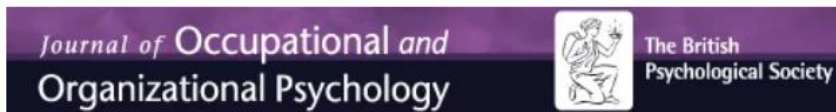


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Flexible working arrangement motives, organisational context,
and supervisor support: A literature review

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Abstract

Flexible working arrangements (FWAs) are sought by a range of employees and for a variety reasons. However, employees who desire greater flexibility may not seek it due to a lack of policy awareness, negative beliefs about flexibility, or fear that requesting such arrangements will result in repercussions, such as negative career consequences. Organisational context and the supportiveness of employees' immediate supervisors also play a role in their ability to access FWAs. Several aspects of FWAs require further research; these areas are presented and discussed.

Flexible working arrangement motives, organisational context, and supervisor support: A literature review

A flexible working arrangement (FWA) is a term that describes options afforded to employees that enable them to perform work outside of traditional timeframes (*temporal*), environments (*spatial*), or a combination of the two (Rau, 2003). Prior to the 2000s, FWAs often referred to *business-friendly* flexible working practices that served to benefit the employer, for example stand-by arrangements or zero hours contracts. However, in academic literature, modern workplaces, and popular media, the concept of flexibility now predominantly refers to *employee-friendly* practices that are sought by the worker, as a means of enabling them to better manage their work and non-work responsibilities (Fleetwood, 2007). For the purposes of this review, the term FWAs will refer exclusively to employee-friendly practices.

Temporal flexibility refers to an arrangement that allows employees to modify how many hours they work or when work is performed (Kossek & Friede, 2006). This can include arrangements such as flexitime, a system whereby workers may set their own start and finish times, provided they complete a set number of hours within a timeframe; and compressed work weeks, for example, working four 10-hour days, as opposed to five eight-hour days.

Spatial flexibility is an arrangement that allows employees to perform their work duties outside of the normal environment, such as from home. Due to advances in technology, work is becoming increasingly portable, making spatial flexibility increasingly common (McDonald, 2017). Spatial flexibility may occur on an ad hoc basis, for instance to care for an unwell child, or may be scheduled in advance, for

example, allowing an employee to work from home two days per week in order to forgo a lengthy commute (Greenberg & Landry, 2011).

The following review aims to examine employees' experiences with FWAs, particularly within an Australian context. It will investigate employees' motives for requesting a FWA, and conversely, the reasons why they may not. Furthermore, it aims to understand how the structural and cultural context of the organisation, and employees' supervisors, may influence the utilisation and acceptance of FWAs within an organisation.

The rise of flexibility

Historically, the idealised worker was one who worked full-time, while also frequently being available for overtime (Munn & Greer, 2015; Williams, 2000). This structure typically required that employees be at their workplace for approximately 40 hours a week, between the hours of 9:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m., from Monday to Friday (Catalyst, 1997).

Between 1978 and 2005, a major shift in the structure of the Australian workforce occurred, with the aggregate labour force participation rate of Australian women growing from 50.6% to 68.9% (Austen & Seymour, 2006). This is referred to as the *feminisation of the workplace*, and resulted in a growth in the number of dual-earning couples (McDonald, 2017).

However, despite the rise of dual-earning couples, the roles within families remained largely unchanged. Women continued to undertake, on average, three times the amount of unpaid childcare and domestic labour as men, irrespective of employment status or income (UN Secretary-General's High-Level Panel on

Women's Economic Empowerment, 2016). This produced a 'double burden' for working women, and led to a demand for greater flexibility in the workplace to enable better management of the competing demands of work and home (Fleetwood, 2007).

In the 1990s, organisations began to adapt to these changes in the workforce, with many adopting *family-friendly* working practices, such as part-time work, compressed work weeks, and flexitime. These policies served as a means of recruiting mothers into the workforce to mitigate labour shortages, and as the 'war for talent' emerged, to retain highly skilled or specialised female employees. However, family-friendly working practices specifically targeted working mothers and therefore, implicitly and often explicitly, excluded men, and women without children, from participating (Fleetwood, 2007). In subsequent years, organisations have increasingly enacted work-life policies that are written in gender-neutral language, making them more accessible to all employees (Pini & McDonald, 2008).

The increase in organisations offering FWAs may be explained by a need to mitigate work-life conflict and to attract and retain valuable employees. Work-life conflict is a result of the competing demands of work, and life outside of work, causing stress and poor outcomes (Carlson, Kacmar, & Williams, 2000). Job stress, poor health, and family responsibilities are leading causes of absenteeism in Australia (beyondblue, 2014; Direct Health Solutions, 2014), and the direct cost to Australian employers of stress-related presenteeism (i.e., when employees attend work but their productivity is reduced due to stress); and stress-related absenteeism, (i.e., when employees do not attend work because of stress), amounts to \$10.11 billion each year (Medibank Private, 2008). This highlights the financial importance of organisations mitigating stress and work-life conflict.

FWAs have been found to reduce work-life conflict (Allen, 2001), decrease turnover intentions (Allen, 2001; Azar, Khan, & Van Eerde, 2018; Masuda et al., 2012; McNall, Nicklin, & Masuda, 2010; Peretz, Fried, & Levi, 2018), reduce absenteeism (Peretz et al., 2018), increase job satisfaction (Azar et al., 2018), and contribute to greater commitment to the organisation (Azar et al., 2018; McNall et al., 2010).

Furthermore, recent research has identified that work-life balance is the second highest driver of attraction for Australians when seeking employment, led only by salary (SEEK, 2017). In this survey, work-life balance encompassed a range of factors including the availability of compensation for overtime, flexible hours, access to leave, and remote working options. When considering that work-life balance was rated more attractive to prospective employees than career development opportunities, quality of management, and even job security, it is evident that flexible working options are vital to remaining competitive in the job market.

Due to the *Fair Work Act 2009*, some groups in Australia also have the 'right to request' flexibility from their employer, regardless of organisational policy. To be eligible, employees must have responsibility for a school-aged child, are a carer, have a disability, are over the age of 55, are experiencing family violence or are caring for a person who is experiencing family violence (Fair Work Ombudsman, 2009). However, in 2014 a survey of working Australians revealed that only 42.6% of those surveyed were aware of the 'right to request', and only 20.1% had made a FWA request in the past 12 months (Skinner & Pocock, 2014). When assessing these results against a comparable survey from 2009, the year the 'right to request' was enacted, in which 22.4% of working Australians reported making a FWA request

in the prior year (Pocock, Skinner, & Ichii, 2009), it appears that the 'right to request' has not resulted in an increase in the number of Australians accessing FWAs.

Motives for requests

All employees have responsibilities outside of the workplace; household maintenance, errands, appointments, spiritual commitments, funerals, and weddings; these impact even the ideal worker (Hamilton, Gordon, & Whelan-Berry, 2006), and require some level of flexibility from an employer to manage. However for ongoing commitments, employees will often require a more formalised arrangement such as a FWA. As previously stated, many organisations have adopted their own flexible work policies that allow for flexibility on grounds other than those specified in the 'right to request'. These provisions are utilised by a range of employees, not just those with young families, and for a variety of reasons. For example, a survey of Australian workers found that the main reasons employees cited for requesting an amendment to their working arrangements were, in order of prevalence: childcare needs, to pursue study, to increase their hours or income, health problems, to reduce work demands, to pursue a more interesting or challenging role, and to spend more time with family (Skinner, Hutchinson, & Pocock, 2012). Similarly, Greenberg and Landry (2011) found that in a study of American working women, the main reasons stated for negotiating a FWA, again in order of prevalence, were: to spend more time with family/spouse, personal/family illness, to pursue study, and to care for elderly parents. Other studies have cited productivity as a reason for requesting a FWA, for example to avoid workplace distractions (Shockley & Allen, 2012); to avoid a long commute (Greenberg & Landry, 2011); or to manage a sporting commitment (Bittman, Hoffman, & Thompson, 2004). So while a large proportion of requests for FWAs are motivated by childcare, the diverse range of

motives for requesting a FWA indicates that flexible work is not an arrangement solely sought by parents.

