

# The balance battle: Five reasons why dads are struggling with workplace flexibility

August 30 2024, by Alina Ewald

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Despite a [rise in dual-earner families](#) in Australia and men wanting to be [more engaged with their kids](#), there are still [major hurdles](#) preventing dads from fully embracing formalized flexible working arrangements such as [part-time work](#) or [parental leave](#).

This is a problem because we know if dads achieve work-family balance it benefits children, [women's employment](#) and [men's well-being](#).

So why are dads finding it so challenging to adopt formal flexible working arrangements to help them as a parent?

As a fathering researcher focusing on mens' adoption of [flexibility](#), I have identified five main reasons. Work-family balance barriers include:

## 1. Flexibility is often feminized

Flexibility can be associated with the "[mummy career track](#)."

Modifying work after becoming a parent is positioned as being for [women with children](#)—rather than for dads.

When men do adopt flexibility for caring, some experience a backlash in the form of [stigmatization or discrimination](#), especially in relation to [parental leave](#) and returning to work—even when they take [short periods of leave](#).

In fact, the Australian Human Rights Commission found men were [twice as likely](#) to have their leave requests rejected than women.

Recent Australian data show only 8% of organizations set targets for [men's engagement with flexible working](#).

This issue is driven by deep-seated gender norms and stereotypes about work and care and it results in [men often being left out](#) of the flexibility conversation.

## **2. There is an expectation for men to focus on their career**

Men's caring responsibilities are [largely invisible in the workplace](#) and dads often get the message to prioritize [career development](#) and financial provision over being actively involved in their children's daily care.

In relation to this, men report [a lack of workplace acceptance](#) for flexible working arrangements and a concern regarding the career penalties that could follow.

While [the benefits](#) of dads being more hands-on as a parent are clear—including [positive outcomes](#) for child development, for father-child bonding, and for men's well-being—negative career implications are often cited as [a prominent downside](#) associated with some forms of flexibility.

Underpinning the expectation for men to be dedicated to their careers are [masculine norms](#) and the [work devotion schema](#) (a moral obligation to dedicate oneself to work).

However, Australian research shows men want more flexibility and some are even [willing to change their job](#) to achieve this.

## **3. Men don't know what they are entitled to**

There is sometimes a lack of awareness from men and a lack of resources from employers surrounding [what men are entitled to](#).

Many dads aren't fully aware of the work-family policies available to them or where to look. They are [sometimes reluctant](#) to ask employers directly due to a perceived lack of entitlement or fears around negative judgment.

As a result, when it comes to finding out about flexibility, men often have to dig around on their own to figure out [what they are actually able to use](#).

The lack of readily available information for men reinforces the message that flexibility for parenting is not really designed for dads.

To help overcome this issue, organizations should ensure they have conversations with fathers, and [not just with mothers](#), about adjusting their work schedules when they have children.

## 4. Occupational barriers

Men in different positions within organizations face distinct challenges when attempting to adopt flexible caregiving arrangements.

Those in high-status roles such as senior workers or managers have a lot of control over [their work hours](#) but they are often reluctant to adopt formal flexibility for caring due to concerns it may signify [a lack of commitment](#) to work.

In contrast, men working in lower-status roles report a lack of power to request flexibility and some report having requests denied or [being pressured](#) to not access flexibility options.

## 5. A lack of male role models

There is a lack of role-modeling from other men and a lack of spaces for men to [learn from each other](#) about working flexibly.

Men also report being hesitant about using flexible work arrangements because they don't see their leaders embracing or [setting an example](#) themselves. This leads to concerns it could result in [negative outcomes](#), leading to missed promotions or career opportunities.

Having more male leaders working flexibly for family reasons would set an example for other men but barriers exist [due to expectations](#) from some leaders to be present at work.

### Where to from here?

In order for things to change, men's caregiving roles must become [more visible at work](#) and organizations must better support dads in adopting flexibility for caring purposes.

Some effective ways to improve the situation include having male leaders model flexibility, organizations promoting the idea that flexibility is for [dads](#) too and telling men about their work-family entitlements when they become, or are about to become, a father.

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Citation: The balance battle: Five reasons why dads are struggling with workplace flexibility (2024, August 30) retrieved 31 August 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2024-08-dads-struggling->

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