

The march of progress? Australian Defence Force working on flexibility

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Flexible working practices have infiltrated the ranks of the Australian Defence Force, debunking the myth it is a rigid and regimented employer, according to QUT research.

The study, presented at the Defence Human Sciences Symposium in Melbourne, involved in-depth interviews with 130 Army, Air Force and Navy personnel about how the timing, location and tasks of work are negotiated with managers.

The researchers found flexible work arrangements (FWAs), including working from home, timing of parental leave and changes to work duties, were regularly made and accepted by men and [women](#) across the ADF.

Associate Professor Abby Cathcart, who authored the paper with Professor Paula McDonald and Dr Deanna Grant-Smith from QUT Business School, said the findings indicated it was a myth that FWAs in the ADF were used exclusively by women.

"Rather, our analysis shows that FWAs are used extensively by all personnel in the ADF with the average member making more than eight requests for flexibility in a 12-month period, and the majority of these being fully granted," she said.

"Similar proportions of men and women made requests for changes to hours of work (78.3 per cent and 78.6 per cent respectively) and a higher

proportion of men requested changes to work location than women (86.7 per cent and 81 per cent).

"Men were also more likely to have their requests fully granted (78 per cent) than women (73 per cent) in three of the four flexibility categories explored: changes to work hours, changes to duties and requests to change the location of work."

Associate Professor Cathcart said women made up 15 per cent of ADF personnel and the ADF had increased access to FWAs as part of a strategy to attract more women and build a culture of inclusivity and equity.

"Since the 2011 review into the treatment of women in the ADF, FWAs have emerged as a central issue, not least for recruiting and retaining female personnel," she said.

"Our findings show there is a growing acceptance from service personnel at all levels that FWAs are compatible with a service career and that men as well as women can benefit from flexibility relating to the location and hours of their work, their roles, duties and leave entitlements.

"FWAs in the ADF should no longer be seen as a threat to capability, as 'women's business', or intended solely for the benefit of personnel with children. They are widely used and valued by the vast majority of personnel irrespective of gender or their personal obligations."

The most common types of requests for FWAs were related to "time off" and changes to hours of work. More than three-quarters of all requests were fully granted with Navy personnel the most likely to have their requests fully granted (79 per cent), followed by Army (77 per cent) and Air Force (70 per cent).

Associate Professor Cathcart said that, despite the widespread use of FWAs, the ADF risked undoing its good [work](#) if it failed to adopt a "broader understanding" of what "flexibility is and can be".

"Flexible working can be informal, temporary arrangements, for example starting later and working later to take a child to school or working from home for a set period during house renovations," she said.

"Many of these sorts of FWAs are already used but there is a significant risk that the growing pressure on the ADF to deliver results may add layers of bureaucracy which will impact on how supervisors respond to requests.

"Recognising the importance of formal and informal access to FWAs for both servicemen and women is likely to help the ADF in driving culture change, promoting inclusion and enabling personnel to balance serving in the defence force with commitments in their personal lives."

The research, which has been published in the *Australian Defence Force Journal*, was funded by the ARC through the Discovery Scheme with some additional travel expenses funded by the Department of Defence.

More information: *Australian Defence Force Journal*,
www.adfjournal.adc.edu.au/UserFiles/issues/195%202014%20Nov_Dec.pdf

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