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## Challenges to Developing Effective Family Friendly Work Practices: Findings from New Zealand

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### Abstract

**Family Friendly Workplace (FFW) arrangements will become an important element of company strategy as work life balance becomes a rising workforce priority. Despite the concept of FFW practice being well established in New Zealand it was found, in a local study with six large firms, that there were a number of significant operational challenges to the effective installation of FFW initiatives. These challenges include: the lack of consultation both prior to and during FFW implementation, inconsistent offering and employee's lack of awareness of available FFW initiatives, high employee workload precluding the utilisation of initiatives, and the method of dissemination of FFW information within organisations. Strategies for addressing these HRM challenges within the Asia Pacific are discussed.**

### INTRODUCTION

The phrase 'family friendly workplace' (FFW) has been increasingly included in the workplace policy discourse. Flexible work arrangements that are exercised as flexi time, permanent part time work, job sharing, the compressed working week and teleworking, have been widely practised in developed countries for several decades (Rodgers 1992, Wilson 2003). These flexible work design arrangements, such as 'flexi time' (often referred to as 'glide time' in the New Zealand public sector, Department of Labour & NACEW 1999) have been proven to be beneficial to both employers and employees (Thompson, Beuvais & Lyness 1999, Evans 2000). In practice, flexi time usually refers to a scheduling program for full time employees, which allows them to choose their daily starting and finishing times, provided that they complete a stipulated number of work hours. In most instances, all employees may be required to be present during certain core hours, which are usually fixed at a period between the latest permissible starting time and the earliest possible finishing time (Ministry of Manpower 2001). An organisation may benefit from this arrangement because it may be able to extend operating hours without an increase in costs, and employees may be better able to meet their personal responsibilities (e.g., those with young children who need to be taken to and from school) (Callister 1996, Evans 2000).

The successful implementation of these kinds of FFW arrangements have been found to contribute to a conducive and supportive work environment (Carmody 1992, Adams 1993, Thompson, et al. 1999). Indeed, FFW arrangements enable companies to attract, motivate and retain valued employees who are committed and dedicated to playing an important role in helping their organisation achieve business success (Solomon 1994, Rapoport & Bailyn 1996, Saltztein, Ting & Saltztein 2001). However, unlike established practice in North America, Europe and Australasia, flexible work arrangements are reported to be "...a relatively new concept in Singapore." (Ministry of Manpower 2001: 20). The idea of FFW is also gaining more attention in other Southeast Asian countries such as Japan (Evans 2000, Curtin 2002), China (Khatri & Budhwar 2000) and Malaysia (Fong 2004). Despite FFW being a well established concept in New Zealand, a number of problems and implementation challenges remain. This article provides details of the various FFW options and issues related to their implementation that were found in a study of six large New Zealand companies. The paper discusses some of the challenges that can be faced by companies in utilising FFW procedures so others can learn from the New Zealand experience.

## THE CHANGING EMPLOYMENT CONTEXT

The notion of FFW is thought by some commentators (Strachan & Burgess 1998) to represent a shift away from the gender specificity associated with Equal Employment Opportunity (EEO), to a wider and gender encompassing emphasis on family (Kirrane & Ryan, 2000). The need to broaden the scope of HRM practice and legislation has been driven by a number of developments that continue to reshape the composition and dynamics of the workforce in contemporary industrial society. For instance, typical demographic changes across modern Western and non Western societies include: an increasing number of women with preschool and school age children in the paid workforce, an aging population, and a rise in the number of dual income parents (Department of Labour & NACEW 1999, Statistics New Zealand 2003). In Singapore, along with other Asian countries, the female labour force participation rate has grown steadily and this increase has meant that women tend to marry later and delay childbearing (Chew & Goh 1997, Khatri 2000, Ministry of Manpower 2001). While previous studies in Singapore have discussed the changing roles of women in the past three decades (e.g., Chew & Goh 1997), little research has been done that investigates the HRM policies, and in particular, FFW initiatives provided for women in the contemporary workforce. On an encouraging note, however, one recent Singapore study (Lee & Pow 1999) with 39 small and medium enterprises (SME), 50 private sector, and 11 multinational firms, found that there were only 13 companies (13 per cent) that did not provide commonly available forms of flexible work arrangements.

