

How flexible is flexible? Australia's flexible work policies to support working carers

Kate O'Loughlin, The University of Sydney, Australia

Zoi Triandafilidis, Carers NSW, Australia

Freya Saich, Carers NSW, Australia

Sarah Judd-Lam, Carers NSW, Australia

Corresponding author: Kate O'Loughlin kate.oloughlin@sydney.edu.au

Abstract

Australia's Fair Work Act 2009 provides a right to request flexible working arrangements for mature age workers over 55 and workers with added caring responsibilities; granting such a request is at the employer's discretion. Drawing on quantitative and qualitative data from three consecutive state-wide surveys of carers in the state of New South Wales, this paper presents evidence on the impact to date of this attempt by government to recognise working carer contributions.

Introduction

Governments around the world are focused on the social and economic challenges associated with population ageing. With increased longevity, improved quality of life, and advances in health and welfare provisions there is a need for ongoing action given that populations worldwide will live to increasingly older ages (O'Loughlin, Kendig & Browning, 2017; OECD 2015; WHO 2015). Some of the policy responses in Australia and elsewhere include encouraging and promoting mature age employment to address expected labour force shortages, increasing the pension age, promoting self-funded retirement, and the introduction of consumer-directed care in the provision of aged care services (O'Loughlin, Loh & Kendig, 2017; Piggott, 2016; Gill & Cameron 2015; Kendig & Lucas, 2014; Page, Baird, Heron & Whelan, 2009). This has led to an increasing research focus on the consequences of these policies for a distinct sub-group - older working carers - as they face the dual pressures of remaining in and managing paid work alongside caring longer and more intensively for family members, often in a multigenerational carer role with ageing parents, spouse/partner, adult children with disabilities and grandchildren (O'Loughlin, Loh & Kendig, 2017; Hill et al., 2016; Taylor et al., 2016; Loretto & Vickerstaff, 2015; Mitchell, 2015).

There has been an increasing research focus on caregivers and recognition by Australian governments and policymakers of the contributions made by carers of all ages at different stages of the life course, especially as more women are now in the workforce (Hill et al., 2016; Cooper & Baird 2015; Kröger & Yeandle 2013). At a national level Australia has a *Carer Recognition Act 2010* (Commonwealth of Australia, 2010), National Carer Strategy 2011, and flexible work arrangements under the *Fair Work Act, 2009* (Commonwealth of Australia, 2009) that are intended to recognise the

social and economic contribution of carers and to provide support to those who take on caring roles¹. However what is also needed is an understanding of the pressures placed on older workers through the often competing demands of paid work and caring responsibilities, and the influence of these demands on their social and financial situation as well as their health and well being as they enter mid to later life (O'Loughlin, Loh & Kendig, 2017; Bainbridge & Broady, 2017). These issues are brought into focus for the post-WWII baby boomer cohort, the 'face' of population ageing in Australia, who are now moving into later life and into roles as multigenerational carers (O'Loughlin, Barrie & Kendig, 2018; Hill et al., 2016; Mitchell 2015), while also being expected, or needing to remain in paid work. Therefore a key issue for policymakers is how people in later working life can care for, or otherwise support, growing numbers of older people unable to be fully independent because of illness, disability or frailty, and, increasingly, providing care for grandchildren which may, for some, include full custodial care (O'Loughlin, Loh & Kendig, 2017; Baird and Heron 2013; Hamilton & Jenkins 2015).

Older working carers

Common themes emerging from international and Australian research examining the situation of older workers and their unpaid carer responsibilities revolve around a range of social, economic and health issues including the impact on workforce participation, health and well-being, and the nature and extent of care provided (Temple & Dow, 2018; Bainbridge & Broady, 2017; Yeandle & Buckner, 2017; Alpass et al., 2017; Loretto & Vickerstaff, 2015; Baird & Heron, 2013). For the purpose of this study, caregiving is defined as the care provided outside of the paid service provision in the formal care sector; that is, the unpaid work undertaken by individuals to provide care for a sick, frail or disabled adult family member or friend.

