Part-time Work: Policy, Practice and Resistance in a Manufacturing Organisation

Sara Charlesworth and Sheree Cartwright
Centre for Applied Social Research
RMIT University

In Australia, part-time work is seen as the key strategy for enabling employees, primarily women, to better balance work and care responsibilities. However, while almost half of all employed women work on a part-time basis, the take up of part-time work varies considerably across industries and organisations. In retail and hospitality, for example, a significant proportion of jobs are organised on a part-time (and casual) basis. In contrast, in industries like manufacturing, part-time work remains relatively rare even for female employees, with those seeking to reduce their hours of work often having to negotiate on an individual basis with their line supervisor. This article examines the issue of part-time work in a male-dominated manufacturing organisation, ManuCo, where relatively few female employees work on a part-time basis. While blue collar employees have an award ‘right’ to part-time work after return from parental leave, uptake is highest among white collar workers who are dependent on managerial discretion to access part-time work. This article explores the reasons for this apparent paradox and reports on the development of a formal company-wide ‘right-to-request’ part-time work policy. We explore the resistance, both overt and covert, to this initiative and the deeply embedded and gendered organisation of work and working-time that underpins it.

INTRODUCTION

Part-time Work in Australia: Setting the Scene

In Australia, part-time work is seen as the key strategy for attempting to reconcile work and care. In recent decades there has been a large uptake of part-time work in Australia, mostly by women, so that in August 2006, 29% of all employees worked on a part-time basis (ABS 2006a). Most of the growth in part-time work has been among women in their childbearing and childrearing years, which shows the direct link between part-time work and caring/family responsibilities (Pocock 2003, p. 164). In 2002, Australia had the second highest rate of employed women in part-time work, after the Netherlands,
out of the 28 countries in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (OECD 2002a, p. 48; OECD 2002b, p. 69). Indeed, the growth of female employment in Australia is driven by the increase in the number of women working part time. Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) data show that at August 2006, 47% of all employed women worked less than 35 hours a week, as did 15% of employed men (ABS 2006a).

The quality of part-time work in Australia has also become an issue. Many part-time employees, compared with full-time employees, find it easier to combine paid work and care responsibilities (Pocock 2003, p. 162). Part-time work can also potentially provide a ‘bridge’ to allow women to re-enter employment or maintain continuous labour force participation, albeit on reduced hours (Fagan & O’Reilly 1998, p. 8). However, available Australian evidence suggests that employees with caring responsibilities often have to trade access to reduced hours for jobs of poorer quality (see Burgess 2005; Chalmers, Campbell, & Charlesworth 2005). Much part-time work in Australia is insecure and many part-time jobs are ‘casual’, lacking basic conditions essential to carers (such as sick leave, holiday leave and paid parental leave). Part-time jobs often have short hours and offer limited access to careers or advancement (Campbell & Charlesworth 2004; Burgess 2005; Pocock 2003).

The take up of part-time work varies considerably across industries. In female-dominated industries, such as retail and hospitality, much of the work is organised on a part-time basis. In July 2006, 47% of all retail industry employees worked on a part-time basis, as did 50% of all hospitality industry employees. For women working in both industries, part-time hours are the predominant working time pattern, with 62% of all female employees in retail and 60% of all female employees in hospitality working part time (ABS 2006b). In other mixed and male-dominated industries such as wholesale trade, manufacturing and mining, work continues to be organised around a full-time norm and part-time work is more typically available only via enterprise policy and/or discretionary ‘grace and favour’ arrangements with line supervisors.

**Part-time Work in Manufacturing**

In August 2006, 13% of employees in the manufacturing industry worked part-time hours. As in other industries, the take up of part-time work is highly gendered, with 29% of female employees in the industry working on a part-time basis compared to 7% of men (ABS 2006b). Within the industry there is considerable variation in the take up of part-time work, with the industry sub-sectors where women comprise a larger proportion of employees generally being the ones with an above industry proportion of employees working part time, as highlighted below in Table 1.
Table 1 Part and full-time employees & male and female employees in manufacturing industry subdivisions 2006