There is growing evidence that the topic of FFW is also becoming an important issue for men (Burke 2000). Not only is the structure of New Zealand families changing, but the number of single parent families is rising, and more men are becoming sole parents or primary caregivers (Statistics New Zealand 2003). Moreover, these features are becoming prevalent in nations of the Asia Pacific (Curtin 2002, Ministry of Manpower 2004, OECD 2004). For instance, in Japan, the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare proposed a series of initiatives designed to encourage fathers to play a more active role in various childcare activities. The major changes qualified fathers for two primary kinds of family work related leave. These were (1) Childcare Leave (Ikuji Kyuuka), and (2) Family Care Leave (Kazokukaigo Kyuuka). Leave can be taken up until a child's first birthday, and an allowance is paid to an employee (i.e., either a mother or father) which equals about 40 per cent of regular pay (Curtin 2002). Issues have also been raised in Malaysia where the Women, Family and Community Ministry has found that while women suffer from stress and fatigue, as they have to handle domestic chores at home after office hours, men suffer from gender role change because they have to learn to help their wives when they return home from work (Chew & Goh 1997, Fong 2004). Statistics from the Malaysian Labour Force Survey 2000, cited by Fong (2004), report that 68 per cent of families have both husband and wife regularly working and that often a child care centre that is affordable, good, and with a structured program, is a better alternative for working parents compared to leaving children with minders who are untrained in childcare.

The literature shows that workers also actively seek assistance to balance their work and family responsibilities in the changing work context (Adams 1993, Carnoy 1999). Employees have raised both employers' and society's awareness of the range of associated workplace issues such as requirements for childcare, care of sick children and other dependents, and marital and family problems that can effect an employee's work performance (Mason 1992, Perlow 1998). Indeed, tensions between paid work and home responsibilities have increasingly been recognised as interfering with concentration at work and increasing absenteeism, lateness, and leaving work early (Grover & Crooker 1995, Pitt-Catsoupes & Bankert 1998). Consequently, concerns with productivity and efficiency (often collectively) have been the catalyst for many organisations becoming involved in developing a FFW philosophy (Carmody 1992, Gunderson, Rozell, & Kellog 1995, Probert 1995). This is the case in many countries, such as Singapore (Ministry of Manpower 2001, 2004), Japan (Curtin, 2002), and the United Kingdom (Evans 2000), where introduced legislation seeks to help address these issues. For example, in New Zealand The Parental Leave and Employment Protection (Paid Parental Leave) Amendment Act came into effect from 1 July 2002. Although the mother is primarily eligible for parental leave and payment, she may choose to transfer some or all of her entitlement to her spouse (who may be a same sex partner). This legislative change is significant, as it makes tax funded paid leave of up to NZ \$346.63 per week, or \$18,024.76 per year before tax (Department of Labour 2004) available to all eligible New Zealand employees irrespective of whether the organisation has or does not have FFW policies. Compared to New Zealand, The Employment Act of Singapore entitles married women to take two months maternity leave for each child, and in a study conducted by Lee and Pow (1999), it was found that while 40 per cent provided partial reimbursement of maternity charges, only seven firms fully reimbursed their female employees' maternity charges.

Legislation is helpful, but not absolute. Although, legislation can provide basic protection of employment rights and (in most countries) some payment for the time surrounding the birth of an employee's child, there is an established literature documenting the fact that workers have found balancing work and childcare and family roles stressful since the 1960s (Milliken, Dutton & Beyer 1990, Rodgers 1992). This research includes studies conducted in Australia (Biberman, Whitty & Robbins 1999), New Zealand (Tudhope 1994, Liddicoat 2003), the United Kingdom (Hyman & Summers 2004), Europe (Carnicer, Sanchez & Perez 2004), the United States of America (Grover & Crooker 1995, Kirrane & Ryan 2000), Singapore (Lee & Pow 1999), and the Asia Pacific (Khatri & Budhwar 2000). The request for workplace policies at a strategic HRM level, and programs at an operational level by employees, is gaining momentum, internationally and consequently, many organisations are now providing a range of initiatives to help their employees. For example, since 1998 New Zealand, Australia and Singapore have annual Work and Family Awards to publicly endorse organisations that assist their employees with achieving a work life balance