Summarising findings from the 2015 Survey of Disability, Ageing and Carers (SDAC), the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS, 2016) reported that approximately 2.7 million individuals were providing unpaid care required by those with a disability/ies or in older age with possibly increasing frailty. There were more female carers (55.5%) than male, with 19.9% of carers aged between 55 and 64 years. The main types of care required include personal care, mobility assistance, household tasks, health care, transportation, financial management and support, and property maintenance (ABS 2016). Data also indicate that those in a primary carer role are more likely to be women (68.1%), older (average age 55 years), and with over a third living with their own disability (37.8%). The ABS (2016) define a primary carer as a person over 15 years of age who provides the most informal assistance (help, supervision) with one or more of the core activities of mobility, self-care and communication to a person with one or more disabilities. That is, primary carers are likely to be responsible for, and participate in required activities and support that are more demanding of their time and involve a higher level and intensity of caregiving (Hosseinpoor et al. 2013).

¹ There also are State-based strategies recognising and supporting carers (e.g. NSW Carers Strategy 2014–2019).

The impact of a caring role on a person's ability to participate in paid employment is clearly reflected in the SDAC data. Overall, carers in the usual working age range of 15-64 years had a lower employment rate (66%) when compared to non-carers (75.9%). The labour force participation rate for primary carers (56.3%) was significantly lower than for non-carers (80.3%), and male carers were more likely to be employed (73%) than female carers (60.8%) (ABS, 2016). The hours of care provided per week clearly have an impact on labour force participation. Of those providing up to 20 hours of care per week, 69.4% indicated they were employed; the proportion fell for those providing between 20-39 hours of care per week (45.6%) and those providing 40+ hours per week (35.5%) (ABS, 2016).

The need for flexible working arrangements

Australia's *Fair Work Act 2009* and National Employment Standards (*Fair Work Act, 2009*) include provisions for paid carer's leave and the right to request flexible work arrangements. An amendment to the Act in 2013 extended the right to request flexible working arrangements to mature-age workers over 55 years of age and workers with added caring responsibilities in further recognition of the expectation of an extended working life and potential multi-generational caring responsibilities. However, it should be noted that while the legal right to request flexible work arrangements is available, it does not guarantee that the request will be granted or that it will be implemented consistently across workplaces. Further, there is evidence to suggest that workers may not even be aware that they have such a right (Skinner and Pocock 2014).

Income security is of particular concern for older working carers, particularly women, as they often have to take extended leave or exit the workforce to care for a family member(s) (Temple & Dow, 2018; Austen & Ong, 2013; Adair & Temple, 2012; Warren, 2008, 2015; Thomson et al., 2008). Additionally, there can be significant out of pocket expenses for carers (Aggar et al. 2014; Keating et al. 2013); for example, an Australian survey indicated that financial responsibility for adult children/grandchildren and ageing parents was one of the major considerations in retirement planning and financial preparation for, and in retirement (National Australia Bank, 2014). Findings from a study of Australia's baby boomers aged 60 to 64 years show that the experiences of older working carers may be mediated by one's socio-economic status, age and gender; those with caring responsibilities were more likely to be women, in part-time work or out of the paid workforce completely, and dependent on some form of government income support such as the age pension or carer payment² (O'Loughlin, Loh & Kendig, 2017). Available evidence further suggests that being in paid employment may serve as a form of respite from the stress and strain associated with caregiving (Gonzales, Lee & Brown, 2015; Rozario, Morrow-Howell & Hinterlong, 2004; Arksey 2002),

² The Australian government provides financial support for carers through the Carer Payment and Carer Allowance, subject to an income test to assess eligibility. Essentially these provide a modest form of income support to those giving constant care over an extended period of time to a person who has been assessed as having a severe disability, illness, or is aged and/or frail.