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Manufacturing Industry subdivision</th>
<th>Employed</th>
<th>Sex</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Full-time '000</td>
<td>Part-time '000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Food, beverage &amp; tobacco manufacturing</td>
<td>150.9</td>
<td>27.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Textile, clothing, footwear &amp; leather manufacturing</td>
<td>39.1</td>
<td>15.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wood &amp; paper product manufacturing</td>
<td>62.2</td>
<td>5.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Printing, publishing &amp; recorded media</td>
<td>81.9</td>
<td>20.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Petroleum, coal, chemical &amp; associated product manufacturing</td>
<td>75.9</td>
<td>8.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-metallic mineral product manufacturing</td>
<td>39.3</td>
<td>5.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Metal product manufacturing</td>
<td>155.0</td>
<td>13.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Machinery &amp; equipment manufacturing</td>
<td>215.1</td>
<td>21.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other manufacturing</td>
<td>55.8</td>
<td>11.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Electricity, gas &amp; water supply</td>
<td>86.3</td>
<td>6.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Manufacturing(a)</td>
<td>924.9</td>
<td>136.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: ABS 2006b
(a) Includes any persons allocated as not further defined within this industry division

In the most female dominated subdivision — textile, clothing, footwear and leather manufacturing — almost 28% of employees work part time, compared to the most male dominated subdivision — metal product manufacturing — where less than 8% of employees work on a part-time basis. This may suggest that industries that employ larger numbers of women have had to be responsive to expectations of availability of part-time hours. The impact of increased female participation is also suggested in data collected by the Equal Opportunity in the Workplace Agency (EOWA) in an analysis of manufacturing organisations that employ more than 100 employees, which are required to report to the agency on an annual basis (EOWA 2005). In textile, clothing, footwear and leather manufacturing, for example, 32% of managers in reporting organisations were women, compared to 11% of managers in metal product manufacturing. This compared to an average of 20% female representation in manager positions in all the manufacturing reporting organisations (2005, p. 8).

However, an increased willingness to appoint women to managerial positions does not extend to an increased acceptance of part-time work in such positions. The EOWA data points to the relatively low uptake of part-time work in occupations above the shop and
Part-time Work

office floor. Just 4.9% of women managers in reporting manufacturing organisations worked part time, compared to 7.3% of managers of all the organisations that reported to EOWA. Indeed, when the figures for men and women are combined, the manufacturing industry is even more unlikely to employ managers part time. Only 1.3% of managers in manufacturing worked part time, compared with 2.9% for all EOWA reporting organisations (EOWA 2005, p. 8).

Workplace culture, structures and practices have been identified as barriers to the availability of part-time work and in determining the quality of part-time work for employees, particularly in male-dominated industries such as manufacturing (Rapoport et al. 2002; Burgess et al. 2005). While there are examples of ‘good practice’ manufacturing workplaces, such as Autoliv — an auto component manufacturer that provides part-time work opportunities for production line employees (IRV 2003) — such exemplars remain atypical. A recent study provides two contrasting manufacturing case studies, both with similar proportions of female employees (Burgess et al. 2005). With respect to flexible work options, the distinguishing feature of the ‘better’ practice case study, which also had a larger proportion of female managers, was management commitment similar to that at Autoliv: ‘to do all they can’ to support flexible work arrangements, including part-time work. The ‘poorer’ practice case study suggests a self-fulfilling management perception that traditional manufacturing workplaces do not have the flexibility to offer the same sort of arrangements as in other industries (Burgess, Henderson & Strachan 2005, pp. 10–11). This view, together with a conception of the ‘ideal worker’ as someone unencumbered by family responsibilities and available to work full-time and overtime as required (Williams 2000, p. 3), remains strong in manufacturing, despite the slowly increasing number of women employed in it. This attitude underpins and maintains workplace cultures, work organisation practices and the design of jobs that ‘are better suited to the needs and circumstances of male employees and which act as a barrier to the recruitment and retention of women’ (EOWA 2005, p. 20).

Drawing on a recent in-depth case study of a large male-dominated enterprise in the machinery and equipment manufacturing industry subdivision, this article attempts to better understand both support for and resistance to the take up of part-time work in manufacturing. The case study of *ManuCo* comes out of a larger two-year action research project ‘testing’ the application of the ‘dual agenda’ model of organisational change in two large Australian organisations.¹ The underlying assumption of the dual agenda, and the collaborative interactive action research (CIAR) methodology on which it draws, is that making changes in work practices to increase gender equity and work–life integration can also increase workplace performance and organisational effectiveness (Rapoport et al. 2002, Lewis & Cooper 2005). At *ManuCo*, patchy access to and implementation of part-time work was identified with a set of work practices impeding both gender equity and organisational performance.

