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The conundrum of workplace flexibility

The Conundrum of Workplace Flexibility: Why do leaders advocate flexible work and then scorn those who use it?

Although flexible work options have been introduced by most large companies, actual uptake has been very limited and mostly to junior roles. Having policies in place is not the same as embracing and deploying a flexibility strategy as a competitive advantage in a globalised economy.

This White Paper exposes evidence that Unconscious Bias negatively impacts on the careers of those who work flexibly. The nature of this Unconscious Bias is explored, providing insight as to why we often see work cultures where flexible work is actively avoided by both male and female employees who are ambitious, and why making the shift from flexibility as an employee perk towards flexibility as smart business strategy is currently impeded.

Unconscious Bias negatively impacts on the careers of those who work flexibly.

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Executive summary

Flexible work persists in the headlines, with the right to request Flexible Work being enacted in law by many countries and implemented by most large organisations. It continues to be listed as a highly desired workplace 'benefit', especially by today's workforce, however uptake remains low. Why? This White Paper explores the evidence that deep-seated unconscious biases, harboured by leadership, act as a major barrier to the uptake of flexible working.

Analysing data collected across the globe through the participation of 473 senior executives in Symmetra's Unconscious Bias programs 2012-2013, spanning 13 corporates in a broad range of industries, the results reveal a clear negative sway against those working flexibly.

The assessment tool incorporated into Symmetra's Unconscious Bias program is designed to measure both conscious and unconscious associations. With regard to flexible working it measured how full-time compared to flexible workers were assessed by leaders with respect to 14 leadership competencies considered indicative of leadership potential by all participating corporates. Ten of the fourteen competencies were considerably more strongly associated with full-timers than flexible workers.

This implicit segmentation has material consequences in the workplace, leading to unfavourable treatment of flexible workers with respect to pay, allocation of assignments, promotion, sponsorship, mentoring and other opportunities.

In this White Paper, Symmetra contrasts the leaders' deep-seated associations against empirical data and finds that there is little or no objective evidence to support these negative imputations against flexible workers. These biases are a cognitive construct acting as a lens which distorts the characteristics and potentialities of flexible workers. We have presented these biases as myths.

The three leadership competencies where the degree of bias is most pronounced are:

Myth 1: That full-time workers are materially more assertive and self-promoting than flexible workers

This myth has its origins in the unspoken premise that flexible workers are mainly female. The corollary is that assertiveness is in essence a masculine attribute and prescriptively females should exhibit 'female' behaviour. This places females in the classic "double bind". If they are highly assertive they are perceived to be bossy and aggressive and if they are too retiring they are seen to be not worthy of promotion.

While many businesses acknowledge the demand for flexible options, there is an unspoken reproach from peers and managers when workers ask to switch from full-time to flexible work.

Myth 2: That flexible workers are considerably less ambitious than full-timers

This is an unwarranted belief. Many C-suite and self-employed business people choose their work hours and are highly driven and ambitious. There is no objective basis for concluding that an employee working flexibly who is fulfilled and satisfied with the number of work hours is of necessity less ambitious than a full-time worker.

Myth 3: That flexible workers are less committed than full-timers to developing others

This misconception finds its roots in the belief that flexible workers are generally less committed to their organisation than full-time workers. In fact, a large body of research shows that flexible workers are more motivated, engaged and committed and are just as prepared to mentor or assist colleagues and co-workers as their full-time counterparts.

The common thread running through all these biases against flexible workers, and the many others identified in Symmetra's research, is gender stereotyping – well recognised in research papers where it has acquired the sobriquet of the 'flexibility stigma'. This stigma sees any departure from the traditional full-time work model as a feminisation of the worker role and employees. That is, whether male or female, those who access flexible working are seen to be exercising an option which is really only appropriate for the least ambitious female workers.

The challenge is that bias emanating from the unspoken, and often unconscious, associations of leaders becomes embedded in the fundamental cultural assumptions of organisations translating into systemic disadvantage. Consequently many men and women who may desire flexible working are reluctant to request it formally because of the 'bad signal' that this sends to leaders and co-workers and the penalties that result. The upshot is that while many businesses acknowledge the demand for flexible work, commend it as performing a valuable function and install policies which ostensibly encourage its uptake, there is an unspoken reproach from peers and managers when workers ask to switch from full-time to flexible work or attempt to gain entry to an organisation on a flexible work basis.

The White Paper's conclusion is that flexible working is becoming a permanent feature of workplaces in advanced economies but businesses are failing to leverage the talents and skills of flexible workers to the best advantage.

What is required is a culture change driven by leaders who show readiness to subject their deep-seated attitudes and decisions to greater scrutiny, individually and collectively. This will embed a meritocratic culture where full-time and flexible work are equally valued, where employees working flexibly can have a clear career path and flexible working can be leveraged as smart business strategy, not relegated to an inconvenient employee perk.

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Introduction

There is a significant discrepancy between the desire for flexible work and the actual uptake of these opportunities, even when readily available.

One of the persistent themes on the topic of flexible working when analysing academic publications and employee surveys is the significant discrepancy between the desire for flexible work and the actual uptake of these opportunities, even when they are readily available[1].

In virtually all industrialised countries, most large employers, both public and private, during the last decade have made flexible working available, usually supported by formalised policies. At the same time, significant proportions of employees, male and female, have stated in employee surveys that the ability to work flexibly is one of the most important non-pecuniary incentives they seek at work.

Conventional economic theory posits that when both demand and supply are high, an equilibrium level should be reached when usage itself reaches a high level. But perplexingly, the extent to which employees exercise the right to use flexible work opportunities has remained relatively low for decades. It makes little difference if organisations have introduced flexible work policies simply to maintain social and political correctness or whether they have implemented and promoted sustained programs to advance flexible working[2]. The uptake does not match expected demand.

In this paper we examine the role that bias, and particularly unconscious bias, plays in creating barriers to the uptake of flexible working.

