

## FLEXIBLE WORK: BARRIER TO BENEFITS?

Melinda Laundon\* and Penny Williams

\*Corresponding Author

Email: melinda.laundon@qut.edu.au

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### ARTICLE INFORMATION

#### *Article History:*

Submitted: 30 November 2017

Revision: 10 January 2018

Acceptance: 3 April 2018

#### *Key words:*

Flexible work arrangements,  
employee benefits, flexibility

### ABSTRACT

The Australian financial services industry has been a leader in offering flexible work policies, positioning them as a solution to the tensions between women's dual work and family roles. While Australian legislation provides the right to request flexible work, this study uncovers how, in one finance organisation, flexible work is framed as an employee benefit within a suite of benefits. The study shows that employees using flexible work arrangements are less likely to understand and know how to access the full range of benefits, many of which have short- and long-term financial implications. This has consequences for the long-term financial security of women (as the heaviest users of flexible work arrangements) and for financial planners, both as employees of organisations in the Australian finance industry and as providers of advice to women working in this sector.

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## Introduction

The Australian finance industry has been one of the leaders in the development of flexible work policies, with over 73 per cent of finance companies having a written flexible work policy (WGEA, 2016b). Flexible work arrangements (FWAs) are frequently positioned as a solution to the tensions between an individual's dual work and non-work roles, and a tool for organisations to attract and retain a greater diversity of talented workers. While FWAs are now offered for reasons beyond caring responsibilities, FWAs were historically focused on family-friendly initiatives as a means of facilitating greater participation of women in the workforce (ABS, 2013b). Women, for a variety of reasons, remain the primary users of FWAs (ABS, 2011). Under the Fair Work Act 2009 (Cth) all Australian employees with caring responsibilities are entitled to request FWAs. Rather than an entitlement, however, FWAs are frequently positioned as an employee benefit offered by progressive employers. This study explores the association between FWA use and access to other employee benefits to determine if employees who use FWAs understand and can access the other employee benefits available to them.

Employee benefits, sometimes called fringe benefits, are defined as the non-wage components of remuneration (ABS, 2013a; Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2015). They are a significant component of compensation or 'total reward', representing an estimated 10–20 per cent of total compensation costs in Australia, the US and the UK (Shields and North-Samardzic, 2016; Dulebohn, *et al.*, 2009; Tremblay, Sire and Pelchat, 1998). As is the case in financial planning, the Australian context for benefits is quite different to other developed economies. Mandatory superannuation and good public health care mean that retirement plans and health insurance are not commonly part of the suite of benefits provided by Australian organisations. Rather, benefits may include special paid leave, health and wellbeing programs, career development such as training, and employee discounts. Employee benefits also differ between and within Australian industries, depending upon company and industry choice of 'best fit' or what may provide employers with a competitive advantage in attracting and retaining staff (Dulebohn, *et al.*, 2009). Common benefits in the Australian financial services industry include salary sacrificing, share equity plans, and discounts on proprietary financial products.

Benefits are distinct from employee entitlements. Benefits are framed as non-essential extras designed to attract, retain and reward staff (Shields and North-Samardzic, 2016), while entitlements are considered essential working conditions. The Fair Work Ombudsman defines employee entitlements as "rules about what employees get at work"—that is, working conditions protected by law or by formal agreements, such as the hours employees work, sick leave or the frequency and duration of breaks (Fair Work Ombudsman, n.d.). The Australian Fair Work Act 2009 provides all workers with caring responsibilities the entitlement to request FWAs; however, Australian organisations maintain the ability to refuse FWA requests on reasonable business grounds. Consequently, access to FWAs remains a negotiated employment arrangement, influenced by organisational policies, practices and culture (Williams, McDonald and Cathcart, 2017). The negotiated aspect of FWAs makes FWAs distinct from other human resource (HR)

policies that specify employee entitlements. This negotiated aspect also distinguishes FWAs from employee benefits, which are pre-defined and involve implied company discretion in altering the benefits offered to staff.

This study is conducted within a large Australian financial and insurance services organisation where flexible employment arrangements are presented as an employee benefit. The study draws on a survey of over 5,000 employees to explore whether utilising FWAs reduces employee understanding of, or ability to access, the other benefits available to them. Further, this paper canvasses the implications for the financial planning profession, both as employees of Australian financial sector organisations, and as advisors to employees in this sector.

