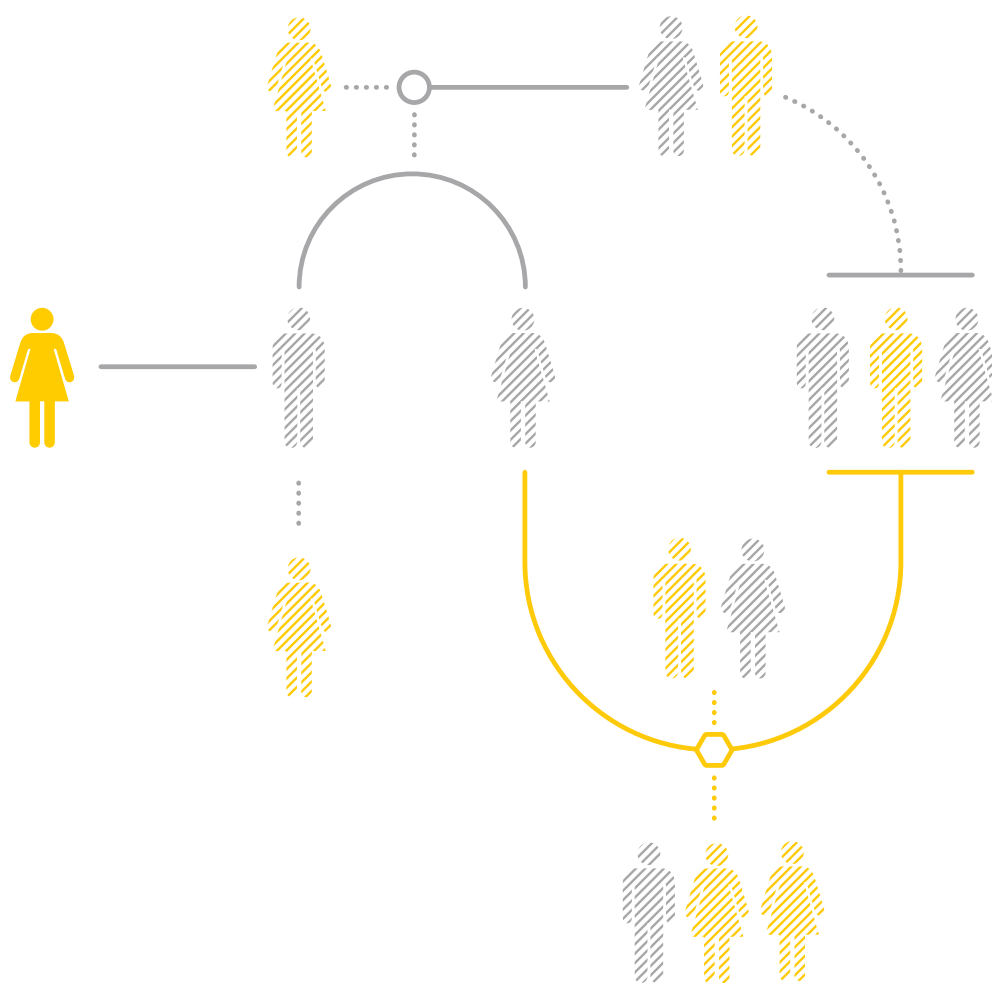# Executive briefing on workplace flexibility

A strategic approach to flexibility

Workplace Flexibility

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A strategic approach to workplace flexibility is needed for employers to fully maximise the opportunities presented by flexible working arrangements. In collaboration with Chief Executive Women (CEW), the Workplace Gender Equality Agency has prepared this executive briefing note to highlight the role of the executive team in leading an organisation towards a more flexible working environment.

The future of work is unlikely to look like the traditional workplace of today. Work is less likely to be tethered to the places and times that have been important to this point as new technologies enable greater flexibility and globalisation renders time zones less relevant. Much of the work that drives our knowledge-based economy will be specialised, and more employees will view their work as connected with their own individual purpose. Different industries and employers will experience these changes to greater or lesser degrees.

As traditional ways of working are disrupted, CEOs and executive leadership teams will increasingly need the skills to reimagine the way work gets done, and the leadership skills to implement new and more flexible ways of working.

Flexibility capability

When an organisation takes a strategic approach to implementing flexible working arrangements, flexibility capability is viewed as an important organisational issue, rather than an issue confined to the relationship between an employee and manager. When issues are seen as organisational, rather than individual, there is often a parallel realisation that they need to be dealt with comprehensively, taking into account every part of the organisation.

In the case of flexibility, the transformation that occurs when an organisation improves its flexibility capability is far-reaching. It can involve creating new processes and systems around work to enable a wholly different way of doing work. It can require managers and employees to change the way they work. It can also require new infrastructure or technology. Organisations need to create a holistic, integrated implementation approach that involves all the key players who can enable flexibility.

Types of workplace flexibility

When developing a flexibility strategy, organisations should consider the full suite of flexible working arrangements that can be offered. Flexible work options may include: flexible hours of work, compressed working weeks, time-in-lieu, telecommuting, part-time work, job sharing, and other choices about the timing of work.