We will address…

- Evidence of the existence of bias pertaining to flexible work

- The nature of this bias

- How bias operates systemically within an organisation

- The effect of bias on the organisation as well as employees

1. Evidence of bias towards flexible work

To explore this issue we analysed the data and results from Symmetra's Unconscious Bias programs 2012–2013, conducted with senior executives across Australia, New Zealand, USA and Hong Kong.
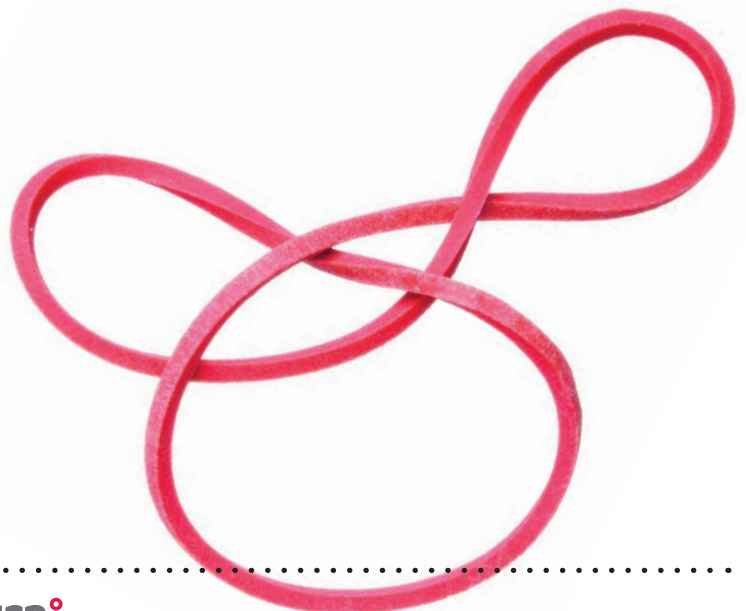
The industries covered include banking, financial services, insurance, legal services, professional services, engineering, resources, recruitment, construction, research and manufacturing. The assessment tool incorporated into these programs is designed to measure both conscious and unconscious associations between diverse groups of people and particular behaviours, traits and competencies – revealing deep-seated cognitive schema with respect to people working full-time versus those working flexibly.

We assessed whether leaders in this sample associated behaviours defined as core competencies for leadership in their organisation more strongly with full-time workers or those who work flexibly. In most cases there was a clear indication of an unconscious bias operating against flexible workers.
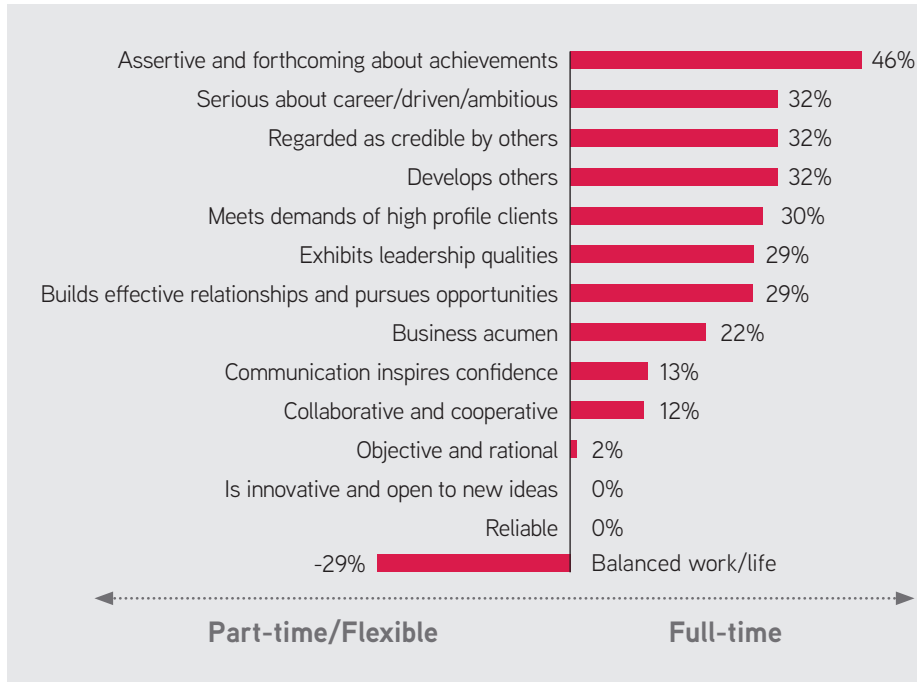
The composite results indicate that 11 out of 13 corporates across the globe, even those corporates which have cutting-edge flexible work-option policies in place, demonstrate an overwhelmingly unfavourable disposition towards those who work flexibly.

Cumulative data from all individual assessments have been collated to produce a collective pattern of associations which may be operating in an organisation, reflecting the strength of the potential bias of the leaders as a group.

Analysis of the data from the 11 organisations, including 473 executives, indicated a negative skew towards those who work flexibly. The patterns of association of the relevant behaviours with flexible work are reflected in the graph on the following page.

11 out of 13 corporates across the globe demonstrate an overwhelmingly unfavourable disposition towards those who work flexibly.

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Chart 1:
Net Sway against flex

Behaviour	Net Sway
Assertive and forthcoming about achievements	46%
Serious about career/driven/ambitious	32%
Regarded as credible by others	32%
Develops others	32%
Meets demands of high profile clients	30%
Exhibits leadership qualities	29%
Builds effective relationships and pursues opportunities	29%
Business acumen	22%
Communication inspires confidence	13%
Collaborative and cooperative	12%
Objective and rational	2%
Is innovative and open to new ideas	0%
Reliable	0%
Balanced work/life	-29%

Part-time/Flexible ←————————→ **Full-time**

Executive leaders assessed perceive that employees working flexibly are much less ambitious or serious about their careers.

It is clear that most of the 473 executive leaders assessed perceive, at least at an unconscious level, that employees working flexibly are much less assertive and forthcoming about their achievements, as well as less ambitious or serious about their careers than full-time workers. Flexible workers are also perceived to be less committed to developing others, to be less credible, to be unable to meet the demands of high profile clients, to show markedly fewer leadership qualities, to be less able to build effective relationships and considered to have lower business acumen compared to those who work full-time.

Interpreting the graph

In order to summarise the results of the assessments, we defined a variable called "Net Sway".

Sway is a measure of how common a particular association is in a group of people being assessed (most commonly an executive team). For example, if most people in the group tend to rate full-time workers higher on ambition than they do Flexible workers, then the group has demonstrated a sway in favour of full-time workers.

In any one group, the sway may go in both directions: for example some in the group will associate "collaborative and cooperative" behaviour more strongly with full-time workers and others may associate it with flexible workers. These are offset against each other to get Net Sway.