Given the evidence to date on the impact of carer activities on paid employment, this paper provides a profile of the characteristics of a sample of working carers and explores their knowledge and use of nationally legislated flexible work arrangements introduced to support working carers. Drawing on survey data from respondents identifying as working carers, this paper presents findings at three different time points around three specific research questions: 1) Who is using flexible work arrangements? 2) Are there push and pull effects associated with remaining in a working carer role? 3) What impact does balancing work and care have on carers? By choosing the three time points (2014, 2016, 2018), the aim was to detect if there has been a shift in the knowledge of, and experience with using the flexible work arrangements resulting from personal circumstances and in response to the policy context outlined above.

Methods

The biennial Carers NSW Carer Survey aims to collect information about carers in the Australian state of New South Wales (NSW) to inform the organisation's direction, support and systemic advocacy for all carers across NSW. The 2014, 2016, and 2018 Carer Surveys were developed with input from an expert reference committee made up of sector representatives and leading researchers in the field of caring, and were conducted with approval from the University of Wollongong Human Research Ethics Committee. All three of the surveys were made available online through Survey Monkey, and as a paper-based questionnaire.

Survey instrument

With each iteration of the survey, changes have been made to improve the quality of the data collected, capture recent changes to the service systems carers can access, reflect up-to-date, best practice approaches to research, and generate new information to address identified gaps in the research literature. Five focus areas were included in all three questionnaires: the caring relationship, services and supports, paid work, health and wellbeing, and carer demographics. The surveys included three screening questions to ensure all respondents met the selection criteria: (1) living in NSW; (2) caring for a family member, friend or neighbour who has a disability, mental illness, drug or alcohol dependency, chronic condition, dementia, terminal or serious illness, or who needs care due to ageing; and (3) not a paid care worker or formal volunteer. Due to ethics requirements, only carers aged 16 years and over were invited to complete the survey.

The paid work section asked carers about the impact of caring on paid work. Carers were asked if they were in paid work, and those who were, were asked a number of questions about their work, and their use of flexible work arrangements. The 2014 and 2016 surveys included an open-text question: "Do you have any comments about your experiences at work?" Due to restrictions surrounding the length of the survey this question was not included in the 2018 survey. Each of the biennial survey instruments was piloted with carers, and feedback used to further refine and finalise the questions.

Survey promotion

The surveys were promoted on the Carers NSW website and social media, and through the Carers NSW monthly email newsletters; it was also advertised through a range of stakeholder networks and other organisations with which Carers NSW staff have regular online and offline contact. Paper-based questionnaires were distributed to Carers NSW members with the bimonthly newsletter, and distributed on request to organisations, support groups, at events, and to individuals requesting the printed version.

The total number of valid response to the Carer Survey ranged between 1,797 and 2,081 across the 2014, 2016, and 2018 surveys. More than half of respondents completed the survey online and more than half of the sample (51.6%, 60.3%, 65.4% respectively) were members of Carers NSW or the Carers NSW Young Carer Program.

Data entry and analysis

Completed print-based questionnaires were entered into Survey Monkey by Carers NSW staff with the support of several trained volunteers and student interns. The final dataset for each survey was exported and cleaned, coded, and analysed using SPSS 22. Analyses were undertaken to look at the demographic profile and employment characteristics of carers, and to explore their knowledge and use of flexible workplace arrangements.

Findings

The findings from the close-ended survey items are supported by comments from the open-text responses, however as noted above textual data are only available from the 2014 and 2016 surveys.

Carers in paid work

Across the three surveys around a third of carers reported being in paid employment. The respondent profile of carers in paid work (Table 1) was similar across the three time points, with most carers being female, aged 45 to 64 years, living in metropolitan Sydney, and educated to a Bachelor degree or higher level. Around 1 in 4 carers had a disability or long-term illness themselves.

Carers in paid work were most likely to be the primary carer (84.6-85.1%), and caring for someone who could not be left alone at all (25.6-29.3%). More than 1 in 10 carers received a Carer Payment (10.2-13.8%), and close to half received the Carer Allowance (37.3-49.4%).

Across the three time points, carers were spending on average 26 hours per week in paid work. The proportion of carers employed full-time or part-time was similar across the three time points, with around 1 in 6 carers in casual employment, and 1 in 10 carers self-employed. Carers were most likely to be working in health care, community / non-profit, government / public sector, or education and training industries (Table 2).