(Ministry of Manpower 2001, Liddicoat 2003, Singapore Family Friendly Employer Award 2004). There are also organisations that undertake research specifically to provide support for institutional efforts to assist employee's to balance their work and family responsibilities, such as the Equal Employment Opportunities Trust ([www.eeotrust.org.nz](http://www.eeotrust.org.nz)) in New Zealand, the U.S. based Families and Work Institute (Probert 1995), the Australian Institute of Family Studies (Wolcott 1995), and the Singaporean Ministry of Manpower (Ministry of Manpower 2004). Overall, the work life balance movement has gained support in many countries and is involved with government sponsored research that evaluates 'work life' programs for all employees (not just those with dependents) for facilitating a better balance in their lives (Employers for Work-Life Balance 2000, Vloeberghs 2002, Hyman & Summers 2004). This paper adds to this literature.

The research reported in this paper examines the potential challenges that confront employers when seeking to develop and implement family friendly or work life procedures and practices within their organisation. It also addresses the challenges that confront employees when their goal is to gain a balance between work and life, or work and family. Initially, examples of FFW arrangements are described, along with some of the four different stakeholders' (top management, middle management, employees, and union officials) perceptions of their implementation and application. Associated challenges or 'difficulties' are discussed. For instance, these difficulties may include a loss or reduction of opportunity for career advancement, and entitlement to other benefits that traditional full time workers may receive. Finally, problems, issues and challenges to the current and continued implementation of FFW practices are debated with a view to offering suggestions re the effective development and implementation of FFW initiatives.

## **FFW ARRANGEMENTS**

The dominant emphasis in the FFW and work life balance literature focuses upon increasing the flexibility and range of leave entitlements and working time arrangements (Carnoy 1999), and to a lesser extent childcare arrangements (Biggs 1997). There are many different and complementary initiatives that can be implemented by the organisation (Strachan & Burgess 1998). These are discussed and grouped according to the following three broad categories - (1) structural changes to the organisation of the working day, (2) altered work patterns, and (3) a variety of other leave and caring provisions.

(1) Structural changes to the organisation of the working day are designed to couple economic efficiency with social equity. Three of the more common variants may include flexible leave working hours, which enables employees to choose working hours to best suit their needs and the needs of the organisation. A second structural change, to traditional work practice, is job sharing. In this scheme, two or more employees share one position. A third structural change is permanent part time work. This initiative enables an employee who works fewer hours or days than a full time position, to enjoy a better work life balance.

(2) Alternative work patterns describe ways of working that are different to the standard working week. In Western countries (except for France where a 35 hour working week is the norm) it is usual to work for eight hours on each of the five week days (Monday to Friday inclusive) to make up a 40 hour working week. One of the alternative forms of working is a compressed work week. This describes a situation where employees may work their full time hours in fewer than five days per week and then have the rest of the week off work. A typical example of this might be working four 10 hour days (Monday to Thursday inclusive) and having the remaining three week days off work. Another example of an alternative work pattern is called flexible leave. This arrangement allows employees to take annual leave in several small blocks of time, such as half or whole days, rather than one longer period of time, such as a traditional summer holiday of three to four weeks paid annual leave. Teleworking is another alternative work mode which is popular with office workers as employees can work from a non work site by being logged on to their company's computer network. This arrangement provides employees with a choice about where their work is physically located, and may include the use of a private residence as a workplace (Callister 1996).

(3) Other kinds of initiatives that demonstrate that an employer cares about their employee's welfare and family care responsibilities may include providing childcare facilities at the workplace. Another caring initiative is called 'eldercare'. This means providing a service (or employee benefits to pay for the costs of care) to care for worker's parents who are elderly and who require physical care and attention during the working day. If the provision of on site care facilities is not feasible, then having a childcare/eldercare referral service (and employer subsidy of childcare/eldercare) can be beneficial to employees who have these responsibilities (Goeller & Schmidt 1999). These caring initiatives and others such as after school and school holiday programs, even though they are a financial cost to the organisation, have been found to yield wide reaching advantages for employers, employees, and their dependents. For example, a Washington D.C. based company Fannie Mae reports that "for every dollar it spends on elder care benefits, the company estimates a return of \$1.50 through higher productivity, retention, reduced absenteeism and turnover." (Wells 2000: 38).