The most recent study to investigate Australians' motivations for seeking FWAs was Skinner et al. (2012). Future research could investigate whether there has been a shift in the reasons that Australian employees report for seeking a FWA.

Reasons for not requesting

Skinner et al. (2012) conducted the most recent investigation into the reasons reported by working Australians for not making a FWA request. The two main reasons were that they were content with their current working arrangements, and that flexibility is not possible for them. This response combined various items including 'not convinced employer would allow it', 'job does not allow it', and 'flexibility not possible or available'. However, other research provides a more nuanced story. Some explanations for reluctance to request a FWA include; lack of policy awareness, beliefs about masculinity, and the possible consequences of such an arrangement.

Policy awareness

A lack of awareness and understanding of flexible work policies and rights acts as a barrier to flexible working arrangements. In 2014, only 42.8% of parents with children under the age of 17 reported knowing about their 'right to request'. The authors indicated concern regarding the lack of awareness among the groups that this policy is designed to support, and suggested that the way it is currently publicised and enacted may be insufficient (Skinner & Pocock, 2014).

This lack of awareness is also an issue with company-specific FWA policies (Cooper & Baird, 2015). A study of Australian organisations found that executives, supervisors, and employees identified that a lack of awareness about their organisations' family-friendly policies acted as a barrier to their uptake. Many supervisors admitted that they were not aware of what their employees were entitled to, and employees reported that they were unsure what would constitute a reasonable request (Bittman et al., 2004). Unless greater effort is made to publicise and increase awareness of the 'right to request' and company-specific FWA policies, employees will continue to be unaware of their rights and entitlements.

Gender

Research investigating FWAs within organisations has shown that beliefs about gender impact the uptake of these policies. As previously stated, FWAs are often positioned as, or understood as, policies that are intended to support working mothers (Munn & Greer, 2015), which may deter men from requesting flexibility. This may explain findings from Skinner and Pocock (2014), that indicated that 32.9% of men were not content with their current work arrangements, but had not made a request for flexibility.

However the issue of men's lack of FWA uptake is more complex than a misunderstanding of entitlements. An unwavering commitment to work constitutes a major component of masculinity (Thébaud & Pedulla, 2016; Williams, 2000), and engaging in full-time paid employment acts as a powerful expression of masculine identity (Pini & McDonald, 2008). Because of the relationship between work and masculinity, seeking flexibility has been shown to result in men being considered less masculine (Butler & Skattebo, 2004; Rudman & Mescher, 2013; Vandello,

Hettinger, Bosson, & Siddiqi, 2013) and the stigma surrounding men participating in FWAs is enough to deter them from utilising these policies even if they are dissatisfied with their working arrangements (Kelly, Ammons, Chermack, & Moen, 2010; Munsch, Ridgeway, & Williams, 2014).

These sentiments are echoed by Australian participants interviewed by Pini and McDonald (2008), “it’s not the blokey thing to work part-time. If you are a real man you work full-time” and that other employees will “think there’s something wrong with [a man who works flexibly]” (p.604). Men who sought a FWA for the sake of childcare or to manage domestic responsibilities were positioned as deviating from masculinity. Given the significance of work to masculinity, it can be assumed that the consequences of seeking flexibility may be more negative for men than women (Vandello et al., 2013).

Career consequences

Another reason for employees’ reluctance to seek a FWA is the potential repercussions for their career. Williams, Blair-Loy, and Berdahl (2013) found that even employees who are unhappy with their work arrangements will not make a FWA request due to the possible consequences.

Many employees feel that because a FWA will reduce their visibility within the organisation, that it will therefore cease or slow their career progression (Lewis & Humbert, 2010; Pini & McDonald, 2008). This is not an unfounded belief; people who seek flexibility receive lower job evaluations than those who do not (Judiesch & Lyness, 1999; Vandello et al., 2013); are considered to be poorer workers (Rudman & Mescher, 2013); to be less committed and less likely to progress in their workplace (Cohen & Single, 2001; Rogier & Padgett, 2004); and are paid less (Holt & Lewis,

2011; Lewis & Humbert, 2010). Even powerful employees who have increased access to flexibility and paid leave fear that utilising these policies will result in negative repercussions (Perlow & Kelly, 2014), for example, managers who take leaves of absence receive less promotions and raises than those who do not (Judiesch & Lyness, 1999). These negative consequences can be described as *flexibility bias* – the belief that an employee who seeks or utilises a FWA is a “bad worker” and does not deserve work rewards (Williams et al., 2013). The presence of this bias indicates that the pervasive belief about the ideal worker remains, and continues to damage the reputation and career progression of those who seek flexible work.

Since Skinner et al. (2012), there has not been another study that has investigated the reasons why Australians do not request FWAs. Future research could re-examine this area to identify if there have been any changes in Australians’ reported reasons for not seeking flexibility.

Organisational context

The level of support organisations provide to employees significantly impacts the level of flexibility that they are able to access, and the outcomes of that flexibility. When employees perceive their organisation to be highly supportive of their work-life management, they experience increased job satisfaction, engagement, and decreased turnover intentions. It is theorised that supportiveness indicates to the employee that they are appreciated, resulting in these positive outcomes (Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002; Saks, 2006). Provisions that allow flexibility are one of the ways that organisations can signal support to their employees.

The amount of flexibility available to employees is heavily dependent on the structural, and cultural work-life support of the organisation. *Structural work-life support* is the creation and/or alteration of organisational policies, practices, and job structures that provide employees with flexibility to manage their work and non-work responsibilities. The *cultural work-life support* of the organisation is a result of the informal workplace practices and norms that signify the value of, and support offered to, employees who seek flexibility (Kossek, Lewis, & Hammer, 2010). However, structural and cultural work-life support are not necessarily aligned within organisations. For example, Holt and Lewis (2011) found that even self-described “family-friendly” organisations may have a culture that considers employees to be committed and ambitious if they are able to work overtime and take trips at short notice. This ideal is largely incompatible with the expressed family-friendliness and flexibility. Or, despite an organisation having supportive FWA policies, the culture may harbour a flexibility bias, meaning that utilising these policies is disapproved of or results in negative repercussions (Rofcanin, Las Heras, & Bakker, 2017). This research indicates that structural supportiveness does not guarantee cultural supportiveness; however it is not clear how strongly linked these two constructs are.

The level of cultural support within an organisation plays a significant role in determining whether employees choose to engage in FWAs (Allen, 2001), and can ultimately undermine their effectiveness, utilisation, and positive outcomes (Holt & Lewis, 2011; Kelly & Moen, 2007; Kinnunen, Mauno, Geurts, & Dikkers, 2005). When organisational culture reflects supportiveness for family and personal commitments, employees are more inclined to feel that they are able to prioritise their home life over work when necessary (Bhave, Kramer, & Glomb, 2010). However, if the organisational culture is not consistent with flexible work policies,

employees believe that seeking a FWA will not be effective in mitigating work-life conflict (Rofcanin et al., 2017). An unsupportive culture can also restrict employees from fully utilising the terms of their FWA. For example, Lewis and Humbert (2010) found that when employees cut back to a four day week, receiving an appropriate reduction in their salary, there would be an implicit, or sometimes explicit, expectation that they would continue to maintain a full-time workload.

Some researchers have debated the potential for FWAs to also lead to spillover of work into private life; increasingly work-life conflict (Blair-Loy, 2009; Schieman & Glavin, 2008). Spillover occurs when individuals habitually perform work activities during their personal time (Schieman & Glavin, 2017). It is noted that spillover is particularly prevalent in organisations with a culture of strong devotion to work. This again reinforces the ideal worker trope, whereby employees are encouraged to be constantly available (Schieman & Glavin, 2017). Spillover has been found to occur for a number of reasons, such as; employees feeling a sense of duty and reciprocity towards an organisation for granting them flexibility (Kelliher & Anderson, 2010; Lewis & Humbert, 2010); being contacted about work matters outside of working hours (Blair-Loy, 2009; Schieman & Glavin, 2008); or worry resulting from a culture of flexibility bias (Lewis & Humbert, 2010). Employees working in organisations with the highest levels of flexibility bias are the most likely to experience home-to-job spillover (O'Connor & Cech, 2018).