From the open-text responses carers expressed several reasons for needing to remain in paid work, including income security and as a form of respite from their caring role. Many commented on the financial costs associated with caring and the need for some form of income to supplement carer support payments as reasons to work longer hours and/or remain in paid work.

“It is extremely difficult to combine the roles of carer and worker. I wish I did not need the income as I love looking after my daughter... I do not understand why my [employer] does not attempt to accommodate me with a [schedule] that would allow me to spend more time at home, particularly as they are aware of my situation.” (2016 Survey)

“My work is very supportive but I find I am exhausted a lot of the time due to trying to work full time and care for my husband. The pension is not enough money for me to reduce my working hours and still be able to pay for the bills so I have to work. Ironically, the more I work, the less pension my husband gets and then the more financial pressure we are under” (2014 Survey)

Table 1. Demographics for carers’ in paid work – 2014, 2016 and 2018 Carers NSW Carer Surveys³

	2014		2016		2018	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Age						
Less than 45 years	214	28.1	172	22.5	132	21.3
45 – 64 years	488	64.1	493	64.4	391	63.0
65+ years	48	6.3	47	6.1	51	8.2
Gender						
Female	659	86.6	650	84.9	519	83.6
Male	90	11.8	77	10.1	62	10.0
Self-described	-		1	0.1	0	0
Location						
Metropolitan	497	65.3	408	53.3	313	50.4
Regional/rural	231	30.4	275	35.9	241	38.8
Primary carer						
Primary carer	644	84.6	652	85.1	526	84.7
Non primary carer	74	9.7	69	9.0	95	15.3
How long care recipients can be left alone						
Not at all	195	25.6	216	28.2	182	29.3
Less than 1 hour	84	11.0	76	9.9	57	9.2
Few hours	171	22.5	184	24.0	159	25.6
One day	116	15.2	109	14.2	82	13.2
Few days or more	140	18.4	136	17.8	98	15.8
Own disability						
Yes	187	24.6	195	25.5	177	28.5
No	559	73.5	528	68.9	404	65.1
Education						
High school or less	138	18.1	115	15.0	90	14.5
Certificate/diploma	270	35.5	259	33.8	202	32.5
Bachelor degree or higher	337	44.3	348	45.4	288	46.4
Income support						
Carer Payment	105	13.8	78	10.2	65	10.5
Carer Allowance	284	37.3	372	48.6	307	49.4

³ N.B Some reported percentage in Tables 1, 2 and 3 do not add up to 100% due to rounding or missing data.

Table 2. Carers' employment characteristics – 2014, 2016 and 2018 Carers NSW Carer Surveys

	2014		2016		2018	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Employment mode*						
Full time	301	39.6	301	39.3	218*	35.1*
Part time	309	40.6	309	40.3	380*	61.2*
Casual	92	12.1	108	14.1	112	18.0
Self-employed	75	9.9	67	8.7	53	8.5
Industry						
Health care	230	30.2	212	27.1	104	23.1
Government / public sector	157	20.6	126	16.4	107	17.6
Community / non-profit	123	16.2	153	20.0	118	19.4
Education and training	116	15.2	120	15.7	83	13.7
Retail	35	4.6	42	5.5	32	5.3
Banking / finance	34	4.5	25	3.3	13	2.1
Other	146	19.2	149	19.4	114	18.7
*Calculated based on hours worked per week						
**Caution – there is slight variation in how this question was asked across the three surveys						

Carers also expressed that employment provided an opportunity to take a break from their carer role; that is, as providing some form of respite from the pressures associated with ongoing care responsibilities. However, many carers commented on the stresses associated with balancing their caring role and employment.