## Literature Review

FWAs provide employees with negotiated variations to when, where and how much they work (Maxwell, *et al.*, 2007). These variations might be formalised in an employment agreement, as is the case with part-time work, or they might be informal adjustments to work arrangements negotiated between the employee and their supervisor on an *ad hoc* basis. FWAs frequently include arrangements such as teleworking/working from home; caring and support arrangements (personal/carer's leave or child care facilities); flexible working hours (time off in lieu, variable start and finish times); and reduced-load work agreements such as part-time or job share (McCarthy, Darcy and Grady, 2010; Yuile, Chang and Gudmundsson, 2012).

The Australian Bureau of Statistics (2011) identifies the availability of FWAs as a stimulus for labour participation rates and the provision of FWAs has subsequently been supported in Australia by industrial and legislative protections such as paid parental leave and the right to request FWAs (Fair Work Act 2009). Many aspects of flexible work are therefore employee entitlements provided by law. The variability inherent in flexible working means, however, that the implementation of many FWAs is tailored to organisational and individual needs, providing benefits to both (Timms, *et al.*, 2015). The understanding of FWAs as an employee entitlement or an employee benefit hence becomes obscured.

Australian organisations have subsequently developed FWA policies that outline the FWAs available to employees and provide guidance on the process for requesting and, for managers, approving or declining FWAs. The financial services industry was an early adopter of FWAs, and over 73 per cent of finance companies in Australia now have a written flexible work policy, compared to 52.3 per cent of all industries (WGEA, 2016b). This is not surprising given the demographic characteristics of the industry. Almost 56 per cent of the workforce in financial services is female (WGEA, 2016a). Women more frequently access FWAs despite FWAs being available regardless of gender (ABS, 2011).

The gendered use of FWAs has been widely researched. It has been demonstrated that an underlying assumption that FWAs are designed to support women, influences the low uptake of FWAs by men (McDonald, Pini and Bradley, 2007). For example, within the Australian finance industry, 89.5 per cent of part-time employees are women and 10.5 per cent are men (WGEA, 2016b). This gendered perception of policy use has been identified as one dimension of work-life

culture that influences employee access to FWAs and contributes to negative stigma associated with FWA use (McDonald, Brown and Bradley, 2005). Numerous studies have identified that both male and female employees believe that accessing FWAs will have negative career consequences, such as reduced opportunities for promotion or development (Eaton, 2003; McNamara, *et al.*, 2012), and there is some empirical evidence to support these perceptions. For example, in a study of Fortune 500 companies, Leslie, Manchester, Park and Mehng (2012) demonstrated that FWA use can result in reduced measures of career success (salary, job levels, recommendations for promotion). Similar results were found in a more recent study of a Dutch financial services firm (Noback, Broersma and Dijk, 2016). Such career penalties are also likely to have immediate and longer-term financial implications for FWA users.

Even though it is a leader in offering FWAs, the Australian financial services industry faces many gender equity challenges. Despite the predominantly female workforce, only 37 per cent of management and leadership positions in the financial services sector are held by women (ABS, 2017; WGEA, 2016a, 2016b). The sector also has the largest gender pay gap of any Australian industry, with the full-time average weekly earnings of female employees 32 per cent lower than that of male employees. This is significantly more than the Australian average gender pay gap of 14.6 per cent (WGEA, 2018). While some of the difference is due to occupational segregation, the gender pay gap cannot be fully explained by the fact that female workers are concentrated in lower-paid administrative and clerical positions (WGEA, 2016a). The long-term implications of pay differences become evident in women's financial security, particularly as they approach retirement age. Previous research has highlighted the role of gender in retirement adequacy (Basu and Drew, 2009; Neelakantan and Chang, 2010; Sunden and Surette, 1998).