Supervisor support

The *supportive model* of organisational behaviour advocates for supervisors to play a supportive role in the workplace, as opposed to exclusively focusing on production and output. This model encourages supervisors to create an environment

in which employees feel comfortable discussing work and non-work problems, and to provide support for employees who are experiencing difficulties in either sphere (Likert, 1967). Hammer, Kossek, Daniels, and Zimmerman (2007) describe family supportive supervisor behaviours as those that provide emotional and practical support to team members, including developing and implementing policies that enable greater work-life management. When employees experience support from their supervisors through the implementation of FWAs, they are likely to be more engaged in their work and to have heightened work performance (Bal & De Lange, 2015; Rofcanin et al., 2017).

Supervisors play a critical role in enacting an organisation's flexible work policies and granting employees access to these provisions. While an organisation may express the importance of supporting employees' work-life management, it is often immediate supervisors who must be negotiated with in order for employees to access FWAs (Bal & Dorenbosch, 2015; Hammer, Kossek, Bodner, & Crain, 2013). Because of this, immediate supervisors have been described as the "linking pin" between FWA policies and their implementation at the individual level (Hammer et al., 2007). Research has identified that supervisors play a significant role in the implementation of FWA policy, and their level of support has a direct impact on their subordinates' FWA uptake (De Sivatte & Guadamillas, 2013; McCarthy, Darcy, & Grady, 2010).

It has been found that supervisors may deny employees access to FWAs regardless of organisational policy. An Australian case study by Pini and McDonald (2008) illustrates this, with employees highlighting the crucial role of their supervisors in granting access to FWAs. For example, supervisors were unwilling to provide FWAs to employees that were not working mothers, or would undermine FWAs that

were approved by previous supervisors. This research indicates that organisational supportiveness does not necessarily mean that supervisors will also be supportive. Future research could examine how much influence organisational supportiveness has on supervisors' level of support.

Foley, Greenhaus, and Weer (2006) note that there is a lack of research investigating why some supervisors perform more family supportive behaviours than others, including the role of gender. Wells-Lepley et al. (2015) did not find supervisor's gender was a predictor of their willingness to offer FWAs to staff. However, Hopkins (2002) notes that female supervisors tend to perform more supportive behaviours, including assisting workers to seek help, and by providing EAP referrals. Conversely, the same study found that female employees perceived their male supervisors to be more understanding and flexible, than female employees with female supervisors. Given that the role of gender in supervisors' supportiveness appears to be unclear, future research could further investigate this relationship.

Supervisors also model their level of FWA support on the behaviours of executives and senior managers. Williams, McDonald, and Cathcart (2017) speculate that if executives do not support FWAs, their attitudes and behaviours will trickle down to those at supervisor level. Their case study of an Australian organisation found that executive behaviours were not always consistent with their stated support for the use of FWAs. For example, most executives did not utilise FWAs themselves, thus failing to normalise FWAs or demonstrate that using a FWA can be consistent with progressing within the organisation. Furthermore, executives did not adjust the workloads or expectations of their subordinates who sought FWAs, even if it had involved a reduction in working hours. These behaviours do not set the

example to supervisors that it is appropriate to value and support those who seek FWAs. These findings are congruent with those of Wells-Lepley, Thelen, and Swanberg (2015), which found that supervisors' perception of management support was the strongest predictor of whether supervisors would offer FWA to their own staff.

Conclusion

This review aimed to examine Australian employees' experiences with FWAs, particularly employees' motives for requesting a FWA, and conversely, the reasons why they may not. It also aimed to understand how the structural and cultural context of the organisation, and employees' supervisors, influence the utilisation and acceptance of FWAs within an organisation.

While FWAs were originally created as a means of retaining working mothers, they are now available more widely. Childcare is still the primary motive for the majority of FWAs; however it is certainly not only working parents who seek them out. Other motives may include pursuing study, managing ill health, or to avoid long commutes.

While some workers simply do not see the need for greater flexibility, there are a number of other reasons why employees do not make FWA request even if they desire greater flexibility. For example, a lack of awareness about flexible work policy is a barrier, with employees often being unaware of their entitlements or options. For men, a significant impediment is beliefs about masculinity. While certainly not all men personally believe that they must work full-time to be masculine, they may be reluctant to seek flexibility due of potential discrimination. In a similar vein, flexibility bias also makes some employees reluctant to seek a FWA. It is well-

documented that employees who utilise flexibility are often considered to be less hardworking and committed, and can receive poorer job evaluations and fewer opportunities than those who do not work flexibly.

The structural and cultural supportiveness of the organisation is an important determinant of whether an employee is able to access a FWA. A culture that is not supportive of employees who seek to manage their work and non-work lives can undermine the effectiveness, utilisation and positive outcomes of FWA policies. In an unsupportive culture, employees often view FWAs as being ineffective, and this belief is substantiated by research showing that FWAs may not be fully utilised and employees can experience spillover of work into their non-work lives.

Employees' immediate supervisor also plays a key role in their ability to access FWAs. Supervisors may deny access to FWAs, or undermine existing ones. However, it is likely that this is largely influenced by the larger context of the organisation, particularly the behaviours and beliefs of executives. The role of gender in supervisor supportiveness remains unclear.

As established above, several areas relating to flexible work require further examination. It would be worthwhile to revisit the reasons why Australians choose to, or not to, seek a FWA, as this has not been done since Skinner et al. (2012). Furthermore, while research has shown that the structural and cultural supportiveness of an organisation can be misaligned, the strength of their relationship has not been studied and warrants further research. Similarly, it appears the supervisors may not provide employees with flexibility despite the organisation having a FWA policy, future research could explore if there is a relationship between organisational and supervisor supportiveness, and how strong it is. Finally, there is a

lack of consensus in the literature regarding whether gender plays a role in the supportiveness of supervisors, this also warrants further research.

This review has established that employees may seek FWAs for a range of reasons, with the underlying motivation being to mitigate work-life conflict. Reducing work-life conflict can provide a range of benefits for both the employee and organisation. However, a review of the literature indicates that there are several areas that require further investigation. Future research should attempt to better understand the supportiveness of organisations and supervisors, as these greatly impact employees' ability to utilise flexibility. It is anticipated that greater clarity in this area will lead to recommendations for organisations, allowing them to ensure that employees can access the benefits of flexible work.

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Title: “ASKING FOR WHAT YOU'RE ENTITLED TO IS INTIMIDATING”: SEEKING FLEXIBLE WORKING ARRANGEMENTS IN AUSTRALIA

Short title: *SEEKING FLEXIBLE WORKING ARRANGEMENTS*

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Abstract:

Flexible working arrangements (FWAs) provide employees with the ability to determine when, where, and for how long they perform work (Hill et al., 2008). This study examined the use FWAs in Australia, including why employees do, or do not, request flexibility; the relationship between FWA policies and organisational culture; and the relationship between organisational support of employee work-life management and supervisor support. Participants consisted of working adult Australians. The results showed that childcare was the most prevalent reason for requesting a FWA, and that work type was the most common reason for not requesting a FWA. It was found that the existence of FWA policies only contributed to a small amount of variance in the supportiveness of the organisational culture.

Results also showed that the supportiveness of supervisors was strongly linked to the supportiveness of the organisation, and that supervisors' gender contributed to their supportiveness. Qualitative data of participants' experiences was also collected. Analysis of this data suggested that the accessibility and utilisation of FWAs is hindered by negative beliefs and attitudes about flexibility. However, supervisors who have personal experience with FWAs may provide more flexibility than is typical of the organisation, or of senior managers. The key implication of this research is that organisations must provide education and training to those in leadership positions to ensure that FWA policies are grounded in a culture that supports flexibility.

