabs analysis revealed that men were significantly more likely than women to customise their work around the Pay and Job tasks categories. Women, in contrast, were significantly more likely than men to customise their Working hours  $X(6) = 45.1, p = .000$ .

Table 1: Proportion of sample indicating issue negotiated in previous 12 months (N = 432).

Topic negotiated	%
<b>Pay*</b>	<b>*45.4</b>
Hourly pay rate/ annual salary	36.6
Penalty / overtime rates	6.5
Casual loadings	5.3
Other financial benefit (vehicle, superannuation, bonuses, sick pay, allowances)	20.8
<b>Time off*</b>	<b>*72.2</b>
Annual leave / holidays	54.6
Carer’s leave	35.2
Parental leave	17.4
Other leave	10.9
<b>Job Tasks*</b>	<b>*70.1</b>
Altered duties	51.9
Promotion	21.3
New job	15.3
Training issue	27.3
Performance/productivity	22.9
<b>Working Hours*</b>	<b>*77.3</b>
Full-time to part-time work	13.2
Part-time to full-time work	8.1
Changes to start/finish times	47.7
Changes to required days	53.5
Flexibility in working times	43.5
Overtime	8.1
Notification of your work hours	6.7
Other changes to working times	9.7
<b>Workplace Contract*</b>	<b>*7.0</b>
Collective to individual agreement	0.0
Individual to collective agreement	2.1
Other contract issue	4.9

*Please note:* Questions asking which aspects of work had been adjusted in the previous year allowed for multiple responses. Hence, percentages for the minor categories equal greater than 100%. Percentages reported for each main category heading, indicated as \*, are the proportion of respondents who reported they had negotiated *at least one* specific area in that category.

### *Significant exchanges*

The section above indicates that respondents had customised their Working hours at similar rates as those related to Time off and Job tasks. However, when respondents were asked to describe their most significant exchange in the previous year, the category Working hours was disproportionately indicated. Indeed, nearly half of respondents described customisations around the timing and duration of their paid work with adjustments to weekly working hours (moving from full-time to part-time work or vice versa, or other increases/decreases to weekly hours) being cited by one in four respondents as the most significant. A further one in ten parent employees in the sample described changing the days they were required to work. Respondents frequently described adjustments to their working hours being necessitated by fixed child care hours or an inability to access child care. Examples included a mother and librarian who needed to 'start work at 9.30am which is later than usual', and a mother and occupational coordinator who requested to change her hours of work to be consistent with changes to the days kindergarten was scheduled.

Around one in four responses (24%) indicated that employee-initiated exchanges were prompted by changes to family composition or caring responsibilities, such as a female nurse who spoke with her employer about changes to her roster when both her children and the day care provider were sick. The importance of grandparents as carers was also evident in the web of care arrangements families had in place, such as a female guidance officer who needed to change her work hours to fit in with the days the children's grandmother was available to provide care.

Textual responses also indicated these significant exchanges frequently occurred at times of key transitions, such as children 'starting kindergarten', or following a period of parental leave<sup>2</sup> when the parent was returning to paid employment. Women were especially likely to indicate discussions about altering the total number of hours they were employed when transitioning from parental leave back to paid work. Indeed, around one in five respondents indicated changing their hours of work had been the most significant exchange in the previous 12 months. An excerpt illustrating exchanges around working hours was the following from a male project officer:

I was arranging starting in a new job as a part time employee in a job share capacity. I have been working part time since Jan 07, but in this new role in a new Department I would be job sharing for the first time. My co-worker and I were involved in discussions about the days we would work and the hours too.

After working hours, the next most frequently reported category of significant exchange was Work-related tasks. Around one in five respondents described exchanges with their managers around this issue. The largest sub-category was altered duties (13%) with smaller numbers indicating promotion (3%), a new job (2%), training issues (2%) and performance/productivity (1%). An example was a father whose role statement had changed and who as a consequence, needed to discuss his discomfort with the new tasks assigned. With respect to promotion, a father and researcher cited being 'promoted to a higher level as a result of taking on more duties'. Both manager-initiated (top-down) as well as employee-initiated (bottom-up) exchanges were reported, such as a mother who was 'approached by [her] employer to take on a temporary

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<sup>2</sup> Descriptions of exchanges around parental leave were frequently associated with other issues. Scenarios involving parental leave were coded under the 'leave' category when they involved discussions of timing and under the 'working hours' category when they involved changes to the number of hours worked.



position as a promotion'. Additional excerpts which illustrate the customisation of job tasks are as follows:

Last November to help juggle family life and work I decided to negotiate that I would get no more on-call work and was offered to resign my permanent position and go casual, which I accepted. (Female, Nurse)

My employer wanted to change the entire structure within my working environment which impacted on my current position – this meant having to reapply for my position – due to the diverse changes to the position. (Male, Accounts Manager).