A qualitative analysis was done to identify common or highly similar behaviours/competencies used across all organisations – the Net Sway across all organisations was averaged for each common behaviour to reach the final numbers shown in the chart.

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On 10 out of 14 behaviours measured the leaders' implicit attitudes show positive skewing toward those working full-time.

Results

On 10 out of 14 behaviours measured (and most of these were all mapped against competencies required for leadership by the participating corporates) the leaders' implicit attitudes show positive skewing toward those working full-time. There is only one attribute where flexible workers were more favourably ranked than full-timers – and that is that they were perceived to achieve considerably better work-life balance. This is a real anomaly considering the plethora of research which shows that most people who access flexible work in order to achieve better work-life balance fail to achieve it due to poor job redesign by well-intentioned but unskilled leaders who have had little training on how to implement a flexible work option effectively[2].

Given these findings, we undertake on the following pages a detailed consideration of the salient attitudes of the executives who completed the assessment.

The following review considers whether or not the attitudes of the executives found in the Symmetra sample accord with empirical data extracted from a broad range of reputable sources across the globe.

2.

Myths and facts concerning flexible workers

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① Myth: Full-time workers are significantly more assertive and self-promoting than flexible workers

Remarkably, in the composite data collected by Symmetra, the leaders surveyed associated descriptions of assertiveness and being forthcoming about one's own achievement most strongly with full-time workers. There appears to be no scientific data to support the proposition that assertiveness and pronouncing one's achievements are features peculiar to full-time workers.

Since assertiveness and self-promotion are fundamentally personal traits rather than workplace behaviours, there is no obvious reason why they should be found more in a full-time cohort as opposed to a flexible-working cohort.

Assertiveness is having or showing a confident and forceful personality.

Self-promotion, includes "pointing with pride to one's accomplishments, speaking directly about one's strengths and talents and making internal rather than external attributions for achievements".[3 (pg 2)]

> **The notion that flexible workers are much less assertive and self-promoting than full-time workers, in all likelihood has its genesis in an unconscious gender bias.**

The notion that flexible workers are much less assertive and self-promoting than full-time workers, in all likelihood has its genesis in an unconscious gender bias. It reflects the implicit assumption that flexible workers are predominantly female and exhibit female characteristics whereas full-time workers, in contrast, are predominantly male and exhibit masculine characteristics.

Thus, not only did the leaders display an unwarranted bias suggesting a clear distinction between full-time employees and flexible workers in possessing the attributes of assertiveness and self-promotion, which itself was not justified but, underlying this bias, there was a further implicit link to the gender of these separate groups.

This point has been aptly summarised by **Sheryl Sandberg** in her book "Lean In",[4 (pg 44)] when she writes:

> "Men can comfortably claim credit for what they do as long as they don't veer into arrogance. For women, taking credit comes at a real social and professional cost. In fact, a woman who explains why she is qualified or mentions previous successes in a job interview can lower her chances of getting hired."

Against this backdrop, female employees and particularly flexible workers who are characterised as mostly female, are seen to be guilty of stereotype violation if they self-promote in a blatant fashion whereas for full-time male employees, this behaviour is actually expected[5].

This places ambitious female employees in the notorious 'double-bind' where if they maintain a degree of modesty about their achievements they are perceived to be too self-effacing and not worthy of promotion, but if they imitate male forthrightness they are seen to be unduly aggressive[6].

It is apparent that flexible workers as a group are viewed by leaders through a particular lens. This lens determines that they fit the feminine rather than the masculine profile – whether they are in fact men or women. Secondly, they are assumed to lack the positive attributes of assertiveness and self-promotion which inevitably consigns them to the margins. In the unconscious perceptions of these leaders they are understood to have subordinated their principal role of employee to other extraneous demands.

In this way leaders view these flexible workers as being out of the mainstream and of lesser importance to the business than full-time workers.

Flexible workers, as a group, are viewed by leaders through a particular lens which determines that they fit the feminine rather than the masculine profile – whether they are in fact men or women.

② **Myth:** Flexible workers are less ambitious

Ambition is considered to be the persistent, general striving for success, attainment and accomplishment. Career aspiration by contrast is a goal orientated variable, involving specific plans or targets for career success[7].

There is no rational basis for the proposition that ambition equates to the number of hours worked or the location where the work occurs. Many extremely ambitious men and women operate as independent consultants or are self-employed in order to enjoy the benefits of career advancement and accumulation of capital whilst having control over their own working lives. Numerous studies affirm that there is no reason to believe employees in an organisation who seek flexible work have different aspirations than those who work traditionally accepted hours.

Unjustified cultural assumptions in many organisations branding those working flexibly as having low ambition are likely to create tensions with a younger, more mobile generation entering the workforce. This generation thinks of technology as an extension of themselves, views distance communication as perfectly natural and sees no conflict between ambition and dividing their hours between work and other activities. In fact, fewer than half of Gen Y workers expect to be working standard office hours[8].

A number of studies have debunked the misconception that employees who work flexibly lose their ambition or aspire only to more junior positions. Most noteworthy is recent research by Catalyst which has shown that flexible workers aspire to the most senior and even CEO positions. In fact, they are more likely to do so if their organisation offers flexibility[9]. However many employees in these flexible-work situations (most likely women) feel they are not adequately challenged or supported to pursue their ambitions[10]. Equally, a significant number of these part-time employees report high levels of job satisfaction and a low desire to change their hours to full-time, which may be misinterpreted by some as less ambition[11].

> A number of studies have debunked the misconception that employees who work flexibly lose their ambition or aspire only to more junior positions.

There is no basis for concluding that an employee working flexibly who is satisfied with the number of hours worked and who feels a degree of fulfilment with a job well done, lacks ambition to move up the corporate ladder.

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Despite these perceptions that flexible workers are not ambitious, recent research in the UK revealed that 77 percent of chief executives and 54 percent of senior managers (who by common consensus are mostly ambitious) do not maintain standard 9-5 work schedules. Typically, this is done informally and not by engaging with a workplace flexibility policy[12].

This highlights the paradox, consistent with Symmetra's experience across the globe, that significant numbers of executives work flexibly in an informal way by exercising choice through their status to influence where, when and how they arrange their work. Though this, by definition, is what constitutes flexible working, the association between flexibility and part-time work means that this informal flexibility is often not called by this name.

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…objective data shows that flexible workers are more committed to their organisation than non-flexible workers.