Practitioner Points:

- The existence of FWA policies is not sufficient to ensure that employees are able to access these entitlements.
- Training must be provided to leaders within the business to ensure that they understand the benefits of flexibility for both the organisation and employee.
- Without a culture that is supportive of FWAs, these provisions are not able to provide their full value.

Keywords:

Flexible working arrangements, flexibility, supervisor support, organisational support, organisational culture, thematic analysis

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“Asking for what you're entitled to is intimidating”: seeking flexible working arrangements in Australia

A flexible working arrangement (FWA) is a term that describes options that enable employees to engage in work outside of traditional timeframes or environments (Rau, 2003). Hill et al. (2008) describes flexibility as providing workers with the choice to determine when, where, and for how long they perform work. FWAs may take many forms, however these can be divided into two main categories; temporal and spatial. Temporal flexibility refers to an arrangement that allows employees to modify how many hours they work or when work is performed (Kossek & Friede, 2006). This can include arrangements such as flexitime (i.e., a system that allows employees to choose their start and finish times providing they work a certain number of hours in a timeframe); and compressed work weeks (i.e., compressing full-time hours into fewer workdays). Spatial flexibility allows employees to perform their work outside of the workplace, such as from home. This is becoming more common, with advances in technology making work increasingly portable (McDonald, 2017).

FWAs are very desirable in the modern workforce, with a recent survey finding that Australian job seekers rank work-life balance as the second highest driver of attraction in an employer, led only by salary (SEEK, 2017). However, despite the range of benefits that FWAs garner for both the employee and organisation, they are not always readily accessible or easy for employees to utilise. The structural and cultural supportiveness of an employee's organisation significantly impacts their ability to access FWAs, as does the supportiveness of the employee's supervisor (Allen, 2001; De Sivatte & Guadamillas, 2013; McCarthy, Darcy, & Grady, 2010; Rofcanin, Las Heras, & Bakker, 2017).

The rise of flexibility

Historically, the idealised worker was one who worked full-time, while also frequently being available to work overtime (Munn & Greer, 2015; Williams, 2000). This structure typically required that employees be at their place of employment for approximately 40 hours a week, between the hours of 9:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m., from Monday to Friday (Catalyst, 1997).

Between 1978 and 2005, a major shift in the structure of the Australian workforce occurred, with the participation rate of Australian women growing from 50.6% to 68.9% (Austen & Seymour, 2006). This resulted in a growth in the number of dual-earning couples (McDonald, 2017). However, women continued to undertake the majority of unpaid childcare and domestic labour (UN Secretary-General's High-Level Panel on Women's Economic Empowerment, 2016). This produced a 'double burden' for women, and led to a demand for greater work flexibility to manage the competing demands of work and home (Fleetwood, 2007). In the 1990s, organisations began to adapt to these changes in the workforce, with many adopting *family-friendly* working practices, such as part-time work, compressed work weeks, and flexitime (Fleetwood, 2007). In subsequent years, organisations have increasingly enacted work-life policies that are written in gender-neutral language, making them more accessible to all employees (Pini & McDonald, 2008).

Due to the *Fair Work Act 2009*, some groups in Australia also have the 'right to request' flexibility from their employer, regardless of organisational policy. To be eligible, employees must have responsibility for a school-aged child, are a carer, have a disability, are over the age of 55, are experiencing family violence or are caring for a person who is experiencing family violence (Fair Work Ombudsman,

2009). However, a survey of working Australians revealed that only 42.6% were aware of the 'right to request', and that it has not increased the number of Australians seeking FWAs (Skinner & Pocock, 2014). Pocock, Charlesworth, and Chapman (2013) describe the 'right to request' as lacking proper enforcement or appeal processes, therefore providing little protection for those that it is designed to assist.

Benefits of flexibility

The increase in organisations offering FWAs may be explained by a need to mitigate work-life conflict and to attract and retain employees. Work-life conflict is a result of the competing obligations of work and personal life creating stress and poor outcomes in either, or both, spheres (Carlson, Kacmar, & Williams, 2000). Job stress, poor health, and family responsibilities are leading causes of absenteeism in Australia (beyondblue, 2014; Direct Health Solutions, 2014). The direct cost to Australian employers of stress-related presenteeism (i.e., when employees attend work but their productivity is reduced due to stress); and stress-related absenteeism, (i.e., when employees do not attend work because of stress), amounts to \$10.11 billion each year (Medibank Private, 2008). These figures emphasise the financial significance of mitigating stress and work-life conflict.

FWAs reduce work-life conflict (Allen, 2001), decrease turnover intentions (Allen, 2001; Azar, Khan, & Van Eerde, 2018; Masuda et al., 2012; McNall, Nicklin, & Masuda, 2010; Peretz, Fried, & Levi, 2018), reduce absenteeism (Peretz et al., 2018), increase job satisfaction (Azar et al., 2018), and contribute to greater organisational commitment (Azar et al., 2018; McNall et al., 2010). Therefore, FWAs offer significant benefits to both employees and organisations.

Furthermore, Australian workers have rated work-life balance as more appealing in a potential employer than career development opportunities, quality of management, and even job security (SEEK, 2017). Therefore, flexible working options are also vital for organisations to remain competitive in the job market.

Motives for requests

All employees have responsibilities outside of the workplace; household maintenance, errands, appointments, funerals, and weddings (Hamilton, Gordon, & Whelan-Berry, 2006), all requiring some level of flexibility from an employer to manage. However for ongoing commitments, employees will often require a formalised arrangement such as a FWA. These provisions are utilised by a range of employees and for a variety of reasons. Childcare is a common motivation for seeking a FWA, however other motives may include; pursuing education, managing health problems of self or close others, spending time with family (Greenberg & Landry, 2011; Skinner, Hutchinson, & Pocock, 2012), reducing work demands, seeking a more challenging role (Skinner et al., 2012), caring for elderly family members or those with a disability, avoiding long commutes (Greenberg & Landry, 2011), sporting commitments (Bittman, Hoffman, & Thompson, 2004), or because working from home is more productive (Shockley & Allen, 2012).

The most recent survey of Australian workers found that the most common reasons for requesting an amendment to their working arrangements were, in order of prevalence: childcare needs, to pursue study, to increase hours or income, health problems, to reduce work demands, to pursue a more interesting or challenging role, and to spend more time with family (Skinner, Hutchinson, & Pocock, 2012).

Reasons for not requesting

Skinner et al. (2012) found that the main reasons working Australians reported for not making FWA request were because they were content with their current working arrangements, or because flexibility is not possible for them. However, other research provides a more nuanced story. A range of reasons may underlie a worker's decision to not make a request a FWA, even if they desire greater flexibility, such as: lack of policy awareness, beliefs about masculinity, and possible negative repercussions.

A lack of awareness and understanding of flexible work policies and rights acts as a barrier to flexible working arrangements. There is a distinct lack of knowledge about the 'right to request', especially amongst the groups that the Act intends to benefit (Cooper & Baird, 2015; Skinner et al., 2012). Lack of awareness is also an issue with company-specific FWA policies, with many employees and supervisors being unfamiliar with entitlements and request processes (Bittman et al., 2004; Cooper & Baird, 2015; Daverth, Hyde, & Cassell, 2016).

Research has indicated that beliefs about masculinity also impact the uptake of FWA policies. As previously stated, FWAs are often positioned as, or understood to be, policies for working mothers (Munn & Greer, 2015), which may deter men from requesting flexibility. Furthermore, a strong commitment to work constitutes a major component of masculinity (Thébaud & Pedulla, 2016; Williams, 2000). The stigma surrounding men participating in FWAs is enough to deter them from utilising these policies even if they are dissatisfied with their working arrangements (Kelly, Ammons, Chermack, & Moen, 2010; Munsch, Ridgeway, & Williams, 2014). This may explain findings that 32.9% of men are not content with their current work arrangements but have not made a request for greater flexibility (Skinner & Pocock,

2014), and that women are more inclined to request a FWA than men (Pocock, Skinner, & Ichii, 2009; Skinner et al., 2012; Skinner & Pocock, 2014).

