



Why significantly changing the construct of work will improve staff retention, productivity, innovation, inclusion and diversity, staff well-being and ultimately, profits. September 2021

Following speaking engagements discussing my PhD research, which focused on the experiences, leadership and social well-being of women in the workplace (with the case study dedicated to women in the NZ Army, and the research being listened to, and acted on, by the NZ Army), I conducted an unintentional, further, research project focusing on the experiences of working parents, primarily mums. During 2020, 82 corporate sector working mums throughout NZ and Australia reached out to share their experiences with me. When I kept hearing the same story over and over, I couldn't help myself from applying my 'research hat' and note the findings. Further, I now share this information with pretty much anyone who will listen to me, and I now have supporting data from more than 400 (and growing) further working parents (mostly mums, and some dads), across NZ, Australia, UK, US, Singapore and Canada.

The stories from these parents fall into two broad categories, with a relatively even split between the two. Parents either (a) return to work full-time and resent the fact that they barely see their children during waking hours in the week, as well as the associated financial cost of childcare. Or (b) they negotiate some kind of part-time arrangement, where they work less hours, to spend more time with their children. They might become a 0.8 or 0.6 FTE, for example, which comes with a corresponding reduction in their pay. What happens in practice though, is that their workload or outputs are not reduced, so these parents often work on their day(s) off, or in the evening, or most prominently - they become far more efficient at their job, completing their work in fewer hours. In fact, when their manager agrees to 'allow' them to work less hours, the response inevitably goes something like this, "yes sure, happy to support your desire to spend more time with your kids, just as long as you still get all of your work done." The parent responds with, "yes, yes, of course – thank you so much." The parents who proceed with this second option all speak about how lucky they feel, and express gratitude for being able to work in an organisation that allows a reduced-hours contract. After hearing this story over and over, my rage set in. There is nothing lucky about getting a pay cut to do the same job – this is not ok, and is an absolute con! I thought, 'there has got to be a better way'.

So, I did some more research about the construct of work, and realised that it is hugely archaic. The concept of '9 – 5', firstly, is just made up. That's right, it is just made up – it is not a requirement for human existence. It was literally dreamed up 200-ish years ago, around the time of the industrial revolution, and was cemented 100 years ago, in line with Henry Ford's car manufacturing era. At that time, women were barely in the workforce and men were barely in the home force. The '9 – 5' construct is based on the assumption that workers do not need to tend to children. The father goes to work, and the mother takes care of the children. However, the demographics of our workforce today are vastly different. Most parents work. Most households do not have a parent dedicated exclusively to childrearing. Workers *are* responsible for looking after children, as well as their paid



role. The heart of the issue became glaringly obvious to me. The societal mismatch between school being '9 – 3' and work being '9 – 5' is absolutely bonkers. Why on earth would we operate in a society where the schedule of the adults is different to the schedule of the children? This means that every single working parent, and most people do become parents at some stage, have to stress about "what the heck do I do with the kids after school, and what the heck do I do with the kids during school holidays?" Working parents are experiencing significant and enduring stress, every single day, spanning over approximately two decades of their working life, because of this misalignment. Young people who are not yet parents are already stressing about this potential future conundrum. This is a huge concern for our society.

So I thought, why not try and align the two schedules, by reducing the workday, and making more accommodations over the school holiday periods? #workschoolhours (Noting that each country has slightly different school hours to NZ, but the point is, work should be reduced to align with the school schedule). Now, this is where things get really exciting. This is not just a nice 'pie in the sky' idea, aimed at making things better for staff (parents and non-parents), as well as wider society - which it would do. There is actually a business case to do it, and organisations love a good business case!

There is plenty of research to support that outputs can be achieved in less than 40 hours. For example, the 4-day-work-week movement is already demonstrating this increase in productivity. The most productive members in the workforce are often part-time workers, as they are already completing their workload in less time. Further, if the stress regarding the misalignment of work and school could be taken away from working parents, just imagine how much happier they would be at work, how much more innovative and creative they would be, how much better their focus and concentration would be? We know that staff well-being is important, not just because we care about our staff (which we should), but because it also impacts organisational performance. Happier staff generate more profits. Given the current pandemic, flexible working is now mainstream. Many staff now expect this to be a basic condition of their employment. Imagine the competitive advantage you could achieve, by being able to attract and retain the most talented staff, if your organisation operated within school hours? This doesn't just apply for current working parents, but you would also be able to attract the best people, regardless of their parental status.

Did you know there are already organisations doing this? There are, and they are raving about the positive impact it is having on their organisation. My latest research project is now collating data about these case study examples, to determine the most effective ways to implement and operate within this new #workschoolhours paradigm. I am convinced that transitioning the work schedule to align with the school schedule is not a case of 'if', but 'when'. Get on this bus, and experience the significant benefits to staff, organisations, and society as a whole.