Our focus in this article is on *ManuCo* and on part-time work rather than the larger research project. In the next section we describe *ManuCo* and the dual agenda/CIAR methodology employed in the action research case study. We then move to an exploration of part-time work practice and policy coverage in the organisation,

¹ This research project was jointly funded by the Australian Research Council and the two organisations, under the Linkage grant program (LP 0455212).
highlighting a key paradox in practice and policy in the take up of part-time work by blue and white collar workers. We examine several reasons for this apparent paradox and report on the development of a formal company-wide ‘right-to-request’ part-time work policy. Finally, we explore both support for and resistance to this initiative and the deeply embedded and gendered organisation of work and working-time that underpins it.

MANUCO AND THE DUAL AGENDA/CIAR METHODOLOGY

The Organisation

ManuCo is a large, multi-national manufacturer, whose parent company is located in North America. Its Australian workforce is located across a number of sites and at the commencement of the research numbered some 9,000. Three-quarters of the ManuCo workforce are blue-collar workers, including those in plant-based and production line positions, while one-quarter of employees work in white-collar positions, including administrative, managerial and professional ones. The distinction between blue- and white-collar workers is broadly reflected in different policies and industrial instruments that cover the different groups of workers. Most of the blue-collar workforce is unionised, while relatively few white-collar or managerial employees are union members. The conditions and entitlements of blue-collar workers and some professional groups, for example engineers, are covered by both an industry award and a union enterprise agreement. The conditions and entitlements of most white-collar workers are covered by various formal company policies and Human Resource (HR) practices.

ManuCo is even more male-dominated than the machinery and equipment manufacturing industry subdivision in which it is located. Women comprise only 10% of ManuCo’s workforce, compared to the 16% female employment that is the average for the subdivision (see Table 1). There are, however, some variations between white-collar and blue-collar representation at ManuCo. Women make up around 20% of the white-collar workforce, compared to only around 7% of plant/production employment. Female representation in senior management is low, with women comprising around 8% of managers at this level. Perhaps surprisingly, at the start of the research women comprised around a third of the company’s Australian board of directors. This may well reflect the impact of ownership by a foreign parent company, a characteristic that the EOWA suggests is associated with an increased push for greater workforce equity and the advancement of women in manufacturing more generally (EOWA 2005, p. 14).

The Dual Agenda and CIAR Research at ManuCo

The dual agenda conceptual framework and organisational change approach used in the case study employs an explicit gender lens. The dual agenda concept argues that gender equitable organisational change can only come about by focusing on the way in which work is organised and by re-examining the ideologies that underpin it (Rapoport et al. 2002, pp. 2–3). The CIAR methodology aims to uncover and get below taken-for-granted assumptions about work organisation, including conceptions of the ‘ideal worker’ and ‘ideal work practices’. The framework aims to challenge and make changes to ‘ideal work’ practices so as to increase gender equity and work–life integration and to
Part-time Work

increase workplace performance and organisational effectiveness. The CIAR methodology is underpinned by a close collaborative relationship between the academic researchers and the organisation. A unique aspect of this methodology involves a ‘resident’ researcher being located at the workplace. A research assistant was located at ManuCo two days a week for a total of 15 months gathering internal company statistical and qualitative data and undertaking extensive participant observation.

ManuCo’s specific interest in collaborating in the dual agenda research project was its relevance to the company’s strategic goals, particularly in organisational change efforts driven through its work–life strategy. Another catalyst and associated initiative was the introduction of extended paid maternity leave, which provided the impetus for HR personnel to push the work–life agenda more strongly. The two-year research project followed the four separate but overlapping stages of the dual agenda/CIAR process (see Bailyn & Fletcher 2003, p. 2):

- The organisational scan — identifying work practices and work–life policies that have implications for organisational effectiveness and gender equity
- The organisational diagnosis — organisational feedback for a work culture diagnosis of the organisation, the aim of which is to make the costs and consequences of the work practices for organisational effectiveness and gender equity visible
- Agreement on ‘interventions’ or initiatives — identification of practical ‘small wins’ change that has the potential to provide both employee and organisational benefits
- Implementation and evaluation of initiatives — working with the organisation to implement the agreed initiatives and to evaluate the outcomes.