Another reason for employees' reluctance to seek a FWA is the potential repercussions for their career. Even employees who are unhappy with their work arrangements will not make a FWA request due to the potential consequences (Williams, Blair-Loy, & Berdahl, 2013). This fear is not unfounded; employees who seek workplace flexibility receive poorer job evaluations than those who do not (Judiesch & Lyness, 1999; Vandello, Hettinger, Bosson, & Siddiqi, 2013); are considered to be poorer workers (Rudman & Mescher, 2013); to be less committed and less likely to progress in their workplace (Cohen & Single, 2001; Rogier & Padgett, 2004); and are paid less (Holt & Lewis, 2011; Lewis & Humbert, 2010).

These negative consequences are a result of *flexibility bias* – the belief that an employee who seeks or utilises a FWA is a “bad worker” and does not deserve work rewards (Williams et al., 2013). The presence of this bias indicates that there is still a strong preference for the ideal worker who is constantly available and prioritises their job above all else.

Organisational context

The level of support organisations provide to employees significantly impacts the level of flexibility that they are able to access, and the outcomes of that flexibility. When employees perceive their organisation to be highly supportive of their work-life management, they experience increased job satisfaction and engagement, and decreased turnover intentions. It is theorised that supportiveness indicates to the employee that they are appreciated, resulting in these positive outcomes (Rhoades

& Eisenberger, 2002; Saks, 2006). Provisions that allow flexibility are one of the ways that organisations can signal support to their employees.

The amount of flexibility available to employees is heavily dependent on the structural, and cultural work-life support of the organisation. *Structural work-life support* is the creation and/or alteration of organisational policies, practices, and job structures that provide employees with flexibility to manage their work and non-work responsibilities. The *cultural work-life support* of the organisation is a result of the informal workplace practices and norms that signify the value of, and support offered to, employees who seek flexibility (Kossek, Lewis, & Hammer, 2010). However, structural and cultural work-life support are not necessarily aligned within organisations. For example, Holt and Lewis (2011) found that even self-described “family-friendly” organisations may have a culture that considers employees to be committed and ambitious if they are able to work overtime and take trips at short notice. This ideal is largely incompatible with the expressed family-friendliness and flexibility. Or, despite an organisation having supportive FWA policies, the culture may harbour a flexibility bias, meaning that utilising these policies is disapproved of or results in negative repercussions (Rofcanin et al., 2017). This research indicates that structural supportiveness does not guarantee cultural supportiveness; however it is not clear how strongly linked these two constructs are.

The level of cultural support within an organisation plays a significant role in determining whether employees choose to engage in FWAs (Allen, 2001), and can ultimately undermine their effectiveness, utilisation, and positive outcomes (Holt & Lewis, 2011; Kelly & Moen, 2007; Kinnunen, Mauno, Geurts, & Dikkers, 2005). When organisational culture reflects supportiveness for family and personal commitments, employees are more inclined to feel that they are able to prioritise

their home life over work when necessary (Bhave, Kramer, & Glomb, 2010). However, if the organisational culture is not consistent with flexible work policies, employees believe that seeking a FWA will not be effective in mitigating work-life conflict (Rofcanin et al., 2017). An unsupportive culture can also restrict employees from fully utilising the terms of their FWA. For example, Lewis and Humbert (2010) found that when employees cut back to a four day week, receiving an appropriate reduction in their salary, there was an implicit, or sometimes explicit, expectation that they would continue to maintain a full-time workload.

Some researchers have debated the potential for FWAs to also lead to spillover of work into private life; increasingly work-life conflict (Blair-Loy, 2009; Schieman & Glavin, 2008). Spillover occurs when individuals habitually perform work activities during their personal time (Schieman & Glavin, 2017). It is noted that spillover is particularly prevalent in organisations with a culture of strong devotion to work. This again reinforces the ideal worker trope, whereby employees are encouraged to be constantly available (Schieman & Glavin, 2017). Spillover has been found to occur for a number of reasons, such as; employees feeling a sense of duty and reciprocity towards an organisation for granting them flexibility (Kelliher & Anderson, 2010; Lewis & Humbert, 2010); being contacted about work matters outside of working hours (Blair-Loy, 2009; Schieman & Glavin, 2008); or worry resulting from a culture of flexibility bias (Lewis & Humbert, 2010). Employees working in organisations with the highest levels of flexibility bias are the most likely to experience home-to-job spillover (O'Connor & Cech, 2018).

Supervisor support

The *supportive model* of organisational behaviour advocates for supervisors to play a supportive role in the workplace, as opposed to exclusively focusing on production and output. This model encourages supervisors to create an environment in which employees feel comfortable discussing work and non-work problems, and to provide support for employees who are experiencing difficulties in either sphere (Likert, 1967). Hammer, Kossek, Daniels, and Zimmerman (2007) describe family supportive supervisor behaviours as those that provide emotional and practical support to team members, including developing and implementing policies that enable greater work-family management, such as FWAs. When employees experience support from their supervisors through the implementation of FWAs, they are likely to be more engaged in their work and to have heightened work performance (Bal & De Lange, 2015; Rofcanin et al., 2017). Conversely, unsupportive supervisors can mitigate the effectiveness and potential benefits of FWAs (Kossek, 2005).

Supervisors play a critical role in enacting an organisation's flexible work policies. While an organisation may express the importance of supporting employees' work-life management, it is often immediate supervisors who must be negotiated with in order for employees to access FWAs (Bal & Dorenbosch, 2015; Hammer, Kossek, Bodner, & Crain, 2013). Because of this, immediate supervisors have been described as the "linking pin" between the FWA policy and its implementation at the individual level (Hammer et al., 2007). Furthermore, a perceived lack of supervisor support makes employees less likely to request or utilise work-life balance policies (Dijkers et al., 2007), and supervisors' supportiveness has a direct impact on subordinates' FWA uptake (De Sivatte & Guadamillas, 2013; McCarthy, Darcy, & Grady, 2010).

It has been found that supervisors may deny employees access to FWAs regardless of organisational policy. Case studies from Australia and Ireland have demonstrated that supervisors are hesitant to provide FWAs to employees that are not working mothers, and undermine FWAs that were approved by previous supervisors (Daverth et al., 2016; Pini & McDonald, 2008). This research indicates that organisational supportiveness does not necessarily mean that supervisors will also be supportive, however it is unknown how much influence organisational supportiveness has on supervisors' level of support.

Foley, Greenhaus, and Weer (2006) note that there is a lack of research investigating why some supervisors perform more family supportive behaviours than others, including the role of gender. Wells-Lepley, Thelen, and Swanberg (2015) did not find supervisor's gender predicted their willingness to offer FWAs to staff. However, Hopkins (2002) notes that female supervisors tend to perform more supportive behaviours, including assisting workers to seek help and by providing EAP referrals. Conversely, the same study found that female employees perceived their male supervisors to be more supportive in terms of being understanding and flexible, than female employees with female supervisors. The role of gender in supervisors' supportiveness remains unclear and warrants further investigation.

There is also evidence that supervisors model their level of support for FWAs on the behaviours and expectations of executives and senior managers (Daverth et al., 2016; Williams, McDonald, & Cathcart, 2017). These findings are congruent with those of Wells-Lepley et al. (2015), which found that supervisors' perception of management support was the strongest predictor of whether they would offer FWAs to their own staff. They also found that supervisors who had

accessed a FWA themselves were more inclined to offer them to their own employees.

The present study aimed to explore several aspects of flexible work in Australia. It aimed to revisit the main reasons why employees do, or do not request FWAs, as this has not been investigated in Australia since Skinner et al. (2012). It also aimed to examine the relationship between organisational structural and cultural work-life supportiveness, and to examine the relationship between overall organisational supportiveness and supervisor supportiveness. Lastly, it aimed to explore the relationship between supervisor gender and supervisor supportiveness.