3 **Myth:** Flexible workers do not help in developing others

This myth is fundamentally linked with the erroneous belief that flexible workers are less committed to their organisations and as a consequence are less inclined to devote time to others employed in the organisation. It also rests on the out-dated notion that mentoring can only be effective when the parties are physically at the same place.

In fact, objective data shows that flexible workers are more committed to their organisation than non-flexible workers. The grant of flexible work is usually seen as an acknowledgment of the responsibility of the employee and the trust demonstrated by the employer. It is a commitment by the employer to accommodating the needs of the employee which typically merits a reciprocal commitment from the employee[13].

There is no evidence that flexible workers are any less prepared than full-time employees to mentor or assist co-employees.

Mentoring can be arranged at times when the flexibly working mentor and the mentee are at the same location. Otherwise the mentoring can take place at a distance or in a virtual mode.

Long distance mentoring is in any event a well-recognised phenomenon when the mentor and mentee are resident in different locations. It can be as effective, and sometimes more effective, than face-to-face mentoring[14].

4 **Myth:** Clients react negatively if they are required to deal with employees who work flexibly

This myth incorporates the rather unlikely assumption that customers and clients will continue to behave in the same way and hold the same expectations as they did in the past – even though everything in business around them is changing.

Customers are being educated by e-commerce leaders to expect an ultra-convenient experience, personalised in real time. In addition, wider use of low-cost technology means that more customers can be reached in environments beyond the traditional workplace. Globalisation has made it inevitable that businesses and customers increasingly interact at a distance and at mutually convenient times, and clients themselves are becoming acclimatised to the global internet-based economy.

Face-to-face interaction with employees is becoming less important and clients will demand less of it in the future. Recent research reflects this shift in customer expectations. In a survey in the UK with customers buying consultancy services, 65 percent of respondents rated experiences with flexible workers as positive[15].

In a further UK study, two thirds of managers expressed that flexible working allowed better matching of the workforce with organisational needs and helped provide a much needed 24 hour service[12].

Face-to-face interaction with employees is becoming less important and clients will demand less of it in the future.

Clients are more likely to be impressed by the efficiency of service and the effectiveness of outcomes rather than the fact that their contact person is available five days a week.

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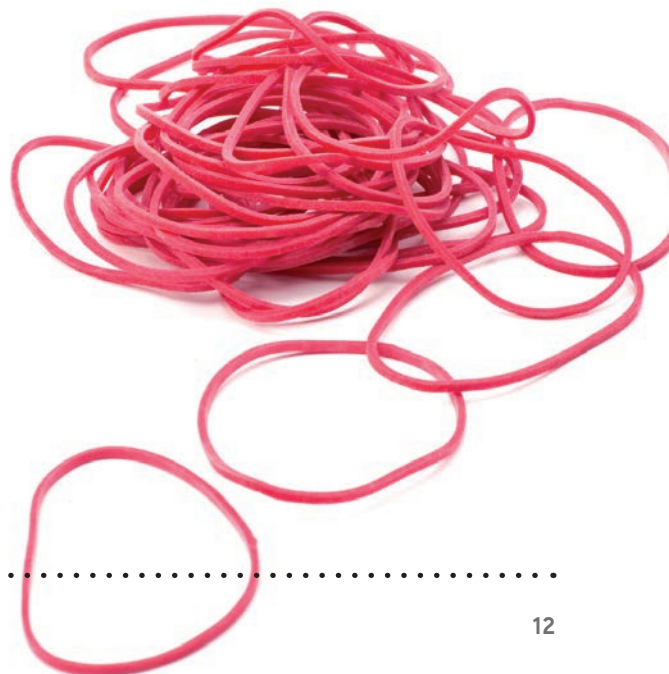
5 **Myth:** A commitment to full-time work is a strong indication of leadership qualities

In large corporations across the globe, one of the common practices observed is that leaders are sourced almost exclusively from the ranks of full-time workers who have had uninterrupted careers. In many instances, leaders judge commitment by the extent to which an employee is prepared to devote time to the organisation and to move through a linear career path. Commitment, however, should be assessed by the extent to which an employee ensures that he or she enables the organisation to meet its obligations in a timely, efficient and excellent manner, irrespective of their flexibility status.

There is no logical reason why one cannot exercise the skills of leadership while working in a flexible role.

Indeed, to the extent that commitment to the organisation is perceived to be an essential component of leadership potential, an important UK study has found that flexible workers are more committed to the organisation than non-flexible workers[13].

Consistent with this, a UK survey across all industries shows that as many as 79 percent of managers were working flexibly with 89 percent indicating they had done so for the past 4 years[12].This demonstrates emphatically that actual leadership roles operate quite compatibly with what is in effect a program of working flexibly.

Since men occupy by far the greater proportion of senior management and executive positions in almost all industrialised countries, it is men who predominantly have the access to flexible work on an informal basis. If we define flexible working as the ability to exercise at least a degree of control and autonomy as to when, how and where one carries out one's work, then executives who work from home or at other locations, even if they work much longer hours, are indeed working flexibly. Typically, the term "flexible working" is not used to describe these kinds of arrangements, because they are seen simply as the exercise of a prerogative attached to senior status and a corollary of leadership.

When however, women, who typically have lower status in the organisation, seek a formal flexible working arrangement the bias is triggered and they are perceived as lacking leadership qualities. Thus, it is the association of the employee with a formalised flexible work arrangement which stigmatises that employee as lacking leadership qualities.

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One of the most assiduous consequences of value attribution bias is that employees working flexibly are simply not expected to be high performers.

❻ Myth: Flexible workers are less credible

This myth is a classic example of the irrational process of 'value attribution'. This is the common human tendency to imbue someone or something with a specific value based on subjective perception rather than on objective data. The consequence of attributing a value, based on deep-seated beliefs, has a profound effect on how one interacts with and perceives the individual who is the object of the value attribution[16].

Because as a rule, leaders view flexible workers as being less than ideal employees in contrast to full-time workers, as confirmed by Symmetra's research reported in this paper, this 'value attribution' inevitably governs their behaviour towards employees working flexibly. Such implicit segmentation has material consequences in the workplace and the results are that flexible workers are unfavourably treated as regards pay, assignments, promotions, leave, mentoring and a host of other potential opportunities[17].