Pay-related issues were cited by one in ten respondents as being the most significant customisation to their work. 'Salary arrangements' was the most frequently reported category (10% of the total sample). Employee-initiated salary negotiations were preceded by circumstances such as perceived errors in the calculation or receipt of pay, such as a female nurse who stated 'my pay rate was incorrect and I wasn't getting paid enough'; comparisons with salaries in similar organizations/sectors such as a male project officer who 'negotiated for a remuneration package competitive with the industry'; and company re-structures or changes to company policies, such as a male property valuer who 'negotiated a new pay structure from wage and bonuses to a single wage'.

Employer-initiated exchanges about pay were frequently prompted by economically driven business imperatives and changes to organizational structures and policies. An example was a male respondent whose employer requested he work for reduced pay following a financial crisis in the organisation and who negotiated a higher pay rate than initially offered with a reduction in working hours. Other pay-related examples were a female nurse who stated 'my employer is attempting to reduce paying penalty rates for senior nurses on weekends' and a male who explained that 'my employer wanted to change my pay structure to go from employed to sole trader ... and to sign a contract and renegotiate my pay.'

A further one in ten respondents indicated their most significant exchange was related to Leave and around half of these pertained to the timing of parental leave. Only 1-2% of the sample indicated other leave categories (e.g. annual leave, carer's leave) as a customisation that was most significant. Descriptions of parental leave commonly included requests for extensions to maternity leave to accommodate family responsibilities.

The least frequently cited subject of significant exchange was Work-related contractual arrangements (2%). Three of the nine responses in this area indicated discussions around renewing contracts, such as a male communications technician who needed to discuss the renewal of 'an individual Australian Workplace Agreement on a different base salary'. Two additional responses were from individuals who held a trade-union role, such as a female teacher who negotiated a 'general enterprise bargaining agreement for the whole of the workplace'. Table 2 illustrates these findings.

Table 2: Proportion of sample indicating which work arrangement adjusted was the most significant (N = 370).

Topic negotiated	N	%
<b>Pay</b>		
Hourly pay rate/ annual salary	37	10
Penalty / overtime rates	1	0.2
Casual loadings	0	0
Other financial benefit (vehicle, superannuation, bonuses, sick pay, allowances)	7	1.8
<b>Total</b>	<b>45</b>	<b>12.2</b>
<b>Leave</b>		
Annual leave / holidays	9	2.4
Carer's leave	5	1.3
Parental leave	21	5.6
Other leave	10	2.7
<b>Total</b>	<b>45</b>	<b>12.1</b>
<b>Job Tasks</b>		
Altered duties	48	12.9
Promotion	13	3.5
New job	8	2.1
Training issue	8	2.1
Performance/productivity	6	1.6
<b>Total</b>	<b>83</b>	<b>22.2</b>
<b>Working Hours</b>		
Full-time to part-time work	22	5.9
Part-time to full-time work	11	2.9
Other increases/decreases to work hrs	47	12.7
Changes to start/finish times	20	5.4
Changes to required days	42	11.3
Flexibility in working times	20	5.4
Overtime	2	0.5
Notification of your work hours	5	1.4
Other changes to working times	5	1.4
<b>Total</b>	<b>174</b>	<b>46.9</b>
<b>Workplace Contract</b>		
Collective to individual agreement	3	0.8
Individual to collective agreement	0	0
Other contract issue	6	1.6
<b>Total</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>2.4</b>

Please note: Totals do not equal precisely 100% due to rounding.