From the research examined and described above, it was hypothesised that there would not be a relationship between structural supportiveness and cultural supportiveness. It was also hypothesised that there would not be a relationship between organisational supportiveness and supervisor supportiveness, and that there would not be a relationship between supervisor gender and supervisor supportiveness.

Method

Participants

The 251 participants consisted of a convenience sample of working adult Australians. Participants were invited to take part via advertisements posted on social media platforms. Some participants also invited their acquaintances and colleagues to participate. As an incentive to participate, participants were able to elect to go into the draw to win a \$100 gift voucher. Participants consisted of 212 females, 36 males, and 3 people who identified as non-binary or other gender. Their ages ranged from 18 to 70 years, with a mean age of 35.70 years ($SD = 10.12$). The

majority of participants (67.72%) had completed education at a tertiary level, including 26.29% who had obtained a postgraduate degree.

Materials

Measures of organisational structural supportiveness and cultural supportiveness were taken from Greenberg and Landry (2011) (see Appendix A). The measure of structural supportiveness consisted of one item to measure whether the organisation had a policy for flexible work arrangements. Respondents were asked: "Does/did your workplace have a flexible working arrangement policy (i.e. allowing a compressed work week, working from home, flex-time, etc)?" Participants could select one of three responses: *yes*, *no*, or *unsure*.

The measure of cultural supportiveness consisted of six items that were designed to measure how supportive the culture of the organisation is of work-life management (Greenberg & Landry, 2011). Three of these items assessed the level of cultural support for discussing personal life concerns in the workplace, for example: "In my workplace it was/is generally accepted that people share concerns about their family/personal life with supervisors/managers". Participants could rate their agreement with these statements on a five point Likert scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). The three next items measured the cultural supportiveness for structuring work to manage work and personal life demands, for example: "In my workplace it was/is generally accepted that people take time away from their family/personal life to get their work done". These items were also scored on a five point Likert scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*) and were reverse coded. According to Greenberg and Landry (2011) internal reliability of this scale was 0.86. In the current study, the Cronbach alpha coefficient was .77. A score

of overall organisational supportiveness was determined by combining scores of structural supportiveness and cultural supportiveness.

The measure of supervisor supportiveness was adapted from the measure of cultural support in Greenberg and Landry (2011) (see Appendix B). These three items measured the perceived supportiveness of supervisors for structuring work to manage work and family demands, for example: "My direct supervisor would/does expect that people put their family/personal lives second to their jobs". These items were also scored on a five point Likert scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*) and were reverse coded. Internal reliability for this scale was acceptable, with a Cronbach alpha coefficient of .78.

The survey also contained questions to establish participants' experiences with FWAs; such as if they have sought one in the past; the reason for their choice to, or not to, make a FWA request; and the gender of the supervisor that they had made the FWA request to, if applicable. There was also an optional, open-ended question to allow participants to provide further context or comments. General demographic questions about participants were also included, including gender, age, and education level.

Procedure

A total of 251 participants took part in the online survey. After demographic questions, participants were asked: "Have you ever requested a flexible working arrangement in Australia? (e.g. to modify where or when you complete work)". Participants were then divided into two groups; those who responded *no*, and those who responded *yes*.

Participants who responded *no* ($n = 106$) were asked: “Why haven’t you requested a flexible work arrangement? Select as many as apply.” They then selected their reason/s for not making a FWA request, or could type the reason if it was not listed. These participants had the option to provide further context or comments to support their responses, after which the survey was completed.

Participants who responded *yes* ($n = 145$) were asked to answer the remainder of the survey regarding their most recent FWA request. This was due to participants potentially having requested FWAs at multiple workplaces or career stages. Of the 145 participants who responded that they had made a FWA request, only 133 completed the survey and were included in the final statistical analyses. Participants were asked: “What was your main reason for requesting a flexible working arrangement?” They could select the primary reason for making a FWA request, or type the reason if it was not listed. Participants then responded to the measures of organisational support, supervisor support, and supervisor gender. In response to this question, 59.40% reported that their supervisor at the time they requested a FWA was male ($n = 79$), and 40.60% reported that their supervisor was female ($n = 54$). Next, participants were asked to respond to the question: “My request for a flexible working arrangement was...” selecting from the responses *granted, denied, or partially granted*.

The final question for all participants was optional and asked: “Do you have any further comments or context that you wish to provide?” The aim of collecting open-ended narratives from participants was to understand their experiences of seeking a FWA in Australia, and in doing so provide further context to the quantitative data. This question did not intend to guide participants’ responses, and therefore inductive thematic analysis was determined to be the most appropriate

system of analysis. As described by Braun and Clarke (2006), this is a data-driven method of thematic analysis which involves coding the data without a preconceived framework. Participants' comments were coded at the semantic level, and then analysed using an essentialist approach. This method was selected because the question aimed to enrich the quantitative data by allowing participants to explain their subjective experiences.

Results

Reasons for making a FWA request are presented in Table 1. These results show that childcare was the most frequently cited reason for seeking a FWA; accounting for 57.44% of requests. Of the participants who made a request, 74.80% had their request granted, 20.61% had their request partially granted, and 4.59% had their request denied.

Table 1
Summary of reasons for requesting a FWA

Reason	<i>n</i>	%
Childcare	81	57.44
To pursue education	14	9.92
Personal illness or disability	12	8.50
To pursue other interests (e.g. travel, volunteering etc)	8	5.67
To pursue other work (e.g. to manage own business)	5	3.54
Caring responsibilities other than childcare (e.g. eldercare)	5	3.54
Greater work/life balance	3	2.12
To reduce commute	3	2.12
To work according to demand/workload	2	1.41
To spend more time with family	2	1.41
No local office	2	1.41
Multiple reasons	2	1.41
To work in a distraction-free environment	1	.70
To recover from night shifts	1	.70

Reasons for not making a FWA request are presented in Table 2. The most common reason for not making a request was that it would not be feasible due to work type.

Table 2
Summary of reasons for not requesting a FWA

Reason	<i>n</i>	%
I do not believe it would be feasible because of my work type	36	23.07
I do not wish to have more flexibility	30	19.23
I do not think my employer would allow it	27	17.30
I did not know it was an option	21	13.46
I am worried about possible repercussions	18	11.53
Flexible work possible without formal arrangement	18	11.53
Not required ^a	2	1.28
Unsure if eligible	2	1.28
Casual employee - can turn down work at will	1	0.64
No children ^a	1	0.64

Note. ^aThe meanings of these responses were ambiguous, therefore they were kept separate from other categories.

Spearman Rank Order Correlations were used to examine the relationships between variables. It was found that there was a small relationship between organisational structural supportiveness and cultural supportiveness, $\rho = .20$, $n = 133$, $p < .05$. This indicated that the presence of structural supportiveness (a FWA policy) was associated with higher levels of cultural supportiveness.

There was a strong relationship between organisational supportiveness and supervisor supportiveness, $\rho = .62$, $n = 133$, $p < .01$. This indicated that high organisational supportiveness was associated with high levels of supervisor supportiveness.

There was a small relationship between supervisor gender and supportiveness, $\rho = .21$, $n = 133$, $p < .05$. This indicated that female supervisors were associated with higher levels of supportiveness.

Comments provided by participants were explored using inductive thematic analysis to identify recurrent semantic themes that emerged, then analysed using an essentialist approach. The key themes identified were 'Supervisors' power', 'Non-parenthood as a barrier', and 'FWA repercussions'.

Supervisors' power

This theme summarises the power that supervisors have to grant or deny employees access to FWAs. This included: supervisors with personal FWA experience being more supportive of flexibility; supervisors undermining FWAs; supervisors denying FWAs despite organisational policy; and conversely, supportive supervisors providing FWAs even if it is not typical of the organisation.

Several participants' expressed that if their supervisor, or supervisor's partner, had worked flexibility; they were more inclined to approve FWA requests. For example: "The only reason [the FWA] was granted was because my manager was married with three young children and his wife was working part-time." (Female, 48 years, request granted). Another participant described: "I also find that managers who are in a similar situation or can relate due to past experiences with working flexibly are more willing to consider the options and make them work for staff." (Female, 41 years, granted).