One of the most insidious consequences of the 'value attribution bias' is that employees working flexibly are simply not expected to be high-performers. Therefore, the normal performance distribution that would be expected for any group of employees actually becomes distorted. Although almost certainly there must be high performers amongst flexible workers, they are often missed[18].

In addition, because flexible workers are not viewed with the equivalent degree of 'seriousness' as full-time workers, little time or attention is paid to investing in them, training them or equipping their managers with the skills to implement flexible working effectively. Consistent with this, in a recent global survey, 88 percent of employees report that they received no training as to how to embark on a program of flexible working and 83 percent of managers received no training on the implementation of flexible working programs[19].

83 percent of managers received no training on the implementation of flexible working programs.

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Recognising and reversing the effect of this harmful bias and the cultural barriers which act as a deterrent to seeking flexible work could have highly beneficial consequences for both the employer and the employee.

A recently published longitudinal study conducted in Canada with over 6,500 women and over 8,300 men who had adopted various forms of flexible work found that while there was undoubtedly stigmatisation in the short term of employees who sought flexible working, the adverse attitude of employers changed over time. Over the longer term, employers recognised that those who had overcome the barriers and actually undertaken a form of flexible work were shown to be more productive and more committed to their organisations than full-time workers. This made them better prospects for promotion in the long term[20].

As the authors of the study noted:

> Using work–life interface benefits is not a career-limiting move. In fact work-life interface benefits replenish employee resources in the form of time, energy and motivation and users of these benefits receive more promotions than their non-using counterparts.

7 **Myth:** Other myths

- Flexible workers are less effective in building relationships and pursuing business opportunities
- Lack business acumen
- Are less collaborative and cooperative
- Communicate in a way which inspires less confidence as compared to full-time employees

As far as Symmetra can determine, there are no scientific studies gathering reliable empirical data which measure the above criteria or behaviours with respect to full-time as opposed to flexible workers.

In principle, there is no reason to believe that workers who seek flexibility at the inception of their careers or who switch to a flexible option in mid-career are less collaborative and cooperative, communicate less effectively, lose their business acumen or are less capable of building relationships.

All these myths have a common thread: that commitment and teamwork are the hallmarks of full-time workers and that adoption of a flexible work pattern is a manifestation of limited interest in the success of the business or the team. This flows from the irrational assumption that physical presence and the total number of hours spent at the main business location is the primary indicator of dedication, loyalty and ultimately of performance. None of this is supported by empirical data.

That these myths or biases have emerged in data collected by Symmetra, and manifest general negativity on the part of leaders towards flexible workers, is indicative of an overarching bias which surfaces in almost every area where the capability of flexible workers is being evaluated.

All these myths have a common thread... that adoption of a flexible work pattern is a manifestation of limited interest in the success of the business or the team.

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3. Gender bias and the flexibility stigma

The flexibility stigma has its origins in gender stereotyping.

This overarching bias pertaining to working part-time or on a flexible schedule is well documented in research where it has acquired the sobriquet of the 'flexibility stigma'. The flexibility stigma has its origins in gender stereotyping. It posits an unconscious model of the male as the home provider who selflessly devotes himself to as many work hours as possible in discharge of his patriarchal obligations. Any departure from this, whether by female or male employees, is seen as a feminisation of the worker role. Employees, whether male or female, who access flexible working are seen to be exercising an option which is really only appropriate for the least ambitious female employees. It marks both those male and female employees as less than ideal workers, with the 'stigma' which frequently becomes permanent[2].

The perceptions expressed by the leaders in the Symmetra data most likely reflect this gender bias that is intertwined with the flexibility stigma. As described previously, the strongest association leaders made was that individuals who work flexibly are not perceived to be as assertive and forthright about their achievements. Others are that they lack business acumen and are not serious about their careers. These descriptors are all implicitly characteristics found in men more than women. They are attributed to flexible workers as a basis for rationalising the failure to mainstream these employees.

> These unconscious attitudes are indeed biases in the full sense of the word. They lead to the conclusion that leaders have pre-conceptions which are not supported by independent empirical data, but moreover, these attitudes are misconceived.

Leaders' attitudes, whether expressed overtly or communicated indirectly through actions and behaviour, become touchstones of the organisations' values and culture. Thus, when the biases described above are harboured by the organisation's leaders, they ultimately infuse perceptions of flexible working throughout the organisation, impacting the access and use of the work options. Employees, whether working full-time or otherwise, internalise the belief that those who do work flexibly are of less value to the organisation than full-time employees and that working flexibly will have significant negative career consequences.
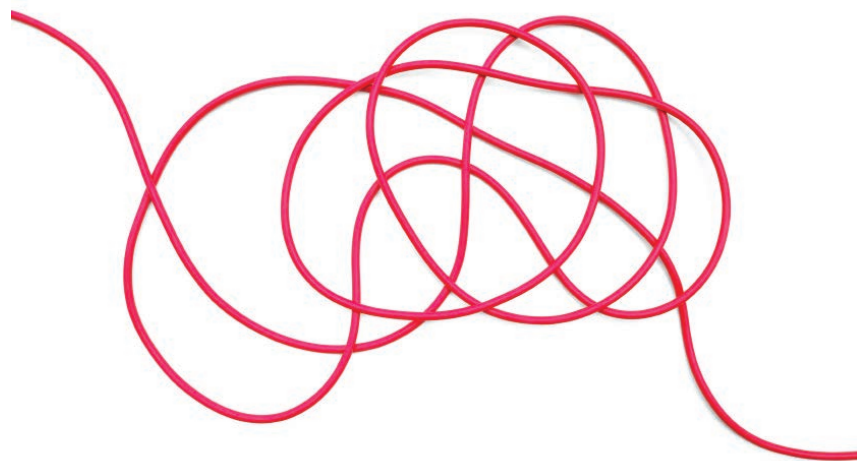
4. Legal decisions on flexible working and the unspoken element of bias

Decided legal cases reflect astonishingly that attitudes towards flexible work have barely shifted in the past 15 years. The case of *Hickie versus Hunt & Hunt* was one of the first discrimination suits in Australia to consider the adverse consequences in the workplace for a female employee who switched from full-time to a part-time role[21].

> Mrs Hickie, a solicitor, after returning from maternity leave in 1996, commenced working part-time. She found upon her return that her client lists and files had been removed and her responsibility diminished. She was given a poor work appraisal by a partner who commented that Mrs Hickie's failure to commit herself to return to full-time work was a "major hurdle". Mrs Hickie launched a discrimination suit against the firm based on her gender which succeeded.

