

Job Quality and Work-Life: Unsocial Working Hours, Casual Work and Work-Life Outcomes in Australia

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Introduction

This chapter analyses the relationship between two key aspects of job quality – job security and working at unsocial times – and work-life outcomes. It draws on Australian data collected since 2006 and considers both national trends and experience in the retail industry in particular. These foci are adopted for several reasons: work-life issues are attracting growing interest in Australia; both casual work and working at unsocial times are currently highly contested in Australia's industrial relations system. The retail sector is of interest because it is the second largest employer in the country; it is an industry in which work-life issues have salience given its high proportion of female employees; and recent industrial cases specifically focus upon the rewards and penalties for working unsocial hours, or working on casual contracts.

Of course job quality means different things in different places and at different times. In the early 21st century in Europe, for example, discussions of job quality often focus on how well work is 'adapted to workers' and their lives, and how this affects workers' wellbeing – with attention to earnings, career and skill prospects, and working time (Eurofound, 2012). In the Global South – where global marketisation is new and rapid industrialisation is underway, like the new economic zones of China for example – job quality is more likely to relate to a liveable wage, physical safety, job security, and

¹ The authors would like to thank officers of the Shop Distributive and Allied Employees' Association (SDA) for their assistance. The authors would also like to thank Nicholas Sageman for his research assistance.

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regular work and job security. Retail workers who are employed casually have worse work-life outcomes than permanents when controlled for their differences in working hours, and many would like to convert from casual terms to permanent. Poorer work-life outcomes experienced by casuals and casual worker preferences for permanency provide support for policy changes that give long-term casual workers the opportunity to convert to permanency without threat of job loss if they ask for that chance. These factors also highlight the importance of regulation limiting the use of casual workers in jobs that are in fact ongoing, predictable and far from short-term or seasonal in nature.

The attempt of Australian retail employers in 2012 to reduce the penalty rates of retail workers who worked unsocial hours did not meet with success: Australia's Fair Work Commission (FWC) rejected their case for its lack of evidence. However, the issue did not end there: in a 2013 appeal, while a FWC full-bench again rejected employer arguments that the level of disability of working on Sundays is no higher than for working on Saturdays, it did decide to reduce penalty rates on Sundays for 'transient and lower skilled workers' (Workplace Express 2014b). In its 2012 Interim Modern Award Review decision, the FWC invited employers to renew their arguments in 2014 when it would begin its next four-yearly review of such provisions in industry awards, but only if they brought forward 'cogent evidence' for their case. This action is to include evidence about the impact of change in employment conditions such as penalty rates for working unsocial hours on employee welfare (Fair Work Commission, 2013; Workplace Express, 2013). Clearly industrial tribunals are alert to the work-life consequences of such changes, making research about job quality – including working time and job security – an important and ongoing live issue for both the regulation of work in Australia and the wellbeing of workers and their families and communities.

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