Some participants described experiences whereby their existing FWAs were undermined by new supervisors who were less supportive than their predecessors. For example: "Change of manager between initial agreement and actual requirement

of flexibility. New manager was male, inflexible and uncaring.” (Female, 42 years, request partially granted). Another participant recalled:

I was the first ever female at work to negotiate a working week less than 30 hours...Then in 2004 after my second child I had a different manager and he tried to stop my previous part-time arrangement and I had to fight and involve unions. I won!! Many women after me were able to work part time. But I was punished and my career could not progress there. It was a horrible time professionally. (Female, 48 years, request granted)

Participants also reinforced the notion that supervisors may deny FWA requests regardless of organisational policy, for example: “The manager’s personal attitude to flexible work practices can overrule any corporate policies under the guise of ‘operational requirement’. Employees can be left helpless when this happens.” (Female, 50 years, request denied). These sentiments were echoed by other participants who had their requests denied, the following recount highlights that this can be problematic because FWAs are not available equally within the same workplace: “Despite having a flexible work policy, it was down to every individual manager to implement it so people were treated differently because of that.” (Female, 34 year, request partially granted).

However, some participants reported that their supervisor granted them flexibility that was not typical of their workplace, one participant recalled: “I had a very good relationship with my manager...I feel this impacted her decision. Colleagues who requested similar arrangements later on did not have their request granted. Also the flexibility was not company-wide.” (Female, 36 years, request granted). Similar sentiments were expressed by other participants who found that

their supervisor had implemented FWAs that senior managers would not have personally approved: "Whilst my current direct female manager is extremely flexible with me, our [Managing Director] disagrees with working from home and is very old school with his views about flexible working arrangements." (Female, 42 years, request partially granted). This illustrates that supervisors who personally support FWAs may provide employees with more flexibility than is typical for the organisation.

Non-parenthood as a barrier

This theme demonstrates the difficulty of not being a parent but desiring flexibility. One participant explains:

As a 29yo female (with no children or intended at this stage) it can be difficult to negotiate flexible work agreements over those with children/young families. And as a person that wants equal time off during school pick up hours/holidays this can be frustrating. I don't believe people with no children should have any less rights for flexible work agreements. (Female, 29 years, no request made)

Other participants expressed that their workplaces only allow parents to work flexibly: "My experience has been that as I don't have children, my employers do not understand why I want to work flexibly and they don't consider people without children for flexible work." (Female, 40 years, no request made).

Flexibility repercussions

This theme summarises the consequences that participants described experiencing as a result of seeking flexibility. These repercussions included negative consequences for their career and unfair workloads.

The most prevalent repercussion of a FWA described by participants was the impact that it had on their career. Participants described being excluded from meetings and decision-making processes, and being overlooked for opportunities. One participant recalled her supervisor openly warning her that a FWA would impact her ability to progress in the business: "I was informed that my request, which was within the FWA policy, would be taken into account next time 'I asked him for a promotion'. A reduction in the requested working from home hours was negotiated." (Female, 34 years, request partially granted). Another stated:

While I was granted flexible working arrangements...I rarely take full advantage of them and continue to feel guilt associated with doing so. I also felt and continue to feel that my flexible working arrangements adversely impact on the types of opportunities I receive in the workplace (eg the projects allocated to me). (Female, 33 years, request granted)

Even participants who had not made a FWA request expressed their concerns about how one might impact their career. "Depending on the employer, asking for what you're entitled to is intimidating, especially when it's made clear you are very replaceable." (Male, 27 years, no request made).

Another repercussion of FWAs was unfair workloads. Participants expressed that although they were granted a FWA that reduced their work hours, their workloads remained the same. For example:

Despite my requests being granted I found that no support was given to ensure that a full time job could be conducted in 4 days instead of 5. So whilst I now get paid for 4 days, I still work the equivalent of 5 plus days in order to fulfil my role. (Female, 35 years, request granted)

Another participant described feeling like she was paying for flexibility: “I requested to reduce my FTE to study however the expectation with regards to workload didn’t decrease...I almost feel like I 'paid' for the flexibility by taking a drop in income to continue to perform at the same level.” (Female, 34 years, request granted).

Discussion

This study aims to investigate several aspects of flexible work in Australia. Results indicate that the most common reason for seeking a FWA is childcare, and the most common reason for not requesting a FWA is work type. The hypothesis that there would not be a relationship between organisational structural and cultural support was not supported. Similarly, the hypothesis that supervisor supportiveness and organisational supportiveness would not be linked was also not supported. It was also hypothesised that there would not be a relationship between supervisor gender and supportiveness, this was also not supported.

The finding that childcare is the most common reason for seeking a FWA is consistent with previous Australian research from Skinner et al. (2012). A notable difference is the proportion of requests this reason made up. In Skinner et al. 16.2% of respondents cited childcare as the reason for their request, however in the present study, childcare made up 57.44% of request reasons. Closely following childcare in Skinner et al., was education; making up 15.4% of requests. In the present study education was also the second most common reason; however it only comprised 9.92% of requests.

The study found that the most common reason for not making a FWA request is that it is not feasible because of work type; 23.07% of participants reported this as a key reason. This was followed by 19.23% reporting that they are

content with their current working arrangements. This is dissimilar to Skinner et al. (2012), who reported that 70.5% of participants were content with their current arrangements, and 15% saying that flexibility is not possible. In Skinner et al., 'flexibility not possible' consisted of various responses, including; 'not convinced employer would allow it', 'job does not allow it', and 'flexibility not possible or available'. However, in the present study these items were separated, as they are believed to be different. For example, some participants explained that FWAs are not available to them because their workplaces rely on rigid scheduling, such as nursing or teaching. Therefore, it is believed that the unavailability of flexibility in these workplaces is different from employers who do not offer flexibility because of their beliefs or biases, as opposed to structural constraints.

Results show a relationship between the structural and cultural supportiveness of organisations. It was hypothesised that there would not be a significant relationship between these variables due to numerous studies identifying that a culture that is unsupportive of flexibility can undermine formal FWA policies, such as Holt and Lewis (2011), Kelly and Moen (2007), Kinnunen et al. (2005), and Rofcanin et al. (2017); suggesting that structural and cultural supportiveness would not be significantly related.

Results show a strong relationship between organisational supportiveness and supervisor supportiveness. The hypothesis that these two factors would not be related was drawn from previous research indicating that supervisors may deny employees access to FWAs despite organisational policy (Daverth et al., 2016; Pini & McDonald, 2008), again, this suggested that organisational and supervisor support would not be significantly related.

It was found that female supervisors are perceived to be more supportive than male supervisors. This finding is inconsistent with that of Wells-Lepley et al. (2015), which found that gender did not predict whether supervisors would offer FWAs. Given that supervisor supportiveness is linked to offering work-life benefits, the results of Wells-Lepley et al. would indicate that no gender difference in supportiveness would be found. This discrepancy in results may be due to the use of different samples; Wells-Lepley et al. investigated responses of supervisors and managers responsible for enacting FWA policies. The present research is also inconsistent with Hopkins (2002), which found that female supervisors were rated as being less supportive than males. However, Hopkins also found that female supervisors were more proactive in providing EAP referrals and encouraging employees to seek help, which is more congruent with the present results.

From participants' comments, several themes emerged. A major theme was the power of supervisors in granting or denying flexibility. This finding is consistent with Bal and Dorenbosch (2015), and Hammer et al. (2013), which found that FWA decision-making is ultimately determined by the employee's supervisor.

Congruent with the results of Wells-Lepley et al. (2015), participants expressed that if their supervisor had a FWA, or had a partner who worked flexibly, they are more inclined to offer FWAs to their own staff.

Participants also feel that previous FWAs can be undermined by new supervisors who did not support flexibility. This is comparable to an Australian case study by Pini and McDonald (2008), in which participants reported similar experiences.