Cross tabs analysis examined the relationship between categories of type of customisation and categories of circumstances leading to the exchange. The significant chi square and subsequent interpretation of findings revealed three insights about these relationships  $X(30) = 613.4, p = .000$ . First, changes to family composition and caring responsibilities were significantly more likely to lead to exchanges about customising working hours and leave arrangements, compared to other areas. Typical scenarios indicating this relationship were exchanges following parental leave and the subsequent transition to paid work, which necessitated both time off and reduced

working hours. Second, changes to external childcare arrangements (e.g. day care centres, schools) were significantly more likely to prompt exchanges around working hours, but unlike changes to family composition and caring responsibilities, were not significantly associated with leave arrangements. This indicates that parents required adjustments to their working hours at times of key transitions and when institutional care arrangements changed, but they did not typically require time off.

Third, changes to the structure of the job itself were significantly more likely to prompt exchanges about pay and job tasks, but not about working hours or leave. This relationship was illustrated in scenarios describing remuneration and structural arrangements for given employment responsibilities that were not necessarily prompted by family-related circumstances. Examples of these scenarios included a female teacher who was job-sharing and needed to re-negotiate the arrangement every 12 months, and a male engineer who had been in his position for three weeks and wanted to clarify the tasks associated with his working arrangements.

### *Contextual features and perceptions of significant negotiations*

In nearly three quarters of cases describing significant exchanges, the discussion occurred after the person had been employed for one year, compared with 10% of exchanges which occurred at the job interview. The remainder (17%) occurred within the first year of employment. This highlights that most manager-employee exchanges occur in the context of ongoing and established employment relationships. Most exchanges (61%) were initiated by the employee themselves, with one in five respondents indicating that their manager had initiated the discussion. A further 18% of exchanges between employees and line managers were reported as being mutually initiated. Men and women initiated the exchanges in approximately equal numbers. However, analysis of variance indicated that negotiations were rated as significantly more important when their manager had initiated them, than if they were self- or mutually-initiated ( $F = 3.52$ ,  $df = 370$ ,  $p = .008$ ). Respondents were also significantly more satisfied with the outcomes of exchanges when they were self-initiated, rather than manager- or mutually-initiated ( $F = 6.67$ ,  $df = 370$ ,  $p = .000$ ). Respondents who indicated that their most significant exchange had been self-initiated were also significantly more confident in initiating future changes ( $F = 2.79$ ,  $df = 369$ ,  $p = .026$ ). In summary then, respondents who indicated their most significant exchange had been self-initiated, considered it as less important than those whose significant exchange had been manager-initiated, but were more satisfied with the outcomes and more confident in future initiations.

The manager's or supervisor's office was the location where around half of the exchanges took place, while a further one in six discussions were conducted in a neutral office space, such as the lunch room, administration desk or organizational grounds. Fourteen percent of discussions occurred by email or telephone, with only 5% occurring offsite (e.g. at a coffee shop or at the employee's home). There were no significant differences on perceptions of importance, satisfaction or comfort related to where the exchange took place.

Respondents attributed the importance of their most significant exchange as a mean of 3.7 on a five-point scale from not at all important to very important ( $SD = 0.6$ ). Overall, respondents indicated moderate levels of comfort (mean = 3.0 on a 5 point-scale;  $SD = 1.2$ ) and moderate levels of satisfaction with the outcomes (mean = 3.2 on a 5-point scale;  $SD = 1.0$ ). They also indicated that their own need to compromise was low and similar to the degree to which their manager had to compromise (mean = 1.8 on a 4-point scale for both own and manager level of compromise). Descriptive statistics for these measures are summarized in Table 3. Women rated

their exchanges as significantly more important than men ( $t = 2.4(373)$ ,  $p = .016$ ), while men indicated that their managers had to compromise significantly more than female respondents did ( $t = -2.5(367)$ ,  $p = .007$ ). There were no gender differences on measures of satisfaction, comfort or confidence in initiating future negotiations.