Data collection during the first three stages involved almost 250 participants in interviews, focus groups, feedback focus groups and other interactions and discussions with a range of blue- and white-collar employees. Research also took the form of ethnographic observations of work practices across the organisation. Interview participants were drawn from across the organisation and included female and male employees working in HR, finance and corporate affairs, engineering, production, product testing and import/export. Participant observation was also conducted in these different work areas. Documentation and data, including the organisation’s employment policies and practices, were gathered and analysed. As discussed further below, one of the ‘small-wins’ initiatives agreed to in the action research process was a decision to examine the uptake and quality of part-time work in the organisation with a view to developing a formal part-time policy covering all employees in the organisation.

As part of the development of this initiative, part-time employees and managers of part-time employees were surveyed about their specific experiences of part-time work across the organisation. The aim was to provide benchmark data against which to evaluate the implementation of a formal policy and to identity specific issues to ensure good quality part-time work was supported in accompanying manager guidelines and training. All ‘active’ (i.e. not on leave) part-time employees were surveyed, with a response rate of 50% for employees and 51% for managers. Following the survey, focus group discussions were held to explore survey findings and to develop a part-time work policy
proposal. It is this proposal, and the support for and resistance to it, that is the focus of the third section of this article.

PART-TIME WORK AT MANUCO: POLICY AND PRACTICE

In 2005, less than one hundred employees worked in a part-time arrangement, which is less than 1% of the total ManuCo workforce. This is far lower than is the 9% average for the machinery and equipment manufacturing industry subdivision in which ManuCo is located (see Table 1). Only 6% of female employees worked on a part-time basis despite the company’s ‘best practice’ provision of 14 weeks paid maternity leave, a provision that has led to increased retention of female employees in recent years. Access to part-time work at ManuCo differs for white- and blue-collar workers. Blue-collar workers have an award ‘right’ to part-time work after their return from parental leave. However, this is a limited right that expires when the child turns two. In the latest enterprise agreement there is also provision for employees to apply for part-time hours (no fewer than 24 per week) in order to accommodate family responsibilities or phased retirement, where such requests can be accommodated by the business. There is, however, no obligation on managers to agree to such applications. By contrast, white-collar workers who are not covered by the enterprise award have no formal right to part-time work and there is no formal policy covering part-time work arrangements within the company. In essence, decisions to access part-time work after parental leave, or in any other situation, are left to the discretion of an individual employee’s line manager and are made on a case-by-case basis. Line managers also have the discretion to decide on what basis, and for how long, part-time work is taken up. In some areas a practice has evolved whereby the award entitlement for blue-collar workers is used as a basis for determining how long part-time work will be offered to white-collar workers. Consequently, in these areas, when a woman’s child turns two it is presumed that she is no longer eligible for part-time work and must return to work full time.

In the course of the research, we found that across ManuCo knowledge of the organisation-wide work–life strategy, and the policies and practices underpinning it, was uneven. For example, generally there was a good knowledge of the various flexible work policies applicable to employees in corporate headquarters and HR. However, although employees had the award right to return from parental leave on a part-time basis, both employees and line managers had little awareness of the potential availability of part-time work arrangements. There was a lot of interest in part-time work expressed during interviews and focus group discussions, but information about part-time work — both among employees and managers — was dependent on manager knowledge and discretion, with one interviewee noting: ‘People are too scared to ask about part-time work.’ There was also a broad assumption that part-time work was ‘just’ for women, despite the identification of several men who had been allowed to work reduced hours, with one production line focus group participant commenting that the view in his work area was that ‘real men don’t work part time’. In some areas, particularly those focused on production line work and import/export, there were strong views that the nature of the work carried out precluded employees working part time.

Despite the ageing of the workforce and broad concern among organisations about losing skills and organisational knowledge when employees retire, there was little
serious discussion anywhere in the organisation of phased retirement options. In both blue- and white-collar areas there was a perception that access to and implementation of options to assist employees manage work–life balance depended very much on the knowledge and discretion of individual managers and supervisors.

We also found that part-time work was inconsistently implemented across the organisation. In some areas there were difficulties in negotiating new roles, workloads, hours and flexible arrangements upon return to work from a period of leave. Where it was accessed in the white-collar area a number of issues arose, including work intensification. For example, one interviewee described it as ‘some part-time jobs are really full-time workloads with a pay-cut’. Realistic expectations of the performance of part-time workers were a particular issue in administrative areas. Two interviewees pointed to performance reviews of part-time workers that had benchmarked their performance output against expectations of a full-time workload. Others complained that their managers had reduced their expectations because they assumed that workers were unable to undertake certain work while on reduced hours. We found some resentment expressed towards the take up of maternity leave and part-time work by women. While concerns arose (partly because of resourcing constraints) such as the lack of backfilling when an incumbent was on leave and what was understood as head count restrictions, women on maternity leave or working part time were seen by a minority as ‘creating’ additional work for their colleagues and managers.