A sub-theme of supervisors' power was the finding that some supervisors provide their subordinates with more flexibility than is common for the workplace,

and even if senior managers would not approve. This is contrary to the findings of Daverth et al. (2016), Williams et al. (2017), and Wells-Lepley et al. (2015) which demonstrate that supervisors' attitudes are strongly linked to those of executives and senior managers. Again, the differences in results could possibly be due to the use of different samples; the aforementioned studies used self-report data from managers and supervisors. It may also be the case that managers who enact greater flexibility are in the minority and therefore their actions have not made a significant enough impact on data to be discussed in previous research.

Another theme that emerged was difficulty seeking flexibility as a non-parent. This indicates that the perception that FWAs as strictly family-friendly working practices may persist in some organisations, thus excluding non-parents from accessing flexibility. This is very similar to findings of Daverth et al. (2016), in which managers reported being unwilling to provide FWAs to non-parents.

The other major theme that emerged from participants' responses was that many experienced negative repercussions because they wanted to work flexibly. This is consistent with a large body of research on this matter (Cohen & Single, 2001; Holt & Lewis, 2011; Judiesch & Lyness, 1999; Lewis & Humbert, 2010; Rogier & Padgett, 2004; Rudman & Mescher, 2013; Vandello et al., 2013). Consistent with the findings of Williams et al. (2013), some participants also described being hesitant to seek flexibility due to the potential career consequences of doing so.

The finding that employees face unfair workloads after undertaking a FWA supports previous literature, such as Lewis and Humbert (2010), who also observed that employees' workloads were not decreased in line with their reduced hours and salary.

The finding that organisational structural supportiveness only accounts for a small amount of variance in cultural supportiveness indicates that other factors may play a more significant role in determining the cultural supportiveness of the organisation. As shown by Holt and Lewis (2011), organisations may harbour beliefs about what constitutes an ideal worker that are in direct opposition to FWA policy or an espoused value of flexibility. Therefore the results from the present study contribute to the body of literature finding that the benefits of FWA policies may be nullified by dominant cultural beliefs and attitudes about whether employees should be entitled to work-life management decision-making.

The strong relationship between organisational support and supervisor support may be interpreted in two ways. One explanation could be that supervisors are modelling their supportiveness on those who play a key role in establishing organisational structures and culture, such as executives and senior managers, as shown by Daverth et al. (2016) and Williams et al. (2017). However, an alternative explanation could be that because the items measuring supervisor support and cultural support were very similar, the two measures may have assessed the same construct.

The finding that gender and supportiveness are related could be explained by the result that supervisors with FWA experience are more inclined to grant their employees FWAs. It is speculated that these results came about because women tend to have more personal experience with FWAs than men. In Australia, women are more likely to seek flexibility (Pocock et al., 2009; Skinner et al., 2012; Skinner & Pocock, 2014), and Wells-Lepley et al. (2015) found that supervisors who had utilised flexibility were more inclined to offer FWAs to their own employees. Therefore, a supervisor's supportiveness may be influenced by their personal FWA

history and not necessarily their gender, however women tend to have had the personal experience that predisposes them to being supportive of flexibility.

Unsupportive attitudes and beliefs about flexibility may have led to several of the results of the present study. In particular, it appears that there exists a belief that employees are not necessarily entitled to make decisions about when or where they perform their work, even though it may significantly reduce their work-life conflict. This is an unfortunate finding given the well-documented benefits that flexibility can garner for both employees and organisations. For example, the finding that participants reported that FWAs were undermined suggests that some supervisors hold the belief that their subordinates are not entitled to flexibility. It also indicates that despite FWA policies being available and granted to employees, the organisation as a whole does not necessarily support the use of these initiatives.

The finding that participants suffered negative repercussions as a result of undertaking a FWA may also be indicative of cultural attitudes towards flexibility. It is likely that flexibility bias also contributed to these consequences. This again indicates that the existence of FWA policies may not protect the employees who access them from facing consequences, such as career repercussions or unfair workloads.

The results of this study highlight the need for organisations to ensure that FWA policies are grounded in a culture that is supportive of their utilisation. It is essential that supervisors and managers implement policies and practices that are endorsed by the organisation. If those responsible for enacting FWAs policies do not believe that their employees deserve these provisions, then they cannot be effective. All employees in leadership positions should receive training to ensure that they understand the benefits of flexible work, as well as how they can support employees

who undertake them. For example, supervisors should understand the need for employees' workloads to be achievable in their work hours so that spillover does not occur, and how to contribute to a culture in which flexibility is normalised and accepted. Research from Sweet, Pitt-Catsoupes, and James (2017) shows that with training, managers attitudes towards FWAs can be improved. Without a supportive workplace, negative attitudes and beliefs about flexibility nullify the potential benefits that these arrangements can provide. Organisations should also provide greater protection for employees to access and utilise flexibility. To leave this up to the discretion of supervisors does not guarantee that employees are able to access the benefits they are entitled to, or that they are treated equally across the organisation.

Future research needs to examine the finding that supervisors may provide more flexibility than their organisation or senior managers. Given that this was reported by participants' on the basis of their personal experiences, it needs to be further investigated. For example; how prevalent this sort of behaviour is, if it leads to negative repercussions for the supervisor or employee, and what motivates them to act in opposition to the norms of the organisation.

The results of this study should be considered in the context of possible limitations. A convenience sample was used which resulted in a participant cohort that is not representative of the general Australian population. Participants were primarily women, skewing results towards their experiences. Research has identified that the FWA experiences of men differ to those of women (Workplace Gender Equality Agency, 2013) and this requires further research. There were also a disproportionate number of participants with a tertiary education, making up two-thirds of participants, which is twice as high as is found in the Australian adult

population (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2017). Another potential limitation could be the measure used for supervisor supportiveness. As previously mentioned, this may have contributed to the high correlation between supervisor and organisational supportiveness. Further research is therefore needed in this regard.

The present research contributes to the body of literature exploring FWAs, and does so within an Australian context. It found that childcare remains the most frequently cited reason for accessing a FWA, and that the most common reason for not seeking a FWA is work type. Structural and cultural supportiveness were found to be linked, however, given that structural supportiveness only accounted for a very small amount of variance in cultural supportiveness; this suggests that unsupportive cultures will override FWA policies. There was also found to be a strong relationship between the supportiveness of supervisors and the supportiveness of the organisation. It was also established that supervisor gender was linked to supportiveness, and theorised that this effect may be due to women having greater experience with FWAs. Personal experiences of participants indicated that negative attitudes and beliefs about FWAs are still prevalent and can result in FWAs being undermined, non-parents being unable to access FWAs, and that people who utilise FWAs may experience negative career repercussions. In sum, this research demonstrates that Australian workers may experience difficulty attaining and utilising FWAs. Despite the vast majority of participants in the present study reporting that their FWA request was granted, many indicated that they were difficult to secure and maintain, and that their career suffered as a result. These findings indicate that flexibility is not yet widely accepted. In order to experience the benefits of FWAs, organisations must foster cultures and supervisor attitudes that are aligned with FWA policy.

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Appendix A

Survey items measuring organisational support

1. Does/did your workplace have a flexible working arrangement policy (i.e. allowing a compressed work week, working from home, flex-time, etc)?
2. In my workplace it was/is generally accepted that people share concerns about their family/personal life with supervisors/managers
3. In my workplace it was/is generally accepted that people talk about family/personal life problems
4. In my workplace it was/is generally accepted that people seek advice from colleagues around family/personal life
5. In my workplace it was/is generally accepted that people make work a top priority
6. In my workplace it was/is generally accepted that people put their family/personal lives second to their jobs
7. In my workplace it was generally accepted that people take time away from their family/personal life to get their work done

Appendix B

Survey items measuring supervisor support

1. My direct manager would/does expect that people make work a top priority
2. My direct manager would/does expect that people put their family/personal lives second to their jobs
3. My direct manager would/does expect that people take time away from their family/personal life to get their work done