...it appears that in the minds of many employers little has changed their essentially negative predispositions towards flexible and part-time work.

With the benefit of hindsight, one can infer with some confidence that Mrs Hickie's bosses harboured distinct biases against part-time work. Once Mrs Hickie switched from full-time to part-time work, a bias was triggered which caused her to be perceived as a less valuable employee.

Since that decision and despite significant extraneous drivers including:

- the introduction of laws providing for the request of flexible working
- government programs encouraging flexible working
- advancing technology facilitating working at a distance
- changing demographics necessitating a shift to flexible working, and
- the mounting evidence that flexible working leads to greater employee engagement and satisfaction

it appears that in the minds of many employers little has changed their essentially negative predispositions towards flexible and part-time work.

The case of *Rind versus Australian Institute of Superannuation Trustees FWC* (decided in 2013)[22] again mirrors the unspoken negative pre-conceptions concerning flexible or part-time work that came to the fore in Hickie.

Ms Rind, like Mrs Hickie, was a female employee returning from parental leave who had requested to work part-time (three days a week) resuming her previous role as a highly skilled database administrator. Despite pleading with the employer to allow her to work part-time until her daughter reached school-going age, this was rejected on the basis that a temporary service provider working 12 hours a week in her absence had proved unsatisfactory. The tribunal was of the view that the employer failed to give any reasonable consideration as to whether Ms Rind, with her skills and experience, could have discharged her functions in three days. Once again it appears that an implicit bias drove the employer to an unjustifiable conclusion. The employer was held liable for unlawful constructive dismissal.

5. The sources of unconscious bias

The notion that some (indeed most) of the cognitive processes which generate our decisions or actions are unconscious or hidden to introspection, can be traced back to early psychologists such as Sigmund Freud. Freud theorised that underlying unconscious motivations and attitudes can be quite different from, if not entirely contrary to, those which are consciously accessible and which we believe (often incorrectly) constitute the real motivation for our actions[23].

More recently, Daniel Kahneman (a Nobel Laureate in economics) has extended the concept of different levels of mental processing by identifying thinking as being fast or slow (intuitive or analytical). The former is automatic and effortless; the latter controlled and effortful. Fast or instantaneous intuitive judgements often result in conclusions which are mistaken. Analytical thinking is, by contrast, more deliberate and evidence-based and more likely to result in justifiable conclusions. 'Heuristics' is the term coined by Kahneman for the process where decisions are arrived at rapidly when we are prevented from or choose not to assimilate all available information[24].

These ideas have received empirical confirmation in a number of areas of study, particularly in the field of behavioural economics which showed fairly conclusively that many economic decisions, as well as everyday business decisions, are grounded in irrational ideas not openly expressed.

While without question our implicit cognition system (intuition) is often useful, the downside is that it can lead to poor solutions or cause us to form immediate stereotypical judgments of other people by automatically slotting them into a stored mental category. In this way, the unconscious mind becomes a repository for various types of biases which subsist below the level of our everyday awareness but which surface often when important decisions have to be made.

During the 1990's, Mahzarin Banaji (Harvard University), who researched unconscious biases and their origins, postulated that understanding biases can help predict actual behaviour. Individuals who endorse meritocracy may, for example, harbour negative unconscious bias towards members of the opposite gender or other racial groups. These biases ultimately cause them to behave unfairly towards these other groups, contrary to their own explicit assertions and what they believe to be their conscious intent[25].

...the unconscious mind becomes a repository for various types of biases

6. Bias and organisational culture

The existence of systemic bias in an organisation fits well with the theory of organisational culture developed by the celebrated researcher in the field of management, Edgar H Schein.

Schein (1984) identifies three strata of cultural phenomena which characterise an organisation.

1. **Artefacts** include any overt or visible features – architecture, dress code, art, work processes.

2. **Espoused values** are the organisation's expressed and explicit values and rules of behaviour. This is often embodied in policy documents and codes of behaviour.

3. **Shared assumptions** are the deeply embedded understood propositions or behaviours which are usually unconscious but which constitute the essence of the organisational culture.

Assumptions are the most deeply embedded but, at the same time, the most influential core of the organisation's cultural attitudes.

Schein's model of organisational culture

Artefacts

Values

Assumptions
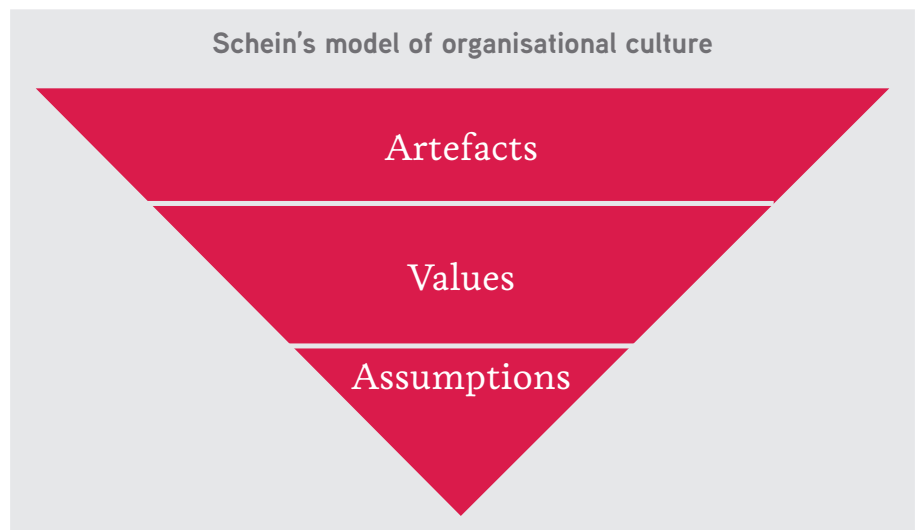
Ostensible support and encouragement for programs, such as flexible working, may be embodied in the artefacts or value statements of an organisation. However, little store will be placed on this if the fundamental unspoken and communicated assumptions are that working flexibly will damage one's career prospects.

Assumptions are the most deeply embedded but, at the same time, the most influential core of the organisation's cultural attitudes.

Underlying assumptions are the most difficult to change, as they are tightly held social norms that prescribe how people should behave within the work environment, which are reinforced by both the mindsets of the organisation's leaders and culture beyond the workplace.

