

Flexibility and the GFC, Australia's had a taste and there's no going back

Executive Summary

30 April 2010

What does it mean for Australia's workplace of the future when media headlines during the Global Financial Crisis heralded "*Workers embrace the 9-day fortnight*" and "*Get ready for the four-day week*" and the Australian Bureau of Statistics found an increase in part-time hours, and a fall in average full-time hours? It suggests that in contrast to previous downturns, organisations sampled from a "response" menu that included flexibility as an alternative to layoffs, and it seems that flexibility tasted good! To identify the depth and nature of this experience, and what it means for Australia as we move into recovery and a high speed economy, in March 2010 Aequus Partners conducted a *2010 GFC/Flexibility Survey* of 40 organisational knowledge gatekeepers.

Key findings from the survey included:

1. **1 in 3 survey respondents took the flexibility taste test** Traditionally workplace flexibility has been associated with women returning from maternity leave on a part-time basis. The survey results demonstrated that during the GFC the flexibility menu expanded (eg organisations offered new forms of flexibility to their staff, such as longer holidays), and a broader range of diners sampled from the menus (eg flexibility was taken up by more men and senior managers).
2. **The new flexibility menu gets a tick of approval.** Those organisations which offered a broader flexibility menu to a broader group of staff observed a win/win for business and staff. Organisations reported that staff and in particular, managers (18%) were more confident in their ability to manage work and flexibility, and at the same time costs were reduced and engagement increased. These outcomes were particularly salient for organisations which offered a "voluntary" menu of flexibility, rather than one which compelled diners to eat from a set-plate of part-time work.
3. **A new (workplace) menu for the future, with a few extra ingredients.** Survey respondents indicated that they intended to continue their new flexibility menu into the future, and were likely to make adjustments to enhance the recipe for success, eg 92% of survey respondents indicated that they planned to engage in job redesign in the future.

Implications for business

Although our 2010 GFC/Flexibility Survey data are not presented as broadly representative of Australian employers, the results provide insight and detail about the GFC "flexibility" story in Australia. Going forward, employees are likely to expect more of a "can do" attitude in relation to flexibility, and managers are likely to have the confidence to respond positively.

For a copy of the full report, contact Juliet Bourke on juliet.bourke@aequus.com.au or (02) 9810 7176.