We also picked up systems issues that make it difficult for managers and line supervisors to implement and manage part-time work, and for the organisation to assess what arrangements were in place. There was some lack of consistency in the way in which part-time employees were counted in different departments. Some used a pro-rata head count system and others counted part-time employees as a full-head, which was problematic given that departments had to operate within a fixed head count. Traditional understandings of head count persisted in some areas, despite an edict from the parent company stipulating that part-time employees were to be counted as ‘half a head’ regardless of the number of hours worked. As one line manager put it: ‘Even though [employee person] only works three days a week, from a head count perspective they are counted as a full-head, so I am down by 40% of a head.’ Head count is thus as much a symptom as a cause of problematising part-time work at ManuCo. It reflects and contributes to perceptions of part time as ‘other’ and as a headache for line managers. There were also some areas of ManuCo where manual pay systems used for part-time employees created administrative hurdles in implementing part-time work as pay had to be calculated on a weekly basis, even where part-time hours were fixed. As a consequence, some part-time production line employees were not counted on ManuCo’s HR software system.

The Dual Agenda methodology stresses the value of ‘small wins’ and ‘small losses’ change efforts in building understanding and support for larger scale change by demonstrating concrete outcomes on a small scale (Rapoport et al. 2002, p. 107). Based on the organisational diagnosis and feedback to it, ManuCo managers and employees were canvassed as to what would be suitable ‘small wins’ initiatives for the organisation and researchers to pursue. Improving access to and the quality of part-time work emerged as an area of organisational change seen as having potential benefits for the business as well as for gender equity and work–life balance. Agreement was reached on an initiative to address these issues. The initiative around part-time work had three main
elements: firstly, the clarification, dissemination and implementation of a formal part-time work policy covering a broader group of employees and situations than was currently the case; secondly, information dissemination/promotion of ‘best practice’ part-time work, for example, information for employees about negotiating part-time work arrangements (how, when to, who), establishing a new role, support networks, part-time work mentors, options, etc; and thirdly, training for managers to support part-time work, including job design, work organisation and performance management. The rationale for this initiative was creating consistency across the organisation with respect to formal access to part-time work arrangements. It was also focused on making sure that part-time work arrangements were quality arrangements. That is, it sought to ensure that part-time work and part-time workers would be fully integrated into the organisation — that workers would not disadvantaged in terms of career development, training, mentoring or performance management and review.

As noted above, a survey of part-time workers and their managers was undertaken as the first part of the initiative, followed by focus groups for interested survey respondents. The survey and focus group findings indicated that for many employers and supervisors, part-time arrangements at ManuCo were working well. Both employee and manager respondents pointed to a range of benefits for employees and for the organisation, particularly the retention of skilled employees, increased productivity and job satisfaction. However, the survey also confirmed what had previously been identified in the organisational diagnosis: that the way part-time arrangements were implemented varied widely. Particular examples of poor quality part-time work were raised. For example, some part-time employees reported having to work in positions at a lower level than their original positions in order to secure reduced hours, while a large number of employees and managers agreed that part-time employees did not have the same development and promotion opportunities as full-time employees.

The Take up of Part-time Work at ManuCo: A Paradox?

While they made up only a quarter of employees at ManuCo, white-collar workers were much more likely to be working part time than blue-collar workers. Two-thirds of those working part time were white-collar employees and only one-third were blue-collar. Of those identified as blue-collar part-time employees, more than half were employed as canteen workers, whose work had always been organised on a part-time basis. This differential take up of part-time work appears paradoxical. There is a very low uptake among blue-collar workers who have an award ‘right’ to part-time work after parental leave and who can apply more generally for part-time hours under the enterprise agreement, subject to managerial discretion. In contrast, there is a much higher uptake by non-award white-collar ManuCo employees who have no similar ‘rights’ to part-time work and whose access to part-time work is on a case-by-case discretionary basis not covered by any formal company policy.