The main benefits for employers of using any of these examples of FFW initiatives are likely to be enhanced staff recruitment and retention, and reduced absenteeism (Solomon 1994, Gunderson, Rozell & Kellog 1995, Callister 1996, Top Drawer Consultants and Families at Work 1996, Goeller & Schmidt 1999, Wells 2000). Including FFW

initiatives as part of an organisation's employment package has also been found to enhance employees' perceptions of their organisation, regardless of the extent to which the individual employee might personally benefit. For instance, it was found that employees who had access to FFW initiatives showed "...significantly greater organizational commitment and expressed significantly lower intention to quit their jobs." (Grover & Crooker 1995: 271).

On an individual level, employees may benefit from an organisation implementing FFW initiatives. Indeed, employees can receive help in balancing work and family responsibilities, and enjoy greater control or autonomy in balancing these responsibilities. Children also may benefit from their parent(s) and/or caregivers having access to initiatives like 'flexible leave hours' or 'flexible leave', as this often means that the parent is able to attend school meetings, attend sports days, and to be with the family in an emergency. In addition, preschool and school aged children may also gain access to better quality childcare facilities. Finally, other family members including partners, elderly parents or relatives may also benefit, as greater flexibility can mean a better balance of work and family responsibilities (Pringle & Tudhope 1997, Saltztein, et al. 2001, Mackey, Jones & McKenna 2002).

In spite of the touted benefits, a number of disadvantages can exist in relation to the implementation of FFW practices. For example, the extension of normal working hours (e.g., the 10 hour day in a compressed week work pattern), or the introduction of split working shifts can be very unfriendly in their consequences, such as the extra transportation costs and time incurred in multiple trips to and from work (Carnoy 1999), or in working extended or antisocial hours when other support people are not normally working (Probert 1995). Care also needs to be exercised in determining who has access to FFW, and on what basis. Some studies have shown that if an employee's status is 'part time' or 'casual' they may remain outside the core internal labour market, and accordingly, there is a good chance that they will also be not eligible for FFW arrangements (Drewe, Emerek & Mahon 1998, Department of Labour & NACEW 1999). Eligibility for core benefits such as training and development opportunities may also be affected (Thompson, et al. 1999, Burke, 2000). These are matters that require discussion and careful consideration by the affected parties (Bibberman, Whitty & Robbins 1999).

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Sample and Site**

A purposive non probability survey sample technique was utilised to select six large (each employing over 200 staff) New Zealand organisations. These included: four South Island companies; two in Christchurch (population approximately 310,000), and two in Nelson (population approximately 40,000); and two North Island companies based in the capital city Wellington (population approximately 160,000). The companies are anonymously identified as A to F and these codings will be expressed in Tables along with relevant data. Three organisations were service based organisations, and three were production based. In order to sample the possible differing viewpoints, representatives of a number of different organisational stakeholders were surveyed. These included the Chief Executive Officers (CEOs), Human Resource Managers (HRMs) (as people in these positions usually deal with the practicalities of FFW policy), union officials (who negotiate work terms and conditions with management on behalf of employees), and the organisation's employees.

### **Procedure**

Semi structured exploratory interviews were conducted with the CEOs, HRMs and union officials in each organisation over a six month period. The objective of these interviews was to capture information about the extent of utilisation of FFW policies, and how the policies were implemented. Questions relating to the HRMs' opinions about the overall efficacy of FFW policy in general were also included. However, only two CEOs agreed to be interviewed, and because one CEO also performed the HRM function this person was only interviewed once. Five union officials were interviewed. One organisation had two major site unions, three organisations each had one major site union, and two organisations had no union presence. Having gained permission from the respective organisations, a questionnaire about FFW practice was distributed to 809 employees in the six companies. Each organisation's HRM advised on the best way to distribute and collect the questionnaires. Employees returned a total of 390 completed questionnaires to the researcher. Checking for convergence in the feedback from all stakeholders helps to build a complete picture of the impact of FFW practices within organisations. A short report outlining the main findings was provided to each organisation at the study's completion.

### **Instrument**

Quantitative data were obtained by the administration of a questionnaire. It was a relatively inexpensive method, but more importantly was pragmatic, particularly for those working on shifts or weekends, as these respondents

could answer it at their convenience. The survey was presented in a booklet style and it contained a variety of closed and open ended questions. A covering letter accompanied the questionnaire booklet. This letter explained why the research was being undertaken and by whom. Participation in the survey was voluntary and anonymous.