Existing literature has not examined employees' understanding of the long-term financial implications of accessing particular benefits, yet benefits are a (non-wage) component of an employee's total remuneration package. The small existing benefits literature deals with benefits satisfaction, benefits type preference and communication preferences, finding that each vary according to employees' demographic characteristics (Dencker, Joshi and Martocchio, 2007; Lawton and Chernyshenko, 2008; Freitag and Picherit-Duthler, 2004; Shields, *et al.*, 2009). Many employee benefits provide a form of additional financial reward for employees. Some benefits, such as salary sacrificing or discounted products or financial services, allow employees to save money immediately, while others such as study assistance are likely to result in sustained longer-term salary increases, with consequent increases to superannuation. In contrast however, FWAs provide non-financial benefits for the individual employee, such as more control over their time and work locations, leading to a reduction in work-life conflict (Haley and Miller, 2015). Associated career and wage inhibiting effects mean that the long-term financial situation of employees is rarely improved by utilising FWAs (Draco and Green, 2004; Glass, 2004; Green and Leeves, 2013; Noback, Broersma and Dijk, 2016). Given the perceived stigma associated with FWA use, this study proposes that when FWAs are positioned as an employee benefit, employees utilising FWAs may be reluctant to access further benefits or may not be aware that other benefits remain available to them. Further, using FWAs that reduce time in the office may limit access to information about other benefits, compounding the financial downside of FWA use.

Focusing on the finance sector, this case study aims to uncover if FWA use influences an employee's knowledge of available benefits or understanding of how to access those benefits. The study answers the research question: is the utilisation of FWAs associated with lower understanding of employee benefits? The implications for all FWA users are discussed but given that women are the largest group of employees in this sector, and also the predominant users of FWAs, this study gives attention to the experiences of female finance workers. The following sections outline the method and approach taken to address the research question.

## Study Context

This study was carried out in a large Australian financial services company with more than 10,000 employees. Consistent with industry data, over half of their employees (56.7%) are female with 37 per cent of senior leadership roles held by women (WGEA, 2016a). A FWA policy has been in place within the organisation for over eight years, and according to an internal staff survey, over 84 per cent of employees feel they have some flexibility (formal or informal) in their job.

The finance sector, and this organisation within that sector, present an ideal case for exploring the implications of FWA use on benefits understanding for a number of reasons. Firstly, as well as being leaders in the development of FWA policy, Australian finance companies offer a wider range of flexible work options than other industries. For example, over 60 per cent of finance organisations offer job-sharing and telecommuting, compared to all industries where 42 per cent offer job share and 28 per cent telecommuting (WGEA, 2016b). The FWAs available to employees, coupled with the wide range of employee benefits offered within the sector, present an opportunity to explore the views of employees when they have access to a diversity of options. As a large employer of women, differences in the views of each gender and the implications of those differences can also be studied.

## Methods

This study utilises a case study approach. Theoretical sampling for single cases involves selecting cases that are exemplary or provide a unique opportunity to critically explore phenomena (Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007; Yin, 2013). The case organisation, hereafter referred to as Bank 1, commissioned a reward management consultancy to develop and conduct an all-staff survey on the suite of benefits offered by Bank 1. Within the survey FWAs were specifically included as part of the suite of benefits. This study analyses the responses to seven open-text questions and two interval scale survey questions, with respondent demographic data, to investigate if employees who perceive and use FWA as a benefit, understand and know how to access other employee benefits. Consideration is also given to the survey design and administration as it pertains to employee perceptions of what the case organisation offers as an available benefit.

The survey focused on issues of benefits satisfaction, benefits understanding, benefits value, flexible work arrangements, health and wellbeing, and financial services discounts for employees. The survey was conducted via an online survey platform and was open to all staff across Australia for a one-month period in mid-2015. Participation was voluntary and no personally identifying

information was collected. Participants were offered the opportunity to enter a draw for some retail and cinema vouchers. The survey was advertised via three all-staff emails, the company intranet and internal social media. The 36 survey questions included seven demographic questions, seven open-text questions, four nominal scale and 18 interval scale questions. Demographic data collected included age range, gender, working location (office-based or working from home), pay band, type of employment (full-time, part-time, casual, other) and business unit. Each question was voluntary; however, missing responses on demographic questions were minor (1%–2.4%). The data was subject to analytical and thematic research techniques to address the research question. While the primary method employed was qualitative (thematic analysis of open-text responses), data from the responses to two quantitative survey questions was statistically analysed to complement the insights gained through the qualitative analysis. In particular, independent samples t-tests were conducted to test for differences between (1) gender, (2) types of employment, and (3) working locations.