The Workplace Gender Equality Agency has developed a series of business-focused toolkits to assist your company take a strategic approach to workplace flexibility. These, along with more information, can be found on the Agency's website: www.wgea.gov.au/lead/strategic-approach-flexibility.

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Why introduce organisation-wide flexibility?

Research indicates that flexible working arrangements deliver significant benefits to employers and to individuals. Flexibility, particularly when it reduces work/life conflict, drives employee engagement and boosts productivity, while reducing staff turnover costs and absenteeism.

Flexibility improves gender equality

The achievement of flexibility is a key driver and enabler of gender equality in workplaces. Access to flexibility in the workplace at all levels enables greater access to roles and leadership positions across an organisation for both women and men. Lack of flexibility has been shown as one of the primary barriers to greater workforce participation of women.

There are significant gender differences in the uptake of flexible work. Currently women are more likely to utilise part-time work, parental leave and other non-standard working patterns, resulting in increased gender inequality in access to quality work and promotions. There currently are fewer opportunities for combining flexible work, especially part-time work, with management and supervisory positions, which are traditionally dominated by men.

Enable equilibrium

Many women and men don't conform to the full-time worker mould; they have other priorities and aspirations such as pursuing additional study, approaching retirement or being active and engaged parents. Targeted research shows that flexibility is a key driver for all these groups of women and men at work, not just those with young children. Providing flexible working arrangements for all employees and reducing work/life conflict has clear benefits for employers. Supporting men to work flexibly often enables women's increased participation in the workforce; a key to achieving gender equality.
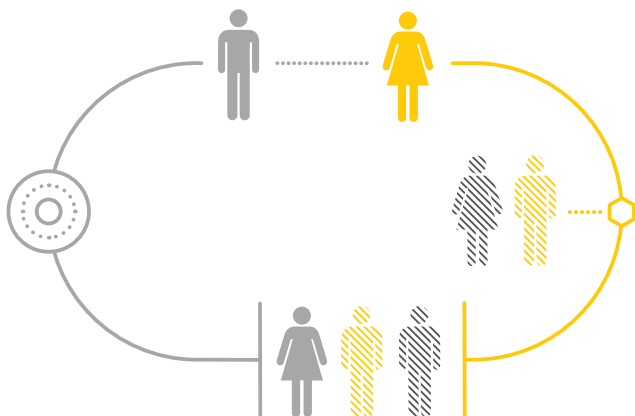
Risk management

There is also now a legislative imperative to offer flexibility under certain circumstances. The National Employment Standards that are part of the *Fair Work Act 2009* require all employers to consider employees' requests for flexibility. The *Fair Work Act 2009* also prohibits discrimination in the workplace on the basis of factors such as family or carer's responsibilities, among other things, and makes provision for 'individual flexibility arrangements'.

To better understand your organisation's obligations under the *Fair Work Act 2009*, visit the Fair Work Ombudsman website www.fairwork.gov.au/employee-entitlements/flexibility-in-the-workplace.

"Workplace flexibility is a strategic imperative for organisations. The way we define it needs to change from being a "working mother" solution and it needs to be broader than just 'part time' work.

For organisations to attract and retain talent, they need to think about flexibility in the context of working styles, hours worked, where people work and how work is conducted. Leaders need to be attuned to what works best for their teams and provide the flexibility that suits the individual, the customer and the business."

Susan Lloyd-Hurwitz, CEO, Mirvac and CEW member

Flexibility strategy roadmap and capabilities

Leadership is critical for the successful implementation of a strategic approach to flexibility. To assist you and your teams implement change, resources are available to help you move along the flexibility roadmap and to develop the necessary capabilities required for transformation. These resources, available at www.wgea.gov.au include:

- Readiness assessment
- Building a flexibility strategy guide
- Manager flexibility toolkit
- Employee flexibility toolkit

Flexibility roadmap

Understanding at a high level where you are on the flexibility roadmap will help your organisation determine the starting point of the journey and set clear strategic objectives at a high level as well as identify which specific flexibility capabilities to focus on as your strategy develops.

The readiness assessment resource (available at www.wgea. gov.au) will assist your organisation determine where your organisation is currently positioned on the flexibility roadmap.