There are several reasons for this apparent paradox. One is that generally, blue-collar workers at ManuCo earn less than white-collar workers, and those returning from paid parental leave with an award ‘right’ to part-time work may not be able to live on a part-time income. This is supported by ManuCo data that indicates that while paid maternity leave is available to both blue- and white-collar workers, blue-collar workers tend to return to work earlier, suggesting that financial issues may add not only a pressure to
return to work but also a pressure to return to work full time. Another explanation might be found in the different female density of white- and blue-collar work at ManuCo. It was the view of one union official who was interviewed that ‘a mass of women’ is needed to drive any change around the demand for and uptake of part-time work in production line areas. With the representation of women in the production line and other blue-collar areas hovering around 7%, as indicated above, any mass of women, critical or otherwise, is a long way off. Despite the insertion of the right to part-time work provision in the enterprise award, which represents a consent agreement between ManuCo management and the relevant unions, the provision is a limited one and its link to parental leave underscores a view of its use as for women only. Given the very few women at ManuCo who are covered by this provision, its use remains exceptional. This is hardly surprising. Even in the white-collar areas, where the representation of women and the uptake of part-time work is higher, the overall low representation of women, together with the dominant organisational understandings of part-time work as being only for those with family responsibilities, reinforces such gendered perceptions. Where mainly women access flexible working time policies, such as part-time work, uptake can be seen as only for the organisationally uncommitted or as special dispensation from organisational working time norms for the deserving. This reinforces gendered perceptions in the workplace about women’s organisational competence and interest in the organisation as compared to men’s relatively time-unbounded availability and commitment.

Further, there is active discouragement of part-time work at ManuCo from many line managers in production areas where part-time work has been described as ‘too difficult to organise’. This view was reinforced by systems issues with head count and payroll difficulties, outlined above, and a strongly gendered perception about who should work part time and who should work full time. At ManuCo traditional blue-collar union norms have also influenced the acceptance and availability of part-time work for award-covered employees. The main union at ManuCo is generally unsupportive of part-time work, as it is seen as potentially undercutting full-time permanent employment. This position has led to some confusion among delegates and workers on the production line regarding the differences between casual and part-time work. One of the union officials interviewed in the course of the research suggested that the main problem with part-time work at ManuCo was that the ‘rest of the full-time job is not covered’. The official also expressed concern that part-time arrangements were often ad hoc and the ‘loss of the remaining hours means other workers have to take on additional work’. This concern with work intensification has increased over time with the implementation of the model of lean manufacturing characteristic of work organisation in the industry. Indeed, the concerns expressed by the main union at ManuCo are consistent with union views in the industry more generally — that part-time work and other flexible work arrangements have the potential to threaten employees’ permanent full-time status and overtime access, and to create a risk of work intensification (EOWA 2005, p. 21).

Finally, another explanation for the comparatively lower take up of part-time work by blue-collar workers resides in the different ways in which work and working time is organised in different areas within ManuCo. Blue-collar workers on the production line have much more restricted access to variations in working time and leave flexibility than their white-collar colleagues. The way production and operations work is organised tends to be accepted as fixed and immutable and it is very difficult to shift this mindset — amongst managers and unions alike. While there are some practical realities
underpinning this view given the very different nature of work on the production line compared to that of most white-collar administrative and professional workers, the case of Autoliv, noted in the introduction, suggests that traditional ways of organising work on production lines can be rethought. It is interesting to note that at ManuCo the view that part-time work does not suit the nature of the work undertaken is not limited to production areas. In the import/export area, part-time work is similarly viewed as simply incompatible with the work demands of the work unit. Employees work long hours, making conference phone calls late in the evening and early in the morning with company colleagues located in North America, Europe and the Asia Pacific. The time-unbounded demands of the work undertaken by this unit are as great an impediment to consideration of part-time hours as the fixed and time limited nature of production line work. While the ideal worker and ideal worker practices have different manifestations in these two very different work areas, reflecting different ideas about commitment to work, both preclude reduced hours.

THE PART-TIME WORK POLICY PROPOSAL

As noted above, one of the small-wins change efforts to come out of the dual agenda action research process at ManuCo was an initiative around part-time work. One of the most important components of this initiative was the development of a formal part-time work policy to cover a broader group of employees and situations than was currently the case. The rationale for this initiative was to provide for transparency and consistency across the organisation in terms of formal access to part-time work arrangements. The focus group consultations after the survey enabled us to further explore employee and manager views on what a part-time policy and organisational guide might look like, and to seek additional advice within the organisation about how to develop and implement the policy.