“My workplace is fantastic and I like going to work to get away from the pressures at home.” (2016 Survey)

“I feel my job empowers me to feel valued, and gives me respite from caring” (2016 Survey)

“My daughter is now 32 when she was born I kept working part time (12 hours) it was my only break from caring” (2014 Survey)

“Very stressful experience managing being a carer and being in the workforce. Especially from a guilt point of view...” (2014 Survey)

For many carers, the rigid work-hours or workspaces make it difficult to meet the demands of their caring role and work commitments, thus in many cases the different forms of flexible work arrangements available or being self-employed offer a way in which carers can continue to both work and care.

“I am fortunate to be able to organize my work around my carer responsibilities, otherwise I would have had to give up work 7 years ago when I began caring for my father.” (2016 Survey)

“I currently have a very supportive manager and workplace. I have taken long service leave in the previous 12 months and have been offered flexible working conditions to manage my caring role and work commitments.” (2016 Survey)

“It is only because I am self employed as a farmer and as a sole operator that allows me the flexibility to help care for my brother. I think if I were a plumber or an accountant that would not be possible...” (2016 Survey)

Carers' use of flexible work arrangements

There was some variation in how the questions relating to use of, and type of flexible work arrangements used were presented across the three surveys. What we do know is that the flexible work arrangements carers were most likely to use to accommodate their caring responsibilities included carer's leave, flexible start-finish times, working from home, and job sharing (Table 3).

Table 3. Carers' knowledge and use of flexible work arrangements – 2014, 2016 and 2018 Carers NSW Carer Surveys

	2014		2016		2018	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Use flexible work arrangements (FWA)*						
Use any FWA			270	35.2	595	95.8
Flexible work arrangement type*						
Carer's leave	324	42.6	381	49.7	307	49.4
Flexible start finish times	310	40.7	378	49.3	301	48.5
Working from home	111	14.6	170	22.2	190	30.6
Job sharing	42	5.5	101	13.2	48	7.7

Experiences with flexible work arrangements

Many carers have expressed difficulties or negative repercussions associated with requesting flexible work arrangements. Carers often noted the discrepancy between workplace policies, which stated in principle support for working carers, and the actual availability and use of flexible work arrangements.

"The business unit where I work provides these benefits grudgingly - especially where working from home is concerned. It is only because this provision is written into our enterprise agreement that they accommodate it 'to the letter of the law' - it has been made clear to me that it will be cancelled at the earliest opportunity." (2016 Survey)

"I am constantly made to feel guilty about having a carer role. I find this incongruous with policy and rhetoric around supporting carers at work. Maybe organisationally it is on the agenda but my immediate supervisor sees it as a weakness..." (2016 Survey)

"Work supports caring leave in theory, it is just a struggle each time to make the arrangements, it's as if I'm having the conversation for the first time." (2014 Survey)

Carers noted that managers often acted as gatekeepers around whether their request for flexibility was granted or refused. For many carers, the success of their requests for flexible working arrangements was dependent upon a manager who understands the demands of the caring role and is willing to accommodate and support the employee.

"I am very lucky that I have a very supportive employer. I really feel that more employers need to look at giving carers a chance to be employed." (2016 Survey)

"Responses in my very large organisation depends very much on the direct line manager, their attitude and knowledge..." (2016 Survey)

"My workplace was great until new manager changed the work conditions" (2016 Survey)

“Until now I have been hugely supported – and greatly thankful due to an understanding manager. But I will be losing my manager soon and thus my support will be gone. Other managers would not be accepting and thus I’m now having to consider options on leaving/changing positions...” (2014 Survey)

While managers are often seen as gatekeepers to the success or failure of a person’s requests for flexible working arrangements, other colleagues can also provide a negative environment which may make a carer reluctant to seek flexible working arrangements.

“Often people at work are judgemental that I try to have a life outside my caring role that I have at home.” (2016 Survey)

“There is some resentment from other staff when I have to take time off to take a 22 year old to appointments but most are understanding” (2014 Survey)

A number of carers revealed that parents caring for a child were more likely to have success in requesting flexible workplace arrangements compared to people with other caring responsibilities. Many felt that they had been grudgingly provided with flexible working arrangements, which made them feel uneasy and guilty for having made such requests.

