



Hours of work - usual and unpaid

Employees in the *Australia at Work* study¹ are asked a series of questions about their current working arrangements. This includes questions about their usual weekly hours of work, paid weekly hours and working time preferences. Key findings around usual versus paid hours of work from 2010 are reported below².

Long working long hours are prevalent

- Despite the National Employment Standard (NES) setting maximum weekly hours of work at 38 hours per week, only one third (34%) of all employees in the study reported working 'standard hours' of between 35 and 40 usual hours per week.
- Almost two-fifths (37%) of the 4,830 employees in the study report usually working more than 40 hours per week.³ While 19% of employees reported working a total of between 41 and 49 usual hours per week a further one-in-five (18%) employees reported working a total of 50 or more usual hours per week.
- Some of the longest working hours are found among full-time managerial and professional employees. Almost two-fifths (38%) report that they usually work more than 50 hours a week and more than one-quarter (27%) usually work between 41 and 49 hours a week.
- Similarly, in excess of one-fifth (22%) of professionals usually work more than 50 hours a week and a further one-fifth (21%) usually work between 41 and 49 hours a week.

Many employees are not compensated for their extra hours

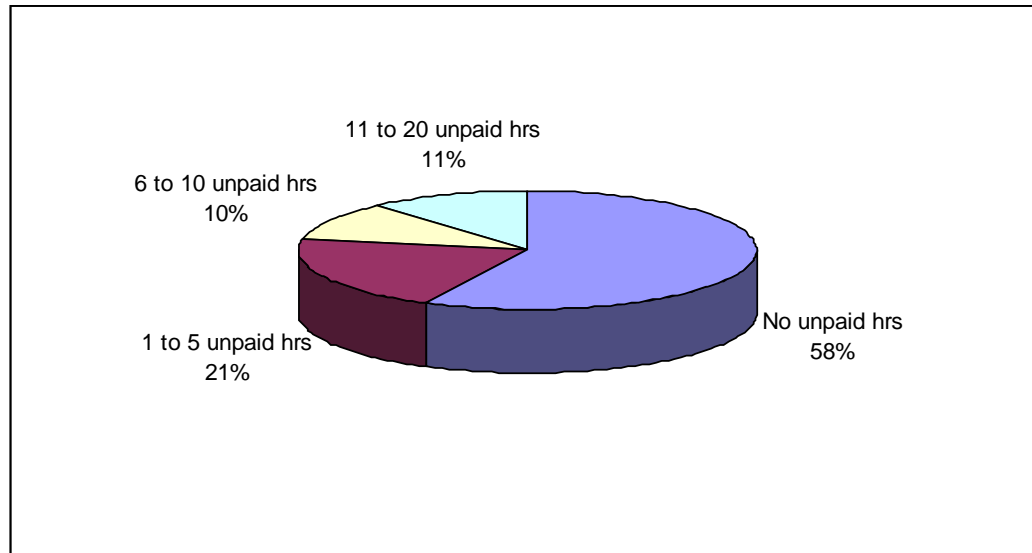
- Almost two-thirds (58%) of employees report working no unpaid hours.
- Just over one-in-five (21%) employees report usually working between 1 and 5 unpaid hours, one-in-ten work (10%) between 6 and 10 unpaid hours and a slightly higher proportion (11%) regularly work in excess of 10 unpaid hours per week.

¹ The *Australia at Work* study is being conducted by the Workplace Research Centre at the University of Sydney Business School. The project is funded by the Australian Research Council's Linkage Grant scheme and the industry partner is Unions NSW. Further financial support is provided by CFMEU Energy & Mining Division, CFMEU ACT Branch, NSW Nurses' Association, the Police Federation of Australia, the SDA, the CEPU, the QLD Nurses Federation and the Nurses Federation (Victorian Branch). *The study* is a five-year longitudinal telephone survey of people who were aged 16 to 58 years and in the Australian labour force in March 2006 (i.e. prior to the implementation of the *Work Choices* legislation on 27 March 2006). New entrants and re-entrants to the labour force after March 2006 were not 'in-scope' for the study.

² Care should be exercised when comparing or combining the data from this study with that from other sources, especially the Australian Bureau of Statistics. The differences primarily arise because the *Australia at Work* study has gone back to survey the same people each year whereas the ABS generally gets a new cross-section each time a survey is conducted. Further technical details as well as substantive findings arising from the *Australia at Work* study can be found at: <http://www.australiaatwork.org.au/index.php>.

- Among employees in managerial roles, more than two-thirds (70%) usually work unpaid hours on a regular basis. Almost one-in-three (28%) work in excess of 10 unpaid hours a week, one-quarter (25%) usually work in excess of 10 unpaid hours a week and a further one-sixth (17%) usually work between 6 and 10 unpaid hours a week.
- Among employees in professional roles, just under two-thirds (61%) usually work unpaid hours on a regular basis. Over one-in-six (18%) professionals usually work in excess of 10 unpaid hours a week and a further 16% work between 6 and 10 unpaid hours a week.

Unpaid hours per week, 2010, per cent



Source: *Australia at Work*, Wave 4 (2010), all employees, main job

What do our findings suggest?

During the 1980s a trend started whereby Australians work amongst the longest hours for full-timers in OECD countries. This trend appears now to be well entrenched. Many of these hours are not separately paid for. This problem is more pronounced in the upper reaches of the workforce, where it appears that 'success' at work today comes at a high price in terms of hours.

This being so, perhaps it is time for a re-think of how we define working time standards. The problem is most acute amongst those who 'work until the job is done' (ie technically known as 'task based employment'). Most working time standards, however, have been framed on the assumption that people are paid 'by the hour' (ie technically known as 'time served employment'). Working to task has traditionally not attracted payment for 'overtime'.

The key challenge appears to be devising labour standards that link the right to adequate resources to getting 'the job done' to overcome the problem of chronic understaffing - the root cause of many excessive hours of work. An example of how this has been achieved is provided by nurse-to-patient ratios in Victorian public and Californian hospitals. A similar system is about to be introduced in NSW public hospitals. A recent example of how excessive hours for 'time served employment' can be reduced was devised in the Victorian construction industry in the 1990s and spread Australia wide in that sector for part of the 2000s.

Considerably more work is required, however, to identify how the problem of excessive hours of work amongst Australian full timers in particular can be overcome.