Perhaps surprisingly, given that many company policies on part-time work in manufacturing, and more generally, involve managerial discretion, it was accepted from the start that the formal policy should follow a ‘right to request’ model. That is, where all employees have the right to request part-time work, and supervisors or managers have a duty to seriously consider such requests in the context of operational requirements. This ‘right to request’ model had been a subject of debate leading up to and following, the Australian Industrial Relations Commission (AIRC) Family Provisions Test Case decision in 2005 (PR082005).¹ Informed by the experience of ‘right to request’ legislation in the United Kingdom, the main advantages of this essentially individualised and procedural (rather than substantive) right were seen to be the development of some consistency in enterprise practice around part-time work and provision of a decision-making framework for supervisors to follow. The ‘right to request’ underpinning of the proposed policy was also seen as assisting the organisation to meet its obligations, under both federal and state anti-discrimination laws that,

¹ This test case decision provided, among other things, that employees could request part-time work on return from parental leave up until the child was five. Employers are obliged to consider such requests, having regard to the employee’s circumstances, and may only refuse on reasonable grounds related to the effect on the workplace or the employer’s business, e.g. cost, lack of adequate replacement staff, loss of efficiency and impact on customer service. Unlike many other test cases on carers leave and unpaid parental leave, this decision was not included in the ‘Australian Fair Pay and Conditions Standard’ introduced in the WorkChoices changes to the Workplace Relations Act 1996 in March 2006.
Part-time Work

arguably, require that workers with family responsibilities be ‘reasonably accommodated’ in the workplace (although see Gaze 2005). The policy was to apply to all employees, both award-covered and non-award covered, although it was emphasised that the formal policy would not provide any additional entitlements, but rather would simply formalise and raise awareness of current best practice around part-time work within the organisation.

The development of the policy had the support of the HR Director. It was initially anticipated that the new draft policy would be piloted at one of the main sites and would cover both blue- and white-collar workers. This was seen as enabling an assessment of the practical utility of the policy and the accompanying managers’ guide and training material. On the basis of this assessment there was to be further refinement of the policy and accompanying material before it was rolled out across ManuCo. However, a high degree of concern was expressed by representatives of the main production areas in the company, as outlined below. The part-time policy reference group then decided it would be more effective to have the formal endorsement of the company’s Board of Directors so as to ensure that the policy was accepted and implemented throughout the organisation. After some delay a presentation was made to the Board. Developed by the researchers and the reference group, it emphasised that a formal policy would have benefits for both the organisation and employees and pointed out the costs of ‘doing nothing’. An in-principle agreement was given by the Board to a formal company part-time policy.

Resistance

The development of a formal ‘right to request’ part-time policy clearly had broad support at the senior levels of the organisation and within the HR and legal compliance departments. However, during the process of developing the policy both overt and covert resistance was encountered. The dual agenda/CIAR methodology anticipates such resistance. A key part of the methodology is to challenge underlying gendered assumptions in organisational work life. This means engaging with and honouring resistance to change so as ‘to find creative solutions for existing problems that integrate different ways of thinking and doing’ (Rapoport et al. 2002, p. 109). Resistance is considered both a consequence and a key part of the organisational change process. For example, Rapoport et al. point out that ‘if there is no resistance, CIAR researchers should begin to question whether they and their organisational partners are on the right track’ (2002, p. 108). They note many sources of resistance, including concerns about performance, resistance at a structural level and individual concerns, which often only emerge as attempts are made to change work practices (2002, p. 109–10).

At ManuCo the two main expressions of resistance to the part-time policy proposal were an argument that certain work could only be carried full time, and assertions that a formal policy would lead to ‘the floodgates opening’. One of the main concerns expressed in the production areas was that the policy would encourage the uptake of part-time work in work environments that were ill-suited to it and that implementing part-time work would place unnecessary pressure on the organisation at a time when it was trying to meet production deadlines for a new product. Interestingly, while the focus was on production areas as the main source of resistance to part-time work and a formal part-time policy, resistance soon emerged in a number of white-collar areas,
including the import/export area. In the context of the ‘long hours’ culture and demands for time-unbounded availability, the prospect of reduced hours in this area presented a direct threat to work organisation and traditional understandings of productivity based on presence in the workplace. While the focus of the proposed policy was part-time work, the research uncovered deeply held gendered assumptions about full-time work, assumptions that make it very difficult for organisations like ManuCo to consider more effective and sustainable forms of work organisation, including part-time work. These assumptions were reflected in the resilience of traditional understandings of head count within the company, as outlined above, which in turn make any move to alternative work organisation extremely difficult to implement (Rapoport et al. 2002, p. 110).