As Schein has said:

> **"To really understand a culture and to ascertain more completely the group's values and overt behaviours, it is imperative to delve into the underlying assumptions which are typically unconscious but which actually determine how group members perceive, think and feel."** [26] (pg 3)

Against this theoretical backdrop, and utilising Symmetra's research, we can now see that the culture of many large corporates encompass deeply held assumptions about the nature, quality and value of flexible work. These assumptions in essence are that flexible workers are merely ancillary to, and less capable than, the core body of full-time employees so that the prized opportunities of allocation of major projects or clients, important stretch assignments, mentoring, sponsorship, regular salary increases and promotions are far more readily offered to the cohort of full-time workers.

The more dominant the masculine-orientation of the culture in the organisation, the greater the degree of marginalisation for groups which are seen to be non-aligned with this culture. This will naturally include women as a group and, as this paper has now demonstrated, will also include those working flexibly, male or female[27].

Employees who take the opportunity to work flexibly are statistically more likely to be female and less likely to be working at a senior level. Almost universally they will be consigned to a lower status in the organisation and will operate in the margins with fewer opportunities – creating a systemic gender disadvantage.

> The literature indicates that there are three salient dimensions which are operative when an employer makes a decision on the granting of flexible work.
> 1. The gender of the employee
> 2. The status and authority of the job held by the employee
> 3. The reason given for the request
>
> Each of these factors in turn can be the trigger for one or more unconscious biases. Whether a request for flexibility is made and whether it is granted depends on how these three factors are weighed in the minds of the employee and the leader.

A recent significant study in the U.S. has gathered empirical data on this topic[28]. It found that managers are more likely to grant flexible work to high-status men who ask for it to advance their careers than high-status women who do so for the same reason. Low-status men are most likely to be granted the opportunity for child care reasons while low-status women are the least likely to be accommodated. The authors conclude that this is consistent with a motive to maintain the status quo, i.e. to maintain men in positions of authority.

...the culture of many large corporates encompass deeply held assumptions about the nature, quality and value of flexible work.

However, the 2012 AWALI (Australian Work and Life Index) survey states men are more likely to have their requests for flexible work arrangements denied, indicating that overall women are considered more suitable for flexible work, irrespective of the reasons.[29] The consequences of these biases for all employees working flexibly are the negative career consequences that have been explored in this paper.

> The upshot is that while many businesses acknowledge the demand for flexible work, commend it as performing a valuable function and install policies which ostensibly encourage its uptake, there is an unspoken reproach from peers and managers when workers ask to switch from full-time to flexible work or attempt to gain entry to the organisation on a flexible work basis.

Thus, workers who desire flexibility but are cognisant of a potential backlash if they seek to exercise it formally, might choose to approach it by stealth. Employees who, in principle, may be attracted to one or other type of flexible work option have to weigh the benefits to their work-life balance against disadvantages for their career prospects if they request to formally adopt a flexible working arrangement. Women, particularly those with carer responsibilities, have much less latitude for choice in this area and therefore often have to acquiesce in unsuitable work arrangements which enable them to earn an income while at the same time taking care of their family responsibilities[18].

Regarding flexibility sought by men, the Diversity Council of Australia reported in 2012[30]:

- workplace flexibility is a key driver of employment decisions for men;
- 18 percent of men indicated that they had seriously considered leaving their organisation because of a lack of flexibility;
- men tend to "tinker" with flexible work and very few work part-time.

The findings above suggest that while many men require time away from work during a normal working day or week, they are reluctant to formally request flexible work or let it be known that they are part-time workers because of the bad 'signal' that this sends to leaders and co-workers and the penalties that result.

For flexible working to operate as an effective business strategy, our narrow perceptions of flexible working need to broaden. It requires a paradigm shift where the barriers between people, workplaces and technologies are removed so that employees functioning in a trusting, collaborative space can optimise performance and can propel the business to achieve its objectives wherever they are situated.

For flexible working to operate as an effective business strategy our narrow perceptions of flexible working need to broaden.

# 7. Counteracting bias as a moral and business responsibility

Once it appears that bias is widespread and systemic... it is unarguable that a fundamental responsibility lies with individuals (especially leaders) to implement steps to remedy the situation.

It has been noted that the recognition of unconscious biases raises an issue of moral responsibility[31]. If adverse actions by leaders are simply the result of unwitting and unconsciously generated thoughts, then it has been suggested that the responsibility of these leaders is negated because the outcomes are not intended by them nor within their conscious control[32].

This proposition in reality amounts to a potential abdication of responsibilities that rest on the shoulders of all leaders. It arises from the traditional and somewhat artificial notion that only consciously-intended outcomes can give rise to moral responsibility.

It is our contention that once it appears that bias is widespread and systemic, causing unjustifiable consequences for certain groups, it is unarguable that a fundamental responsibility lies with individuals (especially leaders) to implement steps to remedy the situation. This includes identifying and acknowledging our own biases and those of others in the organisation, determining how such biases are influencing behaviour and outcomes, and then taking steps, systematically and individually, to counteract them.

The developmental tools assessing biases, now available world-wide, allow subjects to raise unconscious predispositions to a conscious level and to take steps to counteract them when they produce undesirable outcomes. These tools by no means eradicate bias, but they do assist individuals in acknowledging that bias exists and in developing plans to alleviate the negative consequences of biased decisions. The existence of such tools empowers leaders to take personal responsibility to subject all their decisions to greater scrutiny and rigour, making decisions that are less arbitrary and more rational.
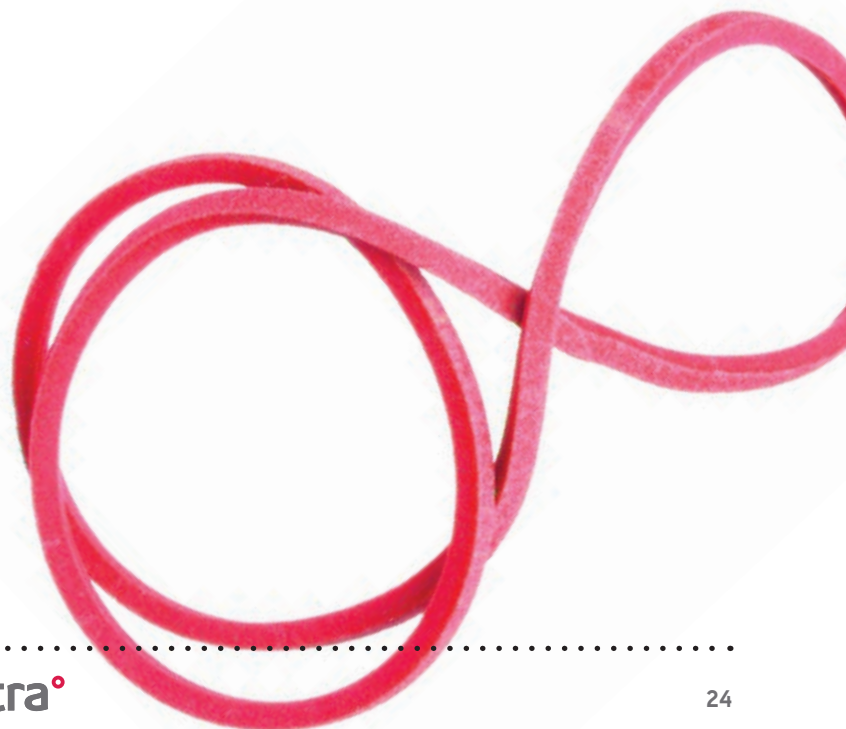
8. Conclusion