Commitment

3. Embedded

2. Basic

1. Limited

Level of strategic integration across the organisation
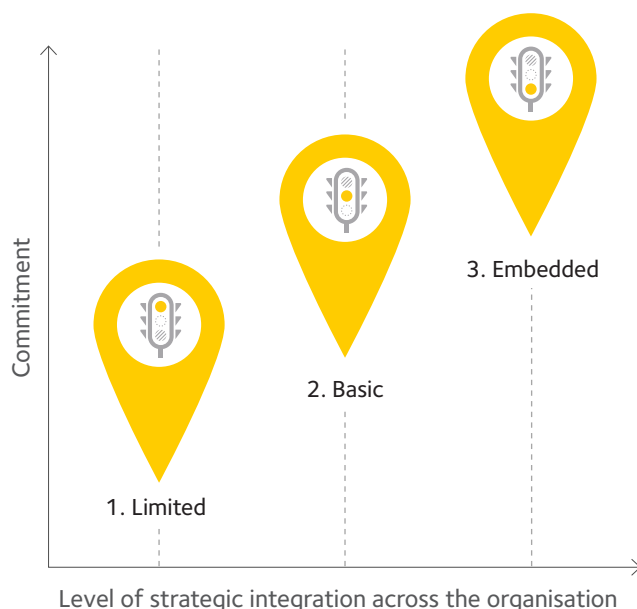
Flexibility capability framework

In order to achieve powerful, effective flexibility, capabilities are needed in a number of areas. The framework below outlines 10 specific capabilities that are required for achieving organisation-wide and strategic flexibility. Together these individual capabilities constitute an organisation's flexibility capability.

The readiness assessment resource (available via www.wgea. gov.au) will help your organisation to diagnose the current status of each capability, and determine where the organisation is on the flexibility roadmap. This will provide a clear picture of areas of strength and development, which can feed into the development of the organisation's flexibility goals, strategy and action plan.

Leadership	
Business case	Management capability
Flexibility vision, strategy & policy	Employee experience
Technology and infrastructure	Client and supplier experience
Results management	Learning cycle
Change management	

"Lack of flexibility around work design and practices continues to be a barrier to promotion and retention of women in their junior to middle years and an impediment to older workers of both genders with elder-care responsibilities. Embedding flexibility starts with the CEO – in role modelling and commitment, adoption of a consistent approach throughout the organisation and in measurement of progress."

Meredith Hellicar, the Chairman of CEW's Business Engagement Committee

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Demonstrating leadership flexibility

The journey towards strategic flexibility can involve significant change, and requires strong leadership commitment and involvement in the process.

Leaders play particularly important roles in several ways:

➡ Leaders establish accountability for the change program's outcomes.

➡ Leaders are the natural example or 'model' of flexibility that sets the tone for the whole organisation.

➡ Leaders provide clear direction to managers and employees.

➡ Leaders facilitate the engagement of managers and other staff in the change process through inspiration, clarity and the provision of resources to support the change.

The Leadership Shadow developed by Chief Executive Women and the Male Champions of Change is a model to help leaders assess their actions and behaviours in the context of achieving gender balance.
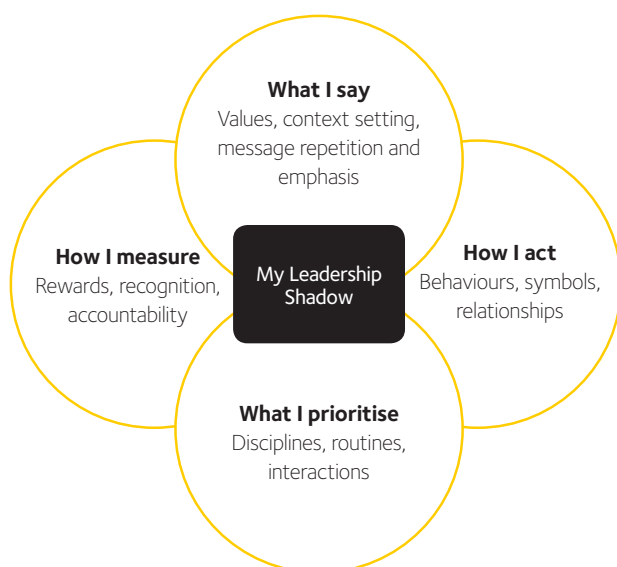
The Leadership Shadow encourages leaders to consider that "what we say; how we act; what we prioritise; and how we measure together determine what gets done".

The original Leadership Shadow model (that can be found at cew.org.au) has been adapted to specifically consider workplace flexibility and the suggested communications, actions, prioritisation and metrics that leaders can implement to take a strategic approach to flexibility are outlined below.

What we say:

➡ Make strong, consistent statements about the importance of flexibility to achieving the organisation's goals.

➡ Talk to your senior management team about organisation wide flexibility.

How we act:

➡ Be a visible leader on the issue of workplace flexibility.

➡ Role model working flexibly and managing a flexible team.

➡ Ask the executive leadership team to role model working flexibly.

What we prioritise:

➡ Ensure workplace flexibility is an agenda item at the executive level and has an executive sponsor.

➡ Ensure flexibility is a priority for your human resources and diversity team.

➡ Prioritise the development of a flexibility strategy.

What we measure:

➡ Monitor the uptake of flexible work arrangements.

➡ Seek feedback and engagement with managers and employees through surveys and focus groups on their experience on flexible work arrangements in the organisation.

What I say
Values, context setting, message repetition and emphasis

How I measure
Rewards, recognition, accountability

My Leadership Shadow

How I act
Behaviours, symbols, relationships

What I prioritise
Disciplines, routines, interactions

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Advice and assistance