



Centre for Labour, Employment and Work

CLEW Research Update: Work-Life Balance Experiences: Tradespeople in Western Australia's Mining Industry

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Introduction

Work-life balance (WLB) provision is a major concern for workers seeking relativity between the quality of their working and non-working lives, particularly within environments where work intensity and work hours continues to grow. Typically framed as a white collar worker issue, WLB is of even greater importance for tradespeople with a variety of commuting work arrangements within the Australian mining industry.

According to the Department of Training and Workforce Development (2015), the Western Australian resources industry has experienced significant skilled labour shortage, in particular, for trades such as electricians, drillers, production technicians, mechanical fitters and boilermakers. With Australian mining businesses noting challenges in attracting, motivating and retaining a highly skilled, flexible and adaptable workforce, the range of FIFO, DIDO and Residential commuting arrangements¹ continues to grow. Mine workers in Western Australia work under different roster models and within dry (no alcohol) sites. How workers in this industry perceive and manage their WLB produced some interesting results.

FIFO and DIDO Mine workers and WLB

For mine workers in Western Australia, WLB is a self-defined, self-determined state of wellbeing that would enable them to effectively manage multiple responsibilities at work, at home, and in their community. Research studying 315 workers in the mining industry shows that, while WLB is highly valued by mine workers and their partners, for those engaged in FIFO and DIDO types of commuting arrangements, achieving WLB whilst working onsite is difficult. Mine workers engaged in either FIFO or DIDO commute arrangements struggle to manage issues surrounding long periods of family separation that make relationships

¹ FIFO: workers who live in one location and fly into their work location on a roster arrangement; DIDO: workers who live in a location close enough to drive to their place of work on a roster arrangement; Residential: workers who live close enough to their place of work to commute daily.

unmanageable. They also lack the time to spend with friends, to engage in community activities, or to pursue further education and training.

While most trades people are attracted by high wages and resultant lifestyles, the social costs of dysfunctional familial relationships for those on FIFO or DIDO commuting arrangements remain high. Mine workers with young families are affected more than workers who are single and those who have no child-care or parent-care responsibilities. Workers with young families were typically found to struggle with separation from their families, high levels of stress during the return/departure points in their roster cycle, and the challenge of defining familial roles. As the non-commuting parent has little or no support with childcare, having one parent working away from the family presents a rigid and challenging lifestyle for families of trades people with young families. However, trades people and their partners who had a FIFO work arrangement over a long period of time and those with non-dependent children developed resilience to the adverse effects of FIFO arrangements and gradually accepted these working arrangements and associated challenges as normal.

In addition to this, WLB for workers on an FIFO or DIDO work arrangement were affected by the isolated nature of mine sites, the quality of accommodation and food, facilities to wash clothes and onerous camp rules, all of which create tensions for both new and long-standing mining employees engaged in these commuting arrangements. Mining working conditions, including the prevalence of non-standard working hours, shift work, weekend work and compressed work schedules, were found to result in fatigue, as well as eating and sleep disturbances. In such cases, some workers resorted to use of alcohol or illicit drugs to manage fatigue, stress or disrupted sleep, instead of seeking on-site support. Although, alcohol and drug use was found to occur away from the workplace, it nonetheless was found to negatively affect workplace safety and productivity. Similarly, the hangover effects of using drugs can last for several days causing further issues of fatigue, aggression and mood swings.

When compared to FIFO and DIDO work arrangements, residential commuting work arrangements present a more supportive environment in the achievement of WLB for workers. Shorter rostering schedules and the ability to return home to see the family every day contribute to higher WLB for residential commuting workers.

Despite the challenges, positive aspects of FIFO, DIDO and residential commuting arrangements were also noted, including relatively long blocks of 'rest' or non-work periods in which to spend quality time with family and friends and the relatively high income levels that provide workers with relatively comfortable lifestyles. Other factors that influence a trades person's decision to either work on a FIFO roster or DIDO commuting arrangement include, career opportunities, employment culture, family satisfaction levels and social supports.

Conclusions

To support WLB, workers express a preference for shortening rosters to minimise stress and fatigue, providing flexibility with rosters, lower work-to-home ratios, access to timely and private communication options and better on-site living conditions and facilities. Other suggestions include developing recreational pursuits, site visits by employee partners and allowing alternative rosters to suit individual circumstances. Maintaining consistent communication with family and friends is considered to be an effective moderator to the negative effects of FIFO working arrangements.

Mine workers on FIFO or DIDO commute arrangements were often found to lack prior knowledge of the mining industry, as well as of how a FIFO or DIDO lifestyle may impact on them and their families. Most workers noted having little knowledge of the realities of FIFO and DIDO commuting arrangements and recommended pre-employment awareness training for new employees. To summarise, this research identifies challenges associated with either FIFO or DIDO commuting arrangements which make it difficult for trades people to achieve WLB during the period they are working on-site. Unlike residential commuting arrangements, FIFO and DIDO commuting arrangements do not provide a conducive environment for trades people to achieve WLB.

For further information about this research, please feel free to contact: georchip@gmail.com