Table 3. Contextual features and perceptions of significant negotiations (N = 370)

Question category	%	Question category	%
Stage of employment		To what extent did you compromise?	
At the job interview	9.8	Not at all	48.8
First day	3.3	A little	34.0
After working for a period of time	70.7	A moderate amount	9.4
		A lot	7.8
Who initiated?		Extent to which manager compromised?	
I initiated	60.8	Not at all	39.8
My employer/manager initiated	19.1	A little	44.4
Mutually initiated	18.5	A moderate amount	12.6
My union initiated	0.8	A lot	3.2
Other	0.8		
How comfortable did you feel?		How important were the issues?	
Very comfortable	42.7	Very important	72.5
Comfortable	30.9	Quite important	22.8
Neither comfortable or uncomfortable	10.1	Moderately important	3.2
Uncomfortable	13.1	Slightly important	1.1
Very uncomfortable	3.2	Unimportant	0.5
Where did the negotiation take place?		Confidence in initiating future change?	
Manager's office	48.1	Very confident	44.2
Neutral office workspace	15.3	Moderately confident	37.8
By phone or email	14.4	Slightly confident	10.6
Offsite at a public or informal place	5.1	Not very confident	4.5
Other	0.2	Not at all confident	2.9
Did anyone else attend?		Satisfaction with the outcomes?	
Yes	15.2	Very satisfied	54.0
No	84.8	Satisfied	29.6
		Neither satisfied or dissatisfied	6.3
		Dissatisfied	7.1
		Very dissatisfied	2.9

Note: Percentages in each category do not total 100% due to missing data.

## Discussion

Building on existing work on idiosyncratic deals and flexible scheduling, this study explored the types of adjustments which are made to standardised work arrangements across a range of workplaces, how frequently they occur, and the circumstances which precede the changes. Initial insights into how the process of customising work evolves were also explored. Given their need to simultaneously fulfil paid work and caring roles, the particular focus on parents provided what was believed to be a concentrated examination of this organizational phenomenon. Respondents

indicated that they had had an exchange with their manager or employer about a wide range of employment terms and conditions an average of five times in the previous year; a frequency which indicated the ubiquity of these occurrences in contemporary workplaces and the need to further understand how they evolve in various work contexts and circumstances.

The descriptions of workplace exchanges evident in the surveys suggest that discussions occur in the context of familial circumstances and the parameters around which formal childcare and educational settings function. Many excerpts cited partner's work arrangements, a myriad of contingency factors associated with institutional care arrangements, and the involvement of extended family, as important factors in prompting changes to working hours and conditions. Such contingencies are consistent with Acker's (1998) assertion of strong links between gendered assumptions and gendering processes within labour market spheres and those outside the formal boundaries of organizations. Parent respondents cited difficulties accessing childcare, children being excluded from care for illness, childcare workers becoming sick and the accessibility and restricted hours of kindergartens, primary schools, outside school hours care and vacation care. These factors are notwithstanding the numerous, more predictable transitions children typically make in early childhood from the family home to childcare and educational settings. The findings therefore paint a picture of complex and evolving patterns of care which necessitate minor and/or significant adjustments (and re-adjustments) to standardized contractual arrangements in the employment sphere and which prompted many of the interactions identified in the survey.

While men customized aspects of their work as frequently as women did in the previous year, they were more likely to engage in interactions around conditions such as wages rather than work hours – a finding consistent with previous research (Babcock & Laschever 2003). Women, on the other hand, were far more likely to negotiate major and longer-term adjustments to their work schedules, particularly shifts from full-time to part-time employment. As many women respondents were working part-time and hence likely to be primary caregivers, it was not unsurprising that they also attributed greater importance to adjustments than men. Importantly however, the survey revealed that men, albeit less often than women, also frequently negotiated adjustments to their work roles in order to undertake childcare. The frequent use of more incremental or *informal* adjustments to standardized employment conditions augments existing evidence which suggests that the use of *formal* flexibility provisions by employed fathers remains low due to factors including the domestic organization of labour and doubts about the legitimacy of men's claims to family responsibilities (Bittman et al 2004; Schaefer & Juhl 2007).

Furthermore, notwithstanding that adjustments to the timing of work made by men were more temporary and of a lesser magnitude than those made by women, it is likely that as organizations increasingly favour the provision and support of work-life policies as a means of attracting, motivating and retaining a highly skilled and adaptive workforce (De Cieri & Kramar 2005), and as dramatically rising numbers of dual career couples demand a new set of assumptions based on an 'adult worker model family' (i.e., that all adults are primarily workers in the labour market; Duncan et al 2003; Giullari & Lewis 2005), men's opportunities and need to negotiate the use of formal policies will continue to increase. These phenomena may add increasing complexity to managerial functions in that managers may need to consider the couple-level dyad when implementing work-life programs, offering career advancement opportunities, or approving requests for other tailored work arrangements (Budworth et al 2008).