In both blue-and white-collar areas the belief that certain work was not amenable to alternative work organisation or job redesign was also linked to fears that once there was a formal part-time policy ‘everyone would want to work part-time’ and that providing information about the availability of part-time work would exacerbate matters. As one production area member of the part-time policy reference group put it, ‘If you let everyone know about it you will have everyone wanting to do it’. The fear of the floodgates opening is a common response of line managers to employees requesting change in working time arrangements (Hegewisch 2005). However, such fears are not supported either at the labour force level — for example, in respect of the implementation of ‘right to request’ legislation in Europe (2005, p. 1) — or by actual organisational experience (Bailyn 2006, p. 137). Indeed, given the paucity of women within ManuCo and the persistence of a broader societal gendered work/care regime in Australia (Pocock 2003), any significant uptake of part-time work is highly unlikely. Bailyn argues that such fears are underpinned by a basic mistrust with respect to the willingness and ability of employees to take responsibility for the work of the organisation while also giving priority to their personal lives, as well as an organisational culture that presumes a necessity for set procedures applied in uniform ways (2006, pp. 136–7).

At a less overt level, we also encountered some resistance to the part-time policy proposal evidenced in the waning support of some members of the reference group and the fact that the proposal kept slipping off the Board agenda. It took approximately eight months for the part-time policy to be formally agreed to by the Board. Consideration of the policy was scheduled for consecutive monthly Board meetings. However, there were a number of changes in direction and emphasis, as well as delays, which saw the proposal being bumped at the last minute from Board agendas. It required the persistent effort of key people within the organisation and the academic researchers to keep the organisation focused on this small-scale change effort. Reasons for the delays were not clearly articulated. On the one hand, it could appear that the initiative was simply unimportant in the business context in which ManuCo operates, including competitive and global pressures and ongoing concerns about possible downsizing. However, if this were so it is not clear why the board sign-off on what could be viewed as a mere formalisation of current practice was delayed. On the other hand, it appears, especially given the active resistance of the production area managers, as outlined above, that a formal part-time policy was viewed as potentially undermining or disruptive of the traditional way of organising work around full-time jobs and overtime in blue-collar areas, as well as a threat to the newer but no less embedded ‘long hours’ culture in some of the white-collar areas.
CONCLUDING COMMENTS

Currently, the formal ‘right to request’ part-time work policy is being implemented as a pilot policy at ManuCo’s main organisational site. It is too early to tell if the presence of a formal policy will make any difference to the limited uptake and limited quality of part-time work at ManuCo. However, the process of policy development and the debate it has generated within the organisation has brought to the surface not only gendered assumptions about the divide between work and care but also assumptions about the gendered way in which work is organised in both blue- and white-collar settings around the ‘ideal’ full-time norm.

Organisational change is always uneven (Lewis & Cooper 2005, p. 105). Perhaps the most successful part of the dual agenda approach to part-time work at ManuCo was the way it encouraged the clear articulation of the benefits of a formal part-time policy for organisational effectiveness and workforce sustainability. The benefits include the link between part-time work and attraction and retention of staff with caring responsibilities in a shrinking labour market, increased employee satisfaction, and realising the full potential of paid maternity leave through having part-time work as a return to work option. Where the action research was perhaps less effective was in surfacing the gender equity aspect of the dual agenda — support for both male and female employees to assume care responsibilities, and the career progression and advancement of those with care responsibilities. While several men spoke in focus groups about wanting to be more engaged parents, the male full-time breadwinner assumption is deeply embedded in the organisation of manufacturing work around a full-time template, and around long hours, fixed rosters, overtime and 24/7 operations (EOWA 2005, p. 21).

The challenge highlighted in this article for ManuCo and other male-dominated manufacturing organisations is to find ways to begin to chip away at the ideal worker norm, an organisational norm that leads to poor outcomes not only for employee work–life balance but also for gender equity and organisational effectiveness. A focus on part-time work leads to questions about the quantum of hours worked and the way in which hours are scheduled, which in turn leads to re-thinking the design and organisation of work. As Bailyn says, ‘asking challenging questions of existing practices is critical if the organizational world is to allow people to attend productively not only to their employment but also to the rest of their lives ’(Bailyn 2006, p. 132).

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

We wish to thank the managers and employees of ManuCo without whose time and generosity this research could not have been undertaken. Responsibility for the information and arguments presented in this article remains our own.

REFERENCES