From the themes we have explored in this paper, we can conclude the following...

- Flexible working is a permanent feature of workforces in advanced economies.
- Businesses are failing to use the talents and skills of flexible workers to the best advantage.
- The espoused values of many corporations in relation to flexible work do not fit well with the actual behaviour towards flexible workers.
- Flexible work options should be fully and seamlessly integrated into the structure of businesses rather than seen as a concession to employees who are unable to meet the 'ideal' of a full-time worker.
- Unless the majority of organisations undergo a culture change, led from the top, many employees will not avail themselves of flexible work which they actually wish for, and those who do will continue to operate on the periphery of the organisation.

There is good evidence to suggest that organisations are losing talent and not operating as effectively as they could because of the failure to mainstream flexible working[33, 34, 19]. Adapting to the demand for flexible working from skilled, committed and productive employees could become a source of competitive advantage.

Where policies exist to provide for flexible work, they should be endorsed unequivocally by leadership who lead by example. Viewing flexible working as a 'program' or simply an ad-hoc series of concessions will undermine flexible working as a key element of workplace strategy.

A truly positive but revolutionary culture change with regard to flexible working will be one where employees can have a clear career path via flexible working. It requires a culture where leaders will unmistakably champion flexible working by adopting it themselves, making this transparent to the whole organisation and positioning the idea that all jobs have the potential to be flexible. In this culture, jobs, workplaces and client service models will be redesigned to align with a paradigm where flexible and full-time work have equal value, are equally promoted and are used to harness the best skills and experience in the most productive way for the business[18].

> Foundational to such a strategy of cultural change however, is the need for all individuals, especially leaders, to become aware of the biases that they entertain towards flexible working. Once these biases are brought to the surface, acknowledged at a personal, group and systemic level, and checks and balances are put in place to counteract them, organisations will be positioned to implement a strategy of integrating and entrenching flexible working as a fundamental and sustainable way of doing business.

Adapting to the demand for flexible working from skilled, committed and productive employees could become a source of competitive advantage.

Symmetra°

About Symmetra

Symmetra is an international specialist consultancy assisting clients in both the private and public sector to embed inclusive workplace cultures. Symmetra provides a customised service, working across all levels of the organisation from executive teams to the front line to develop inclusion skills, counteract unconscious bias and embed flexible work practices. Taking an innovation driven approach, Symmetra utilises tailor-made tools, process and content designed by its team of experts to:

- diagnose and analyse inclusion challenges

- formulate strategy

- design and facilitate cutting edge training and development, and

- coach leaders.

Symmetra has been a leader in the diversity field since 2003, serving industries such as financial services, professional and legal services, resources, utilities, technology, retail, consumer goods, healthcare, transport and logistics, and research and government. Over the past few years, we have partnered with ASX 200 and Fortune 500 clients across the globe to drive their diversity and inclusion strategy.

To find out more, contact us at **flex@symmetra.com.au**

Symmetra
Unit 96, Jones Bay Wharf
26–32 Pirrama Road
Pyrmont NSW 2030
Australia

Tel: +61 2 8570 9400
Fax: +61 2 8570 9444
Web: www.symmetra.com.au

> The study showed that 11 out of 13 leadership teams across the globe demonstrated an unfavourable disposition towards those who work flexibly.

About the study

To explore the topic of unconscious bias and flexibility, we analysed the data and results from Symmetra's Unconscious Bias programs 2012–2013 conducted with 473 senior executives across Australia, New Zealand, USA and Hong Kong. The industries covered included banking, financial services, insurance, legal services, professional services, engineering, resources, recruitment, construction, research and manufacturing.

The assessment tool incorporated into these programs is designed to measure unconscious bias: a repertory grid process is used to explore how a leader might perceive their diverse team members with whom they interact on a daily basis. The tool exposes deep-seated cognitive schema revealing how leaders view people working full-time versus those working flexibly, as well as other notable attitudes. The composite results showed that in 11 out of 13 leadership teams across the globe, even those companies with well-developed flexible working policies in place demonstrate an unfavourable disposition towards those who work flexibly.

When analysing the data for this report, amongst those organisations that showed an overall negative bias towards individuals who work flexibly, similar constructs were grouped together based on themes such as 'ambitious' and 'serious about their career'. In addition, the varying labels for similar working arrangements were also collated, with 'flexible' referring to formal flexibility, informal flexibility and part-time. These results were aggregated to reflect 'flexible' vs 'full-time' (inflexible) on 14 behavioural themes. On 10 out of 14 behaviours analysed (which are mapped against competencies required for leadership roles by the participating companies) the leaders' implicit attitudes show positive skewing toward those working full-time, or inflexibly.

How Symmetra can help create a flexible work culture

Symmetra's FlexWork Solutions are created using evidence-based best practice. Tailored for each unique workplace, our solutions build on the behaviours, skills and attitudes of individuals to ensure that flexibility becomes a mainstreamed business practice.

Our unique approach to the topic of workplace flexibility is based on an organisational change process which blends strategy, diagnostics, training, coaching and action-based learning. The combination of methodologies provides an innovative, challenging and highly engaging experience for participants, and ensures sustained behavioural change.

To find out more, contact us at **flex@symmetra.com.au**

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