The questionnaire was adapted from two main sources. Useful sources in the development and design of the questionnaire were the work and family survey outlined in the book *Work and family: Steps to success* (1996: 21-23), and a questionnaire utilised by Tudhope (1994) in a New Zealand based study. The first three items of the questionnaire focused on the respondent's situation: their level of responsibility, to whom they were responsible, and what dependent care options they utilised. Questions four to six examined issues relating to the workplace: situations that make the work family balance difficult, the work family conflict, and the respondent's promotional prospects. The next nine questions (questions seven to 15) related primarily to the FFW initiatives available within the organisation, and the impact of these initiatives on the respondent's ability to balance work and family responsibilities. Respondents were asked which FFW initiatives they were aware of, their awareness of the consultation process, whether they used any of the initiatives available to them, and how helpful these initiatives were. The final set of questions (questions 16-24) were more demographic in orientation and included questions about a respondent's age, sex, ethnicity, education level, and salary level. The questionnaire featured mostly closed questions, with Likert scale, tick the box, or Yes/No options. For almost every question, additional space was provided for comments from respondents. There were two open ended questions. These were Question 15, 'Who do you think benefits from family friendly initiatives?', and Question 21, 'What section of the organisation do you work in?'

Note. The authors will provide readers with a copy of the questionnaire on request.

## Analysis

Data type and collection method were taken into consideration when determining the appropriate method of data analysis. The computer based statistical analysis package SPSS 8.0 for Windows was utilised to analyse the data gathered from the questionnaires. SPSS is an efficient method of analysing large amounts of data. Frequencies were calculated for each of the questions contained in the questionnaire, both overall, and for each organisation individually. Cross tabulations were also completed to explore the possibility of further relationships within the data, for example, whether a high level of responsibility for dependents meant that an individual utilised FFW initiatives more than those individuals who had a low level of responsibility or no responsibility for dependents. A Pearson Chi Square test was undertaken to assess the male and female responses to questions relating to balancing work life commitments. The analysis of the questionnaire data gives one dimension of the overall data gathered - information from employees. The other dimensions include data gathered from the interviews with the HRMs, the CEOs, and the union officials. Data provided by a variety of respondent groups provided an appreciation of the uniqueness of each organisation. The within organisation analysis identified patterns and themes that occurred within each of the organisations, and the cross organisation analysis showed similarities and differences between the six different organisations.

## RESULTS

### Quantitative Findings

Table 1 Research Sites, Stakeholder Interviews, Distribution and Return of Questionnaires.

Organisation Type and location	Interviewees	Questionnaires		Response Rate (%)
		Distributed	Received	
<b>Totals</b>		<b>809</b>	<b>390</b>	<b>48.2</b>
A: Service, Nelson	CEO, HRM, Union	293	140	47.8
B: Production, Nelson	CEO, HRM, Union	60	26	43.3
C: Production, Christchurch	CEO/HRM, Union	74	34	45.9
D: Production, Christchurch	HRM	175	100	57.1

OrganisationType and location	Interviewees	Questionnaires		ResponseRate (%)
		Distributed	Received	
<b>Totals</b>		<b>809</b>	<b>390</b>	<b>48.2</b>
E: Service, Wellington	HRM, Union	87	42	48.2
F: Service, Wellington	HRM	120	48	40.0

Table 1 shows the research sites and the key organisational stakeholders who were interviewed. A total of 390 employees, of which 64 per cent were female and 36 per cent were males, responded to the questionnaire. This represents an overall response rate of 48 per cent, which is seldom achieved in questionnaire based surveys. In addition, responses were relatively consistent across all study organisations indicating a high level of generalisability.

Table 2 Frequency of Availability of FFW Options  
**Organisation**

FFW Practice	Organisation					
	A	B	C	D	E	F
Flexible hours	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Part time work	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Parental leave	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Flexible leave	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Flexible hours	Yes	Yes	Yes			
Job sharing	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes		
Telework	Yes	Yes				
Work from home	Yes	Yes				
Holiday program	Yes					
Child care centre	Yes					
Compressed work weeks	Yes	Yes				
Employee assistance program	Yes	Yes				

Table 2 shows the frequency of use and range of FFW initiatives employed by the six New Zealand companies. All organisations use the same four FFW initiatives - flexible hours, part time work, parental leave and flexible leave. While not endorsed in all organisations, flexible hours and job sharing are relatively popular FFW initiatives. Telework, work from home, the use of Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs) and compressed work weeks received some support while the least employed FFW initiatives were the availability of holiday programs and childcare centres. The extent to which FFW initiatives were adopted by organisations was explored in open ended questions and communication rich interview forums, with the responses outlined in the qualitative section.