### Participants

The survey had a high response rate (39%, n=5,084). Survey respondents were representative of the organisation and the industry in terms of gender, with the 56.7 per cent female and 42.2 per cent male sample (no response n=59) being comparable to both the organisation (59% female) and the Australian financial services industry (almost 56% female). Survey participants were drawn from both metropolitan and regional locations across all Australian states and territories.

A summary of descriptive statistics is provided in Table 1. “Understand benefits” relates to the survey question: I understand the current benefits available to me and “Know how to access benefits” relates to the survey question: I know how to access my benefits. Both questions were measured on a scale from 0–100 reflecting participants’ self-assessment of their understanding and knowledge.

Gender, employment type and primary working location of survey participants are also included in Table 1. Within this study, employees who self-identified as part-time or casual, as working from home or working a combination of office and home (from home at least 1 day per week), were categorised as users of FWAs. The majority of survey respondents (84.4%) were full-time employees, while 14.6 per cent were part-time, casual or other (no response n=46). Participants identified their primary working location as: Office/Branch-based (65.3%), Working from home (7%), or Working from home at least one day per week (26.7%) (no response n=55).

**Table 1: Descriptive Statistics**

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage <sup>a</sup>	Mean	SD	Min	Max
Understand benefits	-	-	-	63.44	21.74	0	100
Know how to access benefits	-	-	-	66.64	23.53	0	100
Gender	Male	2143	42.2	-	-	-	-
	Female	2882	56.7	-	-	-	-
Type of Employment	Full- Time	4290	84.4	-	-	-	-
	Part- Time	662	13.0	-	-	-	-
	Casual	48	.9	-	-	-	-
	Other	38	.7	-	-	-	-
Work Location	Office/Branch	3320	65.3	-	-	-	-
	Home	354	7.0	-	-	-	-
	Combination	1355	26.7	-	-	-	-

Note: n=5084. <sup>a</sup>Discrepancy towards 100% due to cases with missing data.

The following section outlines the findings from a review of the approach to survey administration, thematic analysis of open-text survey responses, and analysis of relevant interval scale survey responses. The findings begin by examining employee perceptions and use of FWAs as a benefit compared to other employee benefits, then presenting the implications for benefits understanding.

## Findings

### FWAs are presented to staff as a benefit

FWAs available to employees were promoted in job advertisements and on the Bank 1 website, where employee benefits such as wellbeing programs, special paid leave for volunteering, and discounts on financial products are also marketed. Bank 1 further used the benefits survey to explicitly position FWAs as a benefit, listing it alongside other benefits such as health and wellbeing programs and career development initiatives. The academic and HR practitioner-focused literature describes the purpose of benefits surveys as measuring staff satisfaction with current benefits offerings, ascertaining those benefits most valued by staff and the specific dollar value they ascribe to benefits, and assessing the adequacy of internal benefits communications practices (Society for Human Resource Management, 2017; Armstrong, 2010). By including FWAs as a benefit in this survey, the organisation was both positioning and measuring perceptions of FWAs as a benefit. The survey data thus tells us about employee perceptions of FWAs as compared to other

employee benefits, rather than as an entitlement compared to other entitlements. The legitimacy of presenting FWAs as a benefit in the survey was questioned by only eight of the over 5,000 respondents, with statements such as:

I wasn't aware that working from home was a staff benefit. I understood it to be part of our working agreement. To me there is a difference. (Male, full-time, working from home>1day)

Flexible working is great but given it saves [Bank 1] \$\$\$ in real estate and other costs I think it shouldn't be defined as an employee benefit. (Male, full-time, office-based)

I don't see flexible working or career development as a staff benefit, they are hygiene [factors] .... (Female, full-time, office-based)

Notwithstanding the disputable inclusion of FWAs in the survey design, employees used the survey to voice the perceived value of FWAs as a benefit.