While the study points to frequent, informal adjustments to standardised work, this is not to minimize the importance of formal workplace contracts which provide a set of critical minimum

standards and protections to which all employees are, and should be, entitled. Indeed, many employers perceive a key benefit of standard workplace agreements is their overarching structure which allows them freedom to individually negotiate formally or informally with employees over matters as they arise (Townsend et al 2007). However, the findings highlight that knowledge of formal entitlements and provisions, such as those evident in legislation, workplace contracts and organizational policies, provide only a partial picture of what a 'job' entails. Illustrating that employees actively and frequently make attempts to adjust their employment to 'fit' their non-work responsibilities, was that those aspects of customized work deemed to be the most important were not necessarily of the greatest magnitude, nor necessarily the most frequently discussed. An example was that while more than half of the sample negotiated with their manager about annual leave arrangements in the previous year, only one in 50 considered exchanges about annual leave to be the most important.

Many of the adjustments described by respondents as the most significant in the previous year may not be accounted for in existing i-deal research (Hornung et al 2008; Rousseau 2001; Rousseau et al 2006) which appears to neglect a range of tailored work arrangements associated with mutually dependent employment relationships. Examples include adjustments to start and finish times, which do not necessarily differ from standardized arrangements in a work group; training or development prospects, which may not have been distinct from opportunities available to co-workers; the timing of annual leave, which would appear to offer obvious benefits for the employee but not necessarily the manager/ organization; and several pay-related issues such as penalty rates which were initiated top-down by managers rather than bottom-up by employees. While they may not be fully idiosyncratic, our evidence suggests that customizations such as these are important to the broader body of theoretical work in the area because they offered the opportunity for facilitating reciprocity, commitment and positive workplace relationships that are central to the social exchange process. In a pragmatic sense, the range of customized work arrangements evident in the data were also instrumental in alleviating work-life pressures for employees.

Most respondents in this sample reported positive exchanges with their managers in customising their jobs. This was evident in relatively low levels of compromise and high levels of satisfaction in significant exchanges, high levels of confidence in undertaking future exchanges and an indication by most respondents that their preferences had been satisfied. These findings contrast somewhat with previous research suggesting that some employees have limited opportunities to access and utilize formal measures around flexible scheduling (Holt and Grainger, 2005; Pocock et al 2009; 2010; Whitehouse 2005). This may be partially attributed to this particular group of parents who were relatively highly educated and who were engaged mostly in skilled professional jobs with elevated levels of autonomy. Research demonstrates for example that alternative work scheduling is experienced differently by professional workers and support staff (Brewer 2000); a finding that appears consistent with Molm (2006) who pointed out that mutual dependence underlying social exchange relations involves actors' interests which partially correspond and partially conflict. That is, where organizational and employee goals are in conflict, professional staff with valued, specialist or scarce expertise, compared to support staff with less expertise, may be likely to benefit in inverse proportion to what the organization or manager is prepared to give (Molm 2006).

Research from the UK and Australia also suggests that refusal rates in response to requests for flexibility are significantly lower for parents (both men and women) than for those without children (Holt and Grainger, 2005; Pocock et al 2009), suggesting that requests by parents may be viewed as more legitimate than those without parenting responsibilities. Hence, it is possible

that attributions of the legitimacy of preferences and the quality of the ongoing employment relationship is more critical in determining the effectiveness of manager-employee exchanges in customizing work than the topic of discussion itself, where it takes place or the importance attributed to it. This possibility could be explored in future surveys of more diverse groups of employees (e.g. those without children or with older children, with elder care responsibilities, or groups employed in precarious or low skilled jobs). Such research could provide a robust comparison of how early parenthood and job quality status interact to affect the frequency and nature of work customisation in different socio-demographic groups. Factors relevant to specific work settings may also impact the experience of social exchange in customizing work, yet these are currently not well understood. Work setting characteristics may include organizational policies and contractual arrangements as well as social structures, networks and relationships (Gelfand et al 2006); in essence, the rules and norms which guide the exchange process (Cropanzano & Mitchell 2005). Research demonstrates for example that agreement about mutual workplace obligations is shaped by both taken-for-granted assumptions about place, distance and time that are situated deep within organizational practices and power bases, as well as by everyday interactions between managers and employees (Brewer 2000; Dick 2010). Survey methodology is likely to be limited in its ability to assess these clearly nuanced processes and future qualitative research could also be usefully employed to investigate how customized work evolves and the relative benefits which ensue for organizations and employees.