Table 3 Dissemination of Information

## Method of employees finding out about FFW options

Organisation	HRM responses	Employee responses
A	Orientation Email Family responsibilities brochure	Manager, Colleagues
B	Employment contract Organisational policies	Colleagues, Manager
C	Team briefings Communication audits	Colleagues, Manager
D	Orientation Brochure Staff Handbook	Manager, Colleagues
E	Communication has fallen down in this area (HRM comment)	Manager
F	Newsletters One to one discussion Yearly planning and meetings	Colleagues

Note. Employee responses (higher frequency, lower frequency)

Table 3 summarises the method of dissemination of information about FFW initiatives. Communication about FFW initiatives was perceived as a major issue and this was based on a number of concerns including the method of dissemination of information about FFW initiatives. Almost one third of the respondents reported that the main source of information concerning FFW options was their manager; another one third reported colleagues as their main source of information. Curiously, the HRMs responded differently, and although the question put to respondents offered some prompts, including ‘your manager’, ‘a colleague’, ‘at your job interview’, and ‘other (please specify)’, they tended not to mention the dissemination methods referred to by their HRM, as outlined in Table 3. Employees in four of the six organisations learned about FFW options through written communications such as staff handbooks, policy documents and brochures. The two interviewed CEOs were also asked how they thought employees found out about what was offered in their organisation. The CEO of Organisation A said that employees found out about initiatives either in The Work and Family Responsibilities brochure, from the Personnel Section, or from the in house magazine. Although this response was similar to that given by the HRM (who replied ‘during orientation, via email and the work and family responsibilities brochure’), it differed from the employees’ responses that noted ‘manager, colleagues’. The CEO of Organisation B said that the employees learned about the FFW practices available to them during the induction process. However, the CEO noted that some potential employees already knew about the culture and stance of the organisation before applying for a job. A communication gap appeared to exist as the CEO’s reply differed from both the HRM’s responses (via the employment contract and organisation policies) and the employees’ responses (via colleagues and their manager).

A breakdown in communication was evident between employees and organisations with regard to both the prior and ongoing consultation processes about FFW policies. An example of this is shown in Table 3 by responses from employees of Organisation D where an EAP was developed and implemented. While 74 per cent of respondents in this organisation were aware that the EAP was available to them, only three respondents ranked it as their most helpful initiative. In other words, they appeared to not know what it was for and how to use it, if required. Employees in all organisations were asked about communication prior to the introduction of FFW initiatives. Of the 390 responses, 223 (i.e., approximately two thirds of the respondents) were unaware of any communication during the consultation process between themselves, their unions, and management. This would suggest that they are being left out, or did not wish to be involved in the communication and consultation process regarding the choice and implementation of FFW policies and practice. Nevertheless, while all HRMs reported that there was an ongoing consultation process, over 60 per cent of employees were either unaware of this, or did not believe there was any consultation.

## Qualitative Findings

An examination of the data from the semi structured interviews demonstrated that employers were comfortable with the benefits and principles of FFW practice. One CEO commented that the recently introduced holiday program “has probably done as much good in terms of pr [public relations] as it has for the employees”. Other CEOs and HRMs were pleased with cost saving benefits and improved staff retention, with one HRM applauding the fact that “staff turnover was about 43 per cent two years ago, it’s down to about 13 per cent at the moment”. Another commented that “we previously lost 95 per cent of women who went on parental leave; now most employees taking parental leave return”.