“I feel discriminated as colleagues with small children are given more flexibility with time than I am.” (2016 Survey)

“I find I struggle mostly with guilt.... Guilt that I am at work rather than at home and guilt that when I’m at home I need to finish work.” (2016 Survey)

“I love my work but am torn between responsibility at home and work” (2014 Survey)

For carers who had been granted flexibility, they noted that this often had come at a cost to their professional development or career satisfaction.

“I have lost a lot of good jobs because of my role as a carer. Now I am on minimum wage and less hours as I am formally unreliable but a valued team member.” (2016 Survey)

“It is very hard to get a well-paid challenging managerial job which is part time-but that is what I would like.” (2016 Survey)

“Whilst I enjoy my work role, I only earn a minimal amount. My caring duties have meant that I can only work part-time and in a lower grade position than previously” (2014 Survey)

Discussion

The aim of this paper was to provide a profile of the characteristics of a sample of working carers, particularly those in mid to later life (45+ years), and explore their knowledge and use of nationally legislated flexible work arrangements intended to support working carers. The data reported here come from surveys carried out at three time points: 2014, 2016 and 2018. Australia’s *Fair Work Act 2009* was amended in 2013 to extend the right to request flexible working arrangements to mature-age workers over 55 years of age and workers with added caring responsibilities, therefore we might expect a shift in the knowledge of, uptake and possibly more positive experiences with flexible work

arrangements from 2014 given the recognition in policy of extended working lives and multi-generational caring responsibilities.

The profile of working carer characteristics reported here is consistent with other Australian studies (see Survey of Disability, Ageing and Carers, ABS, 2016; O'Loughlin, Loh & Kendig, 2017) in that the majority of carers, including primary carers, are women, in mid to later life, with higher levels of education, and around 25% reporting a health/disability of their own. The gendered nature of care has been well documented in the literature in Australia and elsewhere (Temple, Dow & Baird, 2019; O'Loughlin, Loh & Kendig, 2017; Vlachantoni et al. 2015; Adair, Williams & Taylor, 2013; Hosseinpoor et al. 2013; Kotsadam 2011; Arksey and Glendinning 2008) and our findings show that this continues to be the case for working carers.

In terms of employment, across the three time points the proportion in full-time employment remained stable, however there was an increase in those undertaking part-time work in 2018 which may be due to taking up, or taking on more demanding carer responsibilities or reflect the income tests associated with eligibility for the Carer Allowance and/or Carer Payment. The increased demands of caring and the impact on the carer's health and wellbeing can be a major 'push' factor associated with moving to part-time work or leaving the paid workforce (O'Loughlin, Loh & Kendig, 2017; Hill et al., 2016; Loh & Kendig, 2013). Continuing in paid work for those in mid to later life is integral to Australia's policy responses to population ageing (e.g., increasing pension age, self-funded retirement), therefore balancing paid work and caregiving has particular implications for older workers. What was clear from the comments in the open-text responses, working carers need to remain in paid work for financial reasons; that is, to meet day-to-day living expenses and/or for retirement planning. This is an enduring theme in research related to carers both in Australia (see Temple & Dow, 2018) and elsewhere (Keating et al., 2013). Across the three time points, around 40-50% of working carers reported receiving government support through the Carer Allowance. While this does signify recognition of the time and effort required of carers, clearly it is not adequate and most continue to supplement it with paid work if their caring responsibilities allow. This also reflects women's continued marginal employment status through part-time work (Rose, Hewitt & Baxter, 2013), lower retirement income benefits due to an interrupted work history associated with caregiving (Warren, 2015), and the gender pay gap (Austen & Mavisakalyan, 2018), and goes some way to explaining the dependency on government support through the age or disability pension and/or Carer Payment/Allowance (O'Loughlin, Loh & Kendig, 2017).

Remaining in paid work has been shown to have a positive influence for those in a carer role (see Rozario et al. 2004) in providing a social network and time away from the caring role. Working carers in this study openly expressed that they found some respite from their carer role through their involvement in paid work, though many still found the balancing act of being both a carer and employee quite stressful, and further commented that their situation cost them opportunities for career development and progression consistent with the situation of women's experience of work outlined previously.