Another important finding was that men and women who initiated changes to their jobs were similarly comfortable with, and satisfied with, the outcomes. This finding contrasts somewhat with recent studies showing that workplace requests made by women are more likely to be granted than those made by men (Holt and Grainger, 2005; Pocock Skinner and Ichii, 2009). However, these studies were confined to requests for specifically defined flexible work arrangements on a longer-term basis whereas the survey in the current study explored a broader range of employment terms and short- as well as long-term adjustments. The findings in the current study were also suggestive of similarities across gender in the perceived responses to exchanges, which challenges some of the highly socialized, passive notions of gender ideology in research addressing work-family decision-making (Ransome, 2007). For example, there is a prevailing view and some limited evidence that, *in general*, women negotiate differently from men (Kray and Thompson, 2005; Lewicki, Saunders and Barry, 2006), such as studies of the effectiveness of job negotiations at organizational entry which favour men's negotiating style over women's in terms of economic payoffs (Bowles and McGinn, 2008). It is important to consider however, that this body of research has been predominantly derived from transactional simulations in laboratory settings and/or has focused on initial job interviews, whereas most exchanges reported in this study occurred in the context of ongoing employment relationships. It may be that in workplace interactions involving ongoing relationships, women are equally as, or even more effective than men in initiating and achieving satisfactory outcomes in customizing their work arrangements. Clearly, social exchange processes are complex and outcomes dependent on multiple contextual factors.

## **Limitations and Conclusions**

This research involving a survey of parent employees can only offer selected insights into how customized work arrangements evolve. The choice to focus on parents of young children was strategic in the sense that parents are often intensively engaged in managing competing demands from inside and outside the workplace, and as a result, their motivations for and opportunities to customize their employment may be more pronounced than other groups of employees. However, while caring responsibilities and family dynamics provide the impetus for many

workplace exchanges, we also found evidence of employees frequently tailoring aspects of their work that were irrespective of the demands of parenting. Hence, while there is ample evidence of the benefits of conciliatory exchanges around flexibility in terms of employee wellbeing, job satisfaction, organizational citizenship behaviours and turnover intentions (Anand et al 2010; Beauregard & Henry 2009; Buzzanell & Liu 2007; Hornung et al 2008), we argue for an extension of the current focus on a relatively narrow range of workplace flexibility provisions, such as in surveys addressing the effectiveness of right to request legislation, to other aspects of the timing, location and tasks of work. As suggested earlier, we also argue that the definition of what constitutes 'ideosyncratic' arrangements or 'deals' that is evident in the organizational behaviour literature, be extended to include those

Another limitation of the methodology was that the survey was conducted from the perspective of employees and is therefore only able to offer a 'one-sided' perspective on events. Prior research suggests organizations often adopt a piecemeal ad hoc approach to requests for flexibility (Edwards and Robinson, 1999) and that aligning the often incompatible strategic goals of managers and employees is difficult, such as when requests for reduced hours arrangements leaves work teams responsible for allocating and re-distributing accumulated tasks (Dick, 2006; 2009). Future research addressing views of the same exchange from the perspectives of line managers as well as employees would be useful in advancing knowledge of how organizational and employee goals align in different circumstances and the respective trade-offs that are made. This empirical focus could also address, to a greater extent, process variables, examining how work is customised in, or close to, real time. For example, Langley's (1999) systematic approach to theorizing from process data offers a promising perspective in understanding how negotiated events are sequenced, including occurrences, interactions and choices over time, in different contexts.

The implications of developing this knowledge are that by understanding how and why customized work arrangements evolve, and in what contexts effective outcomes and high levels of satisfaction arise, it will be possible to contribute to a range of significant workplace outcomes. These outcomes include facilitating parents', and particularly mothers, increased participation in the labour market on which, in the context of skill shortages in many industries and an ageing population, industrialized countries increasingly rely (Baird, 2004), promoting greater efficiency and productivity in the context of the workplace, and supporting the capacity of employees to simultaneously manage complex and competing pressures in domestic and employment spheres.



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