The perceived availability of the type of FFW facility differed between employer and employee respondents. Despite employees and HRMs being asked to list the FFW options available to them within their organisation, there were

major discrepancies in the feedback from these two groups about the range and scope of FFW policies and number offered in most organisations. For instance, in Organisation A the HRM said that the Childcare Centre and an EAP were available to staff. However, only seven employees noted the Childcare Centre, and no one knew about the EAP, and others mentioned job sharing as an available alternative work method, but this was not mentioned by the HRM. Similar inconsistencies in knowledge were apparent in Organisation B, where the HRM mentioned the availability of job sharing, yet employees did not know this. Compressed weeks, an initiative for which Organisation C is renowned in New Zealand (Department of Labour and NACEW 1999), was only cited by one employee. Nevertheless, its employees reported job sharing as an initiative available to them, yet the HRM countered this and said this practice was not widespread and was, in fact, discouraged. In Organisation D, the HRM listed compressed weeks, but this was mentioned by only seven per cent of the employees, and part time work was referred to by employees, but not by the HRM. In Organisation E, teleworking and working from home appeared in 29 per cent of employees' responses, but these options were only briefly referred to by the HRM, and in Organisation F, the HRM mentioned job sharing, yet only five out of 48 employees cited this initiative. To further demonstrate the inconsistencies in the lack of knowledge about the FFW initiatives available a number of employees across all organisations reported that they did not know of their existence.

Employees' comments in the open ended questions expressed a range of opinions about FFW options and the (implied) importance of consistency and access to initiatives. Some comments were made about managers, e.g., "managers should be trained in implementing family friendly practice - be flexible leave, let me do it, and then trust me to get on with my job". Others were cynical and said: "the people who benefit most are those who are single, the staff that get paid the most as they can afford the childcare and are able to carry on their jobs". Comments about other workers' attitudes to employees who used FFW options included, "the team complains when I go on flexi hours, so I have to try to fit in with them". The union officials were supportive of both employee and employer positions, and one official provided this succinct summary of the issue. "Sometimes there is opposition from members within the workforce. This requires an approach of educating people as to why such initiatives are important. In a sense our membership reflects the wide diversity of views within society, so at times all will not support the policies."

## **DISCUSSION**

The findings from this study present a number of challenges for HRM practitioners and policy makers who are likely to have a stake in the future successful implementation of FFW initiatives. The first challenge relates to organisational communication and HRM practice (i.e., the apparent inconsistency and communication about the FFW initiatives offered by each organisation). Employees seemed to be unaware of what was actually available, and there was a great amount of conflicting information provided by the various HRMs about the FFW options available to employees. Furthermore, some employees reported that access was based on type of job, the part of the organisation worked in, and/or the stance of the manager or supervisor. Consequently, from a practical perspective, the channel and method of communication used to convey information should be carefully considered. As indicated in Table 3, whereas employees chose informal verbal methods (from colleagues, managers), HRMs assumed that their employees gained their knowledge via more formal, written means such as organisational policies, the written employment agreement, or similar official organisational documentations. Clear communication about the FFW arrangements that are available is essential both for employees and for managers. This also may ensure consistency in offering FFW arrangements, as all parties are clear what initiatives are universally available. There was also an apparent breakdown in communication between employees and the organisation with regard to the prior and ongoing consultation processes. This lack of consultation may have led to organisations implementing initiatives that do not meet the current needs of employees or that would be undesirable in the future. Finally, there was evidence to suggest that even though all of the HRMs interviewed thought that there was a consultation process in place in their organisation, many of their employees did not agree such frameworks existed.

The second challenge identified in this research was the perceived inconsistencies in offering FFW initiatives. Some employees reported that it seemed to depend on various factors including the job, the area of work, or the manager, as to whether employees were able to take advantage of FFW initiatives. Comments included, "staff aren't aware (of initiatives) and management won't tell them", and "The culture (of the organisation) means that FFW initiatives are not available equally". Although these apparent inequities may not have been a conscious decision by management, the perceived inequity or favouritism in offering FFW may seriously undermine the family friendly philosophy the organisation is trying to promote. The study found that perceived inequity or favouritism in offering FFW initiatives can potentially undermine the family friendly philosophy the organisation is trying to promote.

Situations that potentiate work family conflict, in particular, the issue of high workload, constitute the third major challenge identified. Paradoxically, some respondents reported that their scheduled workload precluded them from utilising the FFW initiatives available, whereas the overarching intent of FFW practice is to change aspects of the working day, which should assist in the organisation and management of the employment relationship. Furthermore, the issue of workloads came out strongly as a work family conflict situation when respondents were asked to indicate situations they had experienced which made it difficult to balance work and family responsibilities. This research also clearly identified that a significant number of working men are responsible for child care and wish to be involved in decisions about its implementation.