## Flexible Work as a Valued Benefit

Survey respondents were asked to list the employee benefit(s) they most valued. Previous research shows that determinants of benefits and employee reward preference include demographic characteristics such as gender (Lawton and Chernyshenko, 2008). The benefit most valued by women was FWAs, with 50 per cent of female respondents listing flexibility in their response. In contrast, the benefit most valued by men was financial product discounts; however, 48.5 per cent of men also listed flexibility as a highly valued benefit. Data on the types of FWAs most valued by employees was not gathered but the criticality of FWAs to employees was evident in the responses.

The high value afforded to flexibility was evident in the comments provided by employees who were users of formal FWAs such as weekly work from home and part-time work:

The flexible working arrangements that [Bank 1] offers me are invaluable. It makes a work/life (family with young kids) balance possible and I am very appreciative of that. (Female, part-time, working from home>1day)

[Most valuable benefit is] Flexible working arrangements – as time is more valuable than money. (Female, full-time, working from home>1day)

The most important benefit to me is ability to work from home. (Male, full-time, working from home>1day)

Full-time employees indicated that they used informal FWAs such as occasional teleworking or *ad hoc* adjustments to start and finish times. Full-time and office-based staff also placed a high value on flexible work as a benefit:

Flexible work is crucial for our busy lifestyles and a big benefit to working for [Bank 1]. (Female, full-time, office-based)

I find having the option of having flexible work arrangements is a real privilege and benefit of working for [Bank 1]. It makes working for the company a really attractive option, especially for working parents (such as in my circumstance) as it allows greater flexibility in meeting the demands of family life but in still being able to work your usual hours. (Female, full-time, office-based)

Flexible working arrangements is best benefit. (Male, full-time, office-based)

Qualitative responses also indicated that some employees did not access any other benefits, other than FWAs:

Flexible working arrangements mostly. I currently do not use any other benefits. (Female, working status not provided, office-based)

Flexible working arrangements. I've never found anything worthwhile in the rest. (Female, full-time, office-based)

Apart from flexible working arrangements, I very rarely use any other benefits simply because I don't spend the time going through the portal to see what is on offer. (Male, full-time, working from home>1day)

While respondents valued FWAs, this was not the only reason that some employees did not access other benefits. Employees (notably only female employees) described how they were unable to access other benefits that were inconsistent with FWA use:

The benefit that means the most to me is career progression, however over the last few years I have noticed less and less opportunities ... this means that I have to consider relocating to continue my career...and is at odds with our flexible way of working, working from home, working from different countries. (Female, full-time, working from home>1day)

I have had a lot of questions about employees who can't access benefits while being on leave i.e. parental leave. (Female, full-time, office-based)

The employee benefits days that they have usually fall on the days that I work from home (Female, full-time, working from home>1day)

The responses indicate that employees, and particularly women, in Bank 1 do perceive FWAs as a benefit, and value flexibility more than other benefits that could potentially improve their career prospects (career development), disposable income (product discounts, bonuses), or financial security (share plans or salary sacrificing). Responses further suggest, however, that FWA use, at times, impinges upon the ability to access other benefits. This finding was explored further in relation to employees' understanding of benefits and knowledge of benefits access.

## Understanding of Benefits is Limited

The survey results pertaining to benefits understanding reveal significant differences in benefits knowledge based on gender, employment type, and working location. Responses to two survey questions: I understand the current benefits available to me; and I know how to access my benefits

(0 (disagree) – 100 (agree)); show that females and FWA users had less understanding of the suite of benefits and less knowledge of how to use them. Table 2 provides the results of independent samples t-tests that demonstrate significant differences in benefits understanding and knowledge of how to access benefits between gender and FWA users and non-users.

