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Monitoring and analysing our community and social life to explore future options for society and policy

In 2006-7 the Flinders Social Monitor is using the *Australian Survey of Social Attitudes* (AuSSA) to monitor changes in social life and examine their impact on everyday lives in South Australia. AuSSA is a biennial mail survey that gathers opinions from approximately 4,000 Australians aged 18 or above who are selected randomly from the Electoral Roll. It is managed by the ACSPRI Centre for Social Research in the Research School of Social Sciences at the ANU (<http://aussa.anu.edu.au/>). In 2005, the Flinders Social Monitoring and Policy Futures Network commissioned a special sample of South Australians resulting in 1,019 SA respondents. Details about this survey can be found in the Social Monitor 'About AuSSA'.

Maximising Workforce Capacity as a Means of Easing High Job Vacancy Rates

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In May 2006, job vacancies in South Australia (SA) rose to around 10,800, up from 7,400 a year earlier (ABS, 2006). One method of easing higher job vacancy rates is to increase workforce capacity. This can be achieved by increasing hours worked by *existing* employees, thereby reducing the need to recruit new employees. This paper uses data from the *Australian Survey of Social Attitudes* (AuSSA) to examine the feasibility of this idea. By analyzing various aspects relating to the preferred working hours of Australian workers, the paper demonstrates that increasing hours worked is a feasible strategy for increasing workforce capacity for some workers but not for all. It is likely to be most effective for male, non-professional employees who work less than 30 hours per week.

Preference for Longer Hours Working

In relation to work preferences the AuSSA data suggests that there are few differences between the SA sample and the National sample. As the National sample is the larger, and therefore more statistically robust, it is the one used in this paper. Where differences between SA and the National sample do arise, an explanation is provided.

Of the 4,569 respondents in the AuSSA National sample, 2,687 (or 59%) work. More than three quarters work full-time (classed as 30 hours or more per week), and very few work less than 10 hours (less than 4%). There is a gender difference with a much higher proportion of men working full-time (almost 90%) compared to just under two-thirds of women. Those with low socioeconomic status (SES) are much less likely to be working full-time.

Approximately one-third of the respondents who work would like to work different hours to those they

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currently worked. Of these, the majority would prefer to work more (23% prefer more work hours than currently while 11% prefer less work hours). This indicates that there is an opportunity for increasing workforce capacity by increasing work hours. This is most apparent amongst those working less than 10 hours as they most strongly prefer more hours (31% of those working less than 10 hours per week prefer more hours); overall however those working part time (10-29 hours per week) and full time also expressed a preference for more hours with over 20% of part-time workers and more than 22% of full-time workers preferring more hours of work.

Within this group of respondents who would like to work more hours, there are interesting differences in relation to gender, socio-economic status (SES) and occupation. Unsurprisingly, given that women still undertake the majority of unpaid domestic work, men were found to be more likely than women to prefer longer hours of work. Although there were respondents from low (household income less than \$31,200 per annum), medium (household income between \$31,200 and \$77,999 per annum) and high (household income over \$78,000 per annum) SES who indicated a desire to increase their working hours, those with a low SES were more than twice as likely than those with a high SES (34.3% compared to 16.3%) to prefer this option.

This finding is reflected in examining the broad occupational groups (skilled, semi-skilled and unskilled) of respondents. From this, it is evident that while there is room for increasing hours overall (for those who want more hours) for semi-skilled and unskilled workers, this is not the case for skilled (professional and managerial) employees. However, the level of aggregation used in this analysis could mask the possibility that while there may not be much room for skilled workers to increase their work hours, for individual occupations within this group of skilled workers, there may still be some capacity for increasing their hours worked (the converse may be true with the semi-skilled and unskilled groups).

As illustrated in Table 1 there is a gender difference in preferred working hours by occupation. Men in skilled occupations who desire different working hours overall prefer longer working hours while women in these occupations are split more evenly between the option of working longer or shorter hours. As discussed earlier, there is a larger proportion of men who prefer longer working hours and this is evident across all broad occupations. For women, however, it is those in unskilled and semi-skilled occupations who would prefer to work more hours.

Table 1: Broad Occupation by Preferred Hours Working-Earning Money by Gender

	Women				Men			
	More hours	Same hours	Less hours	Total	More hours	Same hours	Less hours	Total
Skilled	14.6%	69.7%	15.8%	100.0%	19.8%	70.1%	10.2%	100.0%
Semi-skilled	26.5%	64.3%	9.2%	100.0%	29.4%	64.5%	6.1%	100.0%
Unskilled	22.7%	66.7%	10.7%	100.0%	31.0%	60.6%	8.5%	100.0%
Total	20.0%	67.3%	12.7%	100.0%	24.6%	66.9%	8.5%	100.0%



Conclusion

Twenty three percent of workers who responded to AuSSA wanted to work longer hours than they currently work. These workers were more likely to be men, have low socioeconomic status and work in semi-skilled or unskilled occupations. Although people may want to work more hours, presumably to increase their income, they do not always have the physical and emotional capacity to do so. This Social Monitor found that those working less than 30 hours per week have the most capacity to increase their working hours. Workers in this group indicated that they prefer overall to work more hours and are less likely to suffer exhaustion by increasing work hours than those already working full time.

As a means of easing job vacancy pressure, it could well be useful to maximize the potential of the current workforce. In so doing there is a need to take account of the physical and emotional capacity of workers to extend their hours, as well as some of the structural issues that would influence a worker's 'capacity'. For example, people with the physical and emotional capacity to increase working hours need to be in occupations that have job vacancies. An analysis of which occupations are under pressure to recruit workers is beyond the scope of this discussion but there is evidence that it is those in semi-skilled or unskilled occupations that have the capacity to increase working hours. Unfortunately, it is likely that many vacancies are in skilled occupations therefore increasing work hours is not a feasible method to ease recruitment for all skilled workers.

In addition, utilizing the current workforce by increasing their capacity assumes no structural impediments to increasing working hours. However these impediments do exist, for example the decline in manufacturing industries could restrict workers in this sector from increasing their working hours. Structural changes in recent decades that have promoted the growth of part-time employment could also contribute to the underemployment of workers. The possibility of converting part-time work into full-time work also needs to be explored. Easing such impediments to increasing working hours will be vital to maximizing workforce capacity and, in turn, easing job vacancy pressures.

References

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All data from this publication is sourced from:

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