The fourth challenge is to ensure that FFW options operate successfully and meet the needs of both employers and employees. It can often be beneficial to have a 'family friendly champion' within the organisation who is responsible for ensuring that a FFW philosophy is encouraged, ensures that managers are trained in supporting staff and generally promoting the organisation's family friendly stance. Firm commitment and ongoing support by senior management and supervisors is another important factor in developing a family friendly philosophy. In this study, the CEO of Organisation B felt that he was instrumental in establishing a family friendly culture within his organisation. Although the CEO emphasised how important it was for the organisation to have a family friendly culture and be supportive of employees, the HRM seemed less passionate. Support by supervisors of employees with family responsibilities has been noted as a critical element in the creation of a family friendly culture (Milliken, et al. 1990, Biberman, et al. 1999, Hyman & Summers 2004). Support from peers is also important, as they can be influential within an organisation, especially if the organisation has a team based structure. However, it is the front line supervisors and HR managers who play a crucial role in disseminating information about FFW. On a pragmatic note, these managers also have the power to allow or disallow employees to utilise the initiatives on offer.

In summary, the six New Zealand organisations provided a typical range of FFW options, and these were found to make a positive contribution toward creating a healthy work life balance for employees. Nevertheless, if 'excellence' is to be the benchmark for FFW and HRM practice in the new millennium, then this research has identified some areas in which there is room for improvement in policy development and practice, particularly for countries in southeast Asia as they embrace these FFW initiatives.

## **CONCLUSION**

FFW policies are considered as a way to support and recognise the changing needs of all employees, and not just those with children or dependents to care for, at different points of their lives and careers. In developed and developing countries, rising proportions of dual earner families, increased female labour force participation, and the growing number of aged dependents means that a higher proportion of employees have family responsibilities. In the Asia Pacific countries particular concerns for families include the impact of people marrying older in life or not at all, rural urban migration and gender inequality in remuneration and career development. These socio demographic changes place pressure on firms to be proactive in addressing issues concerning work-life balance, including the provision of FFW arrangements.

New Zealand has been using a variety of FFW initiatives for at least two decades, but the findings of this study show that there is still an opportunity to improve the practical HRM implementation of FFW arrangements. This research has provided evidence to suggest that a gap exists between employee's practical needs and expectations of what FFW initiatives can offer, and what is actually available to them. Essentially, this gap is due to ineffective communication, principally because of the differing perceptions of what, how, and to whom FFW arrangements were being offered. To remedy this, a number of measures are required. From a practical perspective, front line managers and supervisors, who are supported by HRMs (and their CEOs), are probably the best people to tell people about FFW initiatives. They are also in a position to be proactive in their communication if they perceive opposition regarding such issues as discretion and inconsistencies. However, these managers may need training in work and family issues to ensure they are supportive of staff with family responsibilities and to ensure that management discretion does not mean that the FFW initiatives are being offered selectively, or in a manner that may advantage or disadvantage some employees. A range of other information, including brochures, newsletters, and email communication, can reinforce the message to ensure all employees are aware of what is available to them, even if they do not have family members to care for, to enable them to manage work life commitments.

Communication is the lifeblood of any organisation and failure to communicate has been demonstrated to be an expensive exercise. Projections for the future predict the real financial costs of not communicating about issues related to work-life balance and issues related to caring for dependents are "...as high as U.S.\$659,000 for employees over their lifetimes in lost wages" and "...a 1997 MetLife study of more than 1,500 employees found that U.S. businesses lost between U.S.\$11.4 and \$29 billion annually in productivity due to elder care giving." (Wells 2000: 38). The message is clear - employers and employees alike are likely to pay the price of not attending to work life balance issues in the future.

Finally, it is advocated that clear consultation processes and feedback among all levels of management (i.e., CEOs, union officials, HRMs at a strategic level, and between line managers at a functional level) is essential. The gap between needs and expectations regarding the provision and uptake of FFW initiatives can be bridged by effective communication between employers and employees. It is suggested that communication and ongoing consultation and feedback will play a pivotal role in enabling both employers and employees to make 'win-wins' (i.e., financially and socially cost effective decisions) concerning FFW initiatives in contemporary industrial workplaces.

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