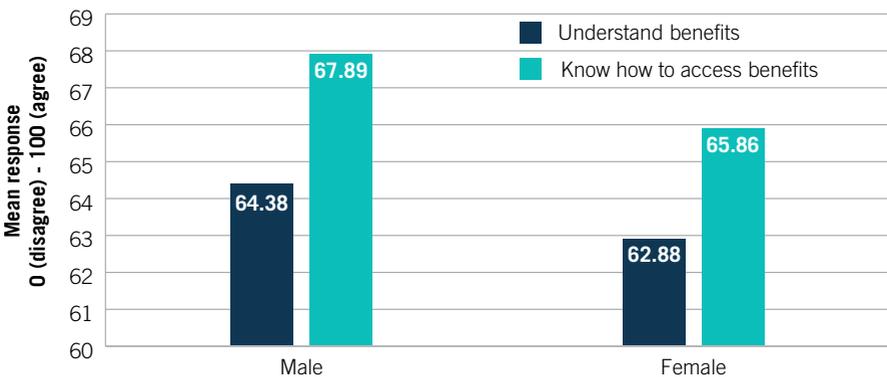
**Table 2: Independent samples t-tests**

	Male		Female		t-test	Full-time		Part-time		t-test	Office / branch		Home		t-test
	M	SD	M	SD		M	SD	M	SD		M	SD	M	SD	
Understand benefits	64.38	21.26	62.88	21.99	2.45*	64.34	21.45	59.20	22.48	5.51***	63.84	22.14	60.77	21.90	2.49*
Know how to access benefits	67.89	22.80	65.86	23.97	3.06**	67.83	23.16	60.70	24.41	7.04***	67.31	23.90	61.81	23.68	4.12***

\*\*\* $p < .001$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \* $p < .05$  M = Mean. SD = Standard Deviation.

Figure 1 below illustrates the significant differences in understanding benefits and knowing how to access benefits between the two groups of male and female employees. Male employees demonstrate higher levels of understanding benefits (M=64.38, SD=21.26) compared to female employees (M=62.88, SD=21.99),  $t(4,697)=2.45$ ,  $p=0.014$ . This was also the case when knowledge of access to benefits was compared between males (M=67.89, SD=22.80) and females (M=65.86, SD=23.97);  $t(4,733)=3.06$ ,  $p=0.002$ . Women in Bank 1 were less likely than their male counterparts to understand the benefits available to them or have knowledge of how to access those benefits.

**Figure 1: Benefits understanding by gender**



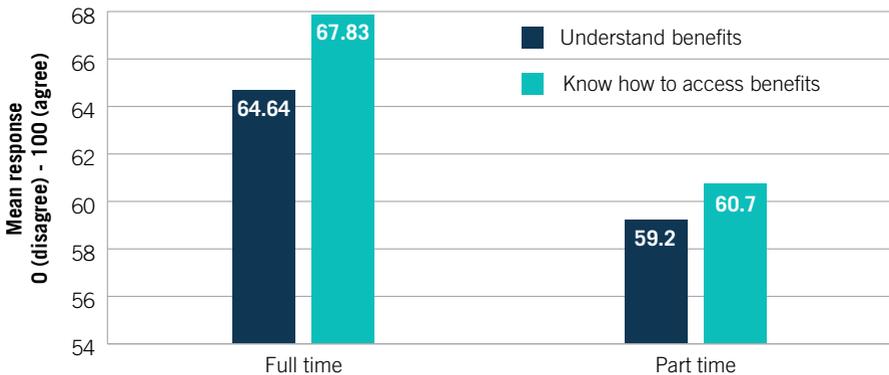
Female employees also commented more frequently on their lack of knowledge about benefits:

I find it hard to understand how to access some of the benefits (Female, full-time, working from home)

You hear about benefits, but don't know how to access them (Female, part-time, office-based)

When viewed by employment type, individuals working part-time show lower levels of understanding and knowing how to access the full suite of benefits than full-time employees (see Figure 2). Full-time employees demonstrate a better understanding of benefits ( $M=64.34$ ,  $SD=21.45$ ) compared to part-time employees ( $M=59.20$ ,  $SD=22.48$ );  $t(857)=5.51$ ,  $p=.000$  (Table 2).