Knowledge of, and more importantly use of flexible work arrangements was evident among the Carers NSW Carer Survey respondents, particularly with 95.8% of the 2018 working carers indicating they used some form of flexible arrangement(s) such as paid carer's leave, flexible start/finish times and working from home. An explanation for this could be that both employees and workplaces are more aware of available flexible work options while carers, through sheer necessity, have to act on their right to request (Temple, Dow & Baird, 2019). It is also important to acknowledge the work done by advocacy groups such as Carers Australia (<https://www.carersaustralia.com.au/work-and-care/>), other State and Territory carer organisations, and the Australia Human Rights Commission (2013) in supporting working carers and advocating for carer-friendly workplaces. The findings indicate that respondents were mostly employed in public sector or non-profit organisations and one might expect that such organisations would accept and actively support the right of carers to request and be granted flexible work arrangements, however this was not fully supported by carers' accounts of the often negative attitudes of managers and co-workers to the requirements of their carer role and need for flexibility in the workplace.

Research to date indicates that the legislated right to request flexible work arrangements is not applied evenly within or across workplaces and is often dependent on a worker's status (e.g. casual, length of service) and the attitude and support of individual managers (see Hill et al., 2016; Cooper & Baird 2015). Drawing on their own experiences, respondents acknowledged that a supportive manager was crucial to the successful implementation and approval of flexible work arrangements; this was usually a manager who understood and accepted that employees will have demands placed on them as carers, not only for young children but other family members and friends as well. The findings highlighted the discrepancy between stated company policies around flexible work arrangements and the availability and use of them in practice; respondents used the term 'gatekeeper' to describe managers' attitudes towards granting (or not) their request for flexibility in the workplace. Despite recognition that flexible work arrangements are available to all employees, carer respondents referred to the often-negative attitudes of co-workers, and especially a lack of understanding if their caring role related to an adult child, spouse/partner or ageing parents. As shown in other research (see Cooper & Baird, 2015), the right to request flexible work appears to be better understood and supported when it relates to the care of younger children.

Limitations

The Carers NSW Carer Surveys are not representative of the broader population of carers in NSW identified in the Australian Bureau of Statistics' SDAC, which is the most reliable source of generalisable population level data regarding carers. Convenience sampling was used to recruit participants, as the survey was promoted on an opt-in basis via a wide range of communication channels to engage members, clients and other stakeholders and therefore is likely to over-represent carers who identify as carers and already have contact with supports and services. Hidden carers and carers who are not in receipt of support or who are socially isolated are much less likely to have responded to the survey. Moreover, due to response bias, it can be assumed that people with more positive or negative experiences were more likely to respond. In the development phase, it was also

identified that, due to the length of the questionnaire and the formal English required in order to elicit accurate responses, carers who lacked confidence in reading and writing English were likely to be excluded. Due to these limitations, caution should be used when generalising findings to the broader population of carers in NSW. Additionally, further analysis is needed to fully explore any differences in knowledge/use of flexible workplace arrangements based on age, gender and workplace/employment sector across the three time points.

Conclusion

Australia has extended the legal right to request flexible work arrangements to specifically include older workers (aged 55+ years) and those with caring responsibilities for older people or people with a disability or illness, however it does not guarantee that the request will be granted or that it will be implemented consistently across workplaces. Despite the legislation and the recent ruling of the Fair Work Commission requiring employers to provide a detailed response when refusing a request for flexible work arrangements (Fair Work Ombudsman, 2019), barriers remain in place that make the situation of working carers problematic including limited paid carer leave options and negotiating flexible work arrangements with often unsupportive managers and co-workers. Further policy reforms will require a major commitment from government and other stakeholders in recognising that with population ageing there will continue to be competing demands and pressures placed on older workers to provide unpaid care, particularly women but increasingly for men, and that these demands have potential employment and health-related consequences on those providing the care, their families, employers and the community.

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