

# Will a 5-day week promote meaningful work-life balance in the Building and Construction Industry? Giving everyone a voice

Work-life balance (WLB) is essential to mental health and wellbeing and organisational performance, yet poor WLB is widespread in Australia's construction industry due to long hours, presenteeism, and normalised six-day work weeks.

## Why the study:

- Work-life balance (WLB) occurs when people have the time and resources required to meaningfully meet their expectations in both work and non-work domains.
- Everyone has a right to a good WLB and poor WLB is in no one's interests. There is significant evidence to show that workplace cultures which provide employees with a healthy WLB, represent the foundation of a productive and resilient workforce and prosperous economy.
- However, numerous studies have identified poor WLB as a significant and growing problem for people who work in the Australian construction industry.
- This poses significant risks to peoples' physical and mental health and well-being, family and social relationships and workplace productivity, safety and engagement.
- Recently, proposals for a 5-day working week are being advocated as a way to solve this problem.
- The aim of this study was to ensure that everyone in the NSW building and construction (B&C) industry has a voice in this profoundly important debate.
- Only by understanding, respecting and considering all perspectives in this highly diverse industry, can one make an informed and responsible evidence-based decision about the pros and cons of a 5-day week.

## What we did:

Data was collected from a wide variety of people and organisations across the NSW B&C industry. The research involved four main stages:

- A thorough and systematic literature review of high-quality peer-reviewed international research evidence, within and outside the Australian construction industry, relating to the potential impact of a 5-day working week on WLB;
- Semi-structured interviews (supported by documentary analysis) with a representative sample of 47 project planning, cost, project management, human resource management and safety experts from 28 contracting and development firms across the NSW B&C industry. The aim of this stage was to explore the cost, time and other project performance implications of moving to a 5-day week in practice for firms across the construction supply chain and their clients.
- Semi structured interviews with a representative sample of 64 people from across the NSW B&C industry to understand the individual WLB implications of various 5-day week scenarios and the level of support for each. The aim of this stage was to understand, from the perspective of those working across the NSW B&C industry, the individual WLB implications of moving to a 5-day week and the level of support for this.
- A major NSW state-wide survey of 1475 people who are representative of the NSW B&C industry, using a range of standardised WLB instruments. The aim was to understand the current WLB of people working across the industry, the factors that affect it, the implications of moving to a 5-day week on their WLB and the level of support for this across the NSW B&C industry.

## What we found:

- This research finds that one cannot generalise about WLB, long working hours and working weeks across the NSW B&C industry. For many people working in the NSW B&C industry WLB is good, while for others it can certainly be improved.
- On-project salaried workers, young people, those in relatively junior roles and some waged workers, especially on large inner-city commercial, residential and infrastructure projects appear to be doing the heavy lifting, in terms of hours and days worked. This is related to the high value of weekend working on these projects. However, there are also exceptions in other parts of the industry, where individual firm cultures can be problematic.
- While many people want to work a 5-day week, few people are willing or able to take a pay cut or work longer hours during the week or increase their productivity to suit.
- Furthermore, few businesses are willing or able to accept the risks involved and it is likely that few clients are prepared to adjust their programs and budgets to suit.
- Many considered a compressed 5-day working week (working longer hours during the week) to be bad for women and there is much research evidence to support this. Most (including female respondents), argued that the industry needs to be made more appealing for both men and women;
- Improving peoples' WLB is far more complex than just reducing hours and days worked and is most effectively and efficiently achieved by providing people with greater and more equal access to flexibility and control over when, where, how and how long they work. If flexibility can be improved across the construction workforce, then there is no need to incur the potential risks of a 5-day week to individuals, employers and clients.
- However, unequal access to flexibility across the workforce and doubts about whether it can be achieved in practice creates strong support for a mandated hard 5-day week (weekends off) as a way of forcing the industry to shut down.
- Nevertheless, this support varies significantly across the workforce and is contingent on two conditions:
  - People's ability to significantly increase productivity to compensate for the lost weekend working (given that most are not prepared to tolerate lower pay and are concerned about the personal, safety and productivity implications of working longer hours during the week).
  - Minimal risk to employers in the industry on which people's WLB ultimately depends (this requires clients to share the potentially significant risks of a 5-day week, be more transparent, reduce liquidated damages and plan their projects from the start as a 5-day week).
- Given these conditions are considered unrealistic by most people, if a 5-day week was imposed then a soft 5-day week (where sites are kept open on weekends) is currently seen as the best compromise between individual, business and client interests. This model is already being implemented by an increasing number of companies across the industry with minimal risks to all involved.



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**More information about this research can be found here:**

**<https://www.masterbuildersindustryresearch.com/5-day-working-week>**

<https://opus.lib.uts.edu.au/bitstream/10453/181659/2/5-Day%20Working%20Week%20and%20WLB%20in%20building%20and%20Construction%20Industry.pdf>