**Figure 2: Benefits understanding by employment type**



Similarly (see Figure 3 and Table 2), the survey results pertaining to employee understanding of benefits reveal that benefits understanding is significantly lower for those working from home ( $M =60.77$ ,  $SD=21.90$ ) than for office-based employees ( $M=63.84$ ,  $SD=22.14$ );  $t(3,672) = 2.49$ ,  $p=0.013$ . The difficulties of understanding benefits as a remote worker were acknowledged in free-text comments:

Benefits are very confusing, especially when I do not have the time to fully look into any of them. (Male, full-time, working from home>1day)

I find it requires an investment in time to understand and if you don't have your own device that is easily connected to the intranet, it means you have to take time in the office to look for benefits and manage purchases. It benefits those who have easier access to the website and/or those who spend their time in the office purchasing items. I rarely use time in the office doing things other than work. (Male, full-time, office-based)

Figure 3: Benefits understanding by working location

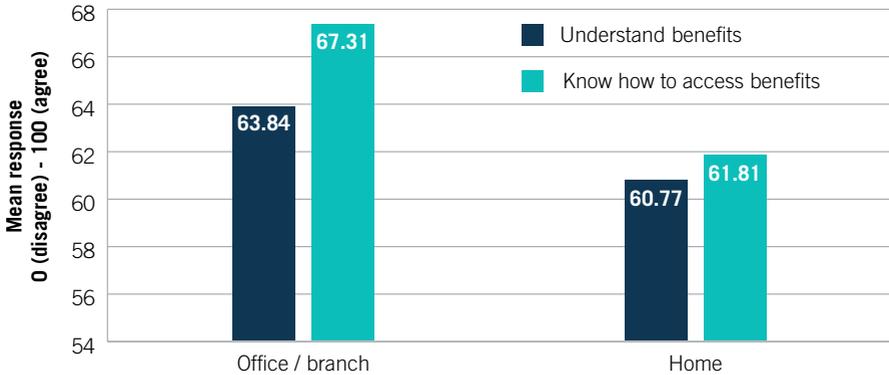


Figure 3 and Table 2 also show that employees working from home had significantly less knowledge about how to access benefits ( $M=61.81$ ,  $SD=23.68$ ) than office-based employees ( $M=67.31$ ,  $SD=23.90$ ),  $t(3,672)=4.12$ ,  $p=0.000$ . Difficulties in accessing information relating to benefits appeared to contribute to employees' limited understanding of the benefits available to them:

I didn't know about the employee benefits for nearly 2 years after joining the company. Even now, I am slowly learning while talking to co-workers. Something should be done to create employee awareness. (Male, full-time, office-based)

Comments regarding access to information about the full suite of benefits were most noticeable among employees utilising FWAs such as part-time workers or those who work from home, with women expressing the majority of concerns regarding access to benefits information:

The benefits could be better advertised. Hardly anyone in our team have used them. Poor take-up is attributed to low awareness of what is available to us. (Male, full-time, working from home>1day)

There needs to be more communication around benefits available to employees especially for parents and employees going on maternity leave. (Female, part-time, office-based)

I know there are benefits available to me, but accessing them or information about them is difficult (Female, full-time, working from home)

[I use] Flexible working hours. I didn't know of any career development benefits on offer. (Female, full-time, office-based)

Interestingly, a number of respondents noted that the greatest deficit in benefits understanding was in relation to the financial benefits offered by Bank 1, whereas relatively inconsequential benefits such as small discounts at retailers were well known and well understood:

Discounts on food shopping, fashion and homewares – amazing. (Male, full-time, office-based)

Financial benefits from [Bank 1] products is where I have the greatest lack of clarity. (Male, full-time, working from home>1day)

Salary sacrificing could be explained better. (Female, full-time, working from home>1day)

If I spent hours trolling through the material online I might be able to figure it out—but some one-on-one time with an expert to provide ideas and answer questions would be great. (Male, full-time, office-based)

It would be good to cover some fundamentals—like, 'what can be salary sacrificed by employees?' (Female, part-time, office-based)

## Discussion

Drawing on data from an employee benefits survey conducted in a large Australian financial services company, this study set out to understand if using FWAs influenced employee understanding of available benefits. The findings have implications for financial planners, both as employees of Australian financial sector organisations, and as advisors to employees in this sector.

Even though the right to request FWAs is an entitlement provided by the Fair Work Act 2009, in Bank 1 FWAs are communicated as an employee benefit and positioned as part of the total reward, remuneration and benefits package, yet FWAs are distinct from the other benefits that provide some form of financial gain for employees. In Bank 1, female employees perceive FWAs as the most highly valued benefit and indicated that they access FWAs more than other employee benefits. The identified lack of understanding in relation to the financial benefits being offered by Bank 1, and limited knowledge of the full suite of benefits available to them, may reinforce the perceived value of FWAs over other benefits. The findings further identify that those employees accessing FWAs are also least likely to understand what other benefits might be available or how to access those benefits.

Viewed collectively, the study's findings suggest that where FWAs are valued as a benefit, users of FWAs are less likely to understand benefits options, or have knowledge of how to access other benefits (available alongside FWAs) that may improve their financial situation. This situation is further exacerbated for women who are the primary users of FWAs and are least likely to understand available benefits or have knowledge of how to access them. FWA use appears to limit access to information required to make informed benefits decisions. FWAs that reduce time in the office may also reduce an employee's availability for training or information sessions on employee

benefits or may simply restrict access to benefits information provided formally and informally to office-based staff. An alternative explanation—in the context of Bank 1—is that employees who perceive they are accessing FWAs as a benefit do not then seek out information on other benefits or believe they can access other benefits. Further research in other organisational contexts is needed to fully understand the factors that contribute to this apparent relationship between FWA use and access to benefits information.

The FWA literature links FWA access to reductions in hours and career opportunities, lower pay and lower superannuation (see for example, Crowley and Kolenikov, 2014). This study explains how in one organisation where FWAs are framed as an employee benefit, they are also largely perceived by employees as a benefit that is highly valued. Employees who use FWAs as a benefit then tend to have less understanding and knowledge of how to access other benefits available to them. Within the legislative framework and within organisational policy however, FWAs are not provided *in lieu* of other benefits. Rather, employees need to be aware that their use of FWAs should not preclude them from accessing other benefits with greater financial reward, such as salary sacrifice, product discounts or career development opportunities. When providing advice, financial planners have an opportunity to prompt individuals to investigate and use the full range of benefits available to them, regardless of their work arrangements.

Additionally, the finding that female employees and all FWA users are less likely to understand and know how to access benefits has implications for financial literacy. The financial literacy literature indicates that women have far lower financial literacy than men (Lusardi, Mitchell and Curto, 2014; Hung, Parker and Yoong, 2009). Further research is needed to explore whether FWA users are less financially literate than employees who do not use FWAs. For the financial planning industry these findings do, however, suggest the need for greater education on the financial implications of benefits decisions for employees who use FWAs.

### Limitations and Future Research

While survey methodology is a popular and appropriate method for collecting data on employee opinions (Church, 2001)—in this case in relation to employee benefits—this study drew data from an organisational survey developed by a third party and administered by the case organisation. While the survey provides a rich data set to inform this study, the analysis was limited by survey questions designed for an alternate purpose, and potential resultant response effects (Yang and Hinkle, 2012). By applying a qualitative approach to analysis of the free-text responses, however, this study was able to inductively use the data to provide insight into the research question. The industry context, large sample size, gender and geographic diversity of the sample in this study, also provided a unique opportunity to explore in depth how FWA use may influence benefits understanding. Future research that considers how FWAs are positioned and perceived within other finance organisations and other industries would shed light on the relative influence of industry or organisational context on this study's findings. Further research in contexts where FWAs are not framed as part of the benefits package is also required to extrapolate when FWA use influences benefits understanding. The link between understanding of employee benefits and financial literacy also warrants further investigation.

## Conclusion

The Future of Financial Advice (FoFA) Bill 2016 provided a clear indication that regulators of financial planners are seeking to raise the standard of financial advice provided to Australians. As an aim of the financial advice profession is to assist people to manage their finances effectively in order to achieve financial wellbeing (Johnson, Brimble and Zanetti, 2016, p.107), it is important that financial planning professionals understand and communicate the implications of employees perceiving flexible work as a benefit. While further research is needed, there is potential that employees—particularly women as the heaviest users of flexibility—may be forgoing other benefits because of their lack of understanding of the benefits available to them and how to access them. Since benefits have important long-term financial implications in terms of career development and consequent pay and superannuation increases, financial planners are well positioned to advise their clients to become educated about how they can maximise benefit use, and to inform clients using FWAs that they do not need to forgo access to other benefits simply because they have accessed flexibility.

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