

Who has the best work-life balance in Australia?

Ensuring employees have a decent balance between their work and personal lives is as much about protecting your business as it is about preserving workers' wellbeing.

While the benefits of work-life balance policies are disputed by researchers, the bottom line, according to management guru Charles Handy, is that business survival depends on finding better ways to protect people from the demands of their jobs.

"We are in danger of populating companies with the modern equivalent of monks, who forgo all else for the sake of their calling," Handy once [wrote in a Harvard Business Review article](#). Not to mention the damage to individuals caused by overwork, such as an increased risk of alcoholism, stress and other problems. If nothing else, employees who are under too much pressure may leave.

"Neglecting the environment may drive away customers, but neglecting people's lives may drive away key members of the workforce," wrote Handy.

Good work-life balance policies may also help improve recruitment, according to recent SEEK research. Work-life balance was the most important factor considered by more than a third of the almost 3000 Australian workers surveyed, ahead of job security and salary, when considering a new position.

In any case, a raft of research over decades has proved that working longer hours doesn't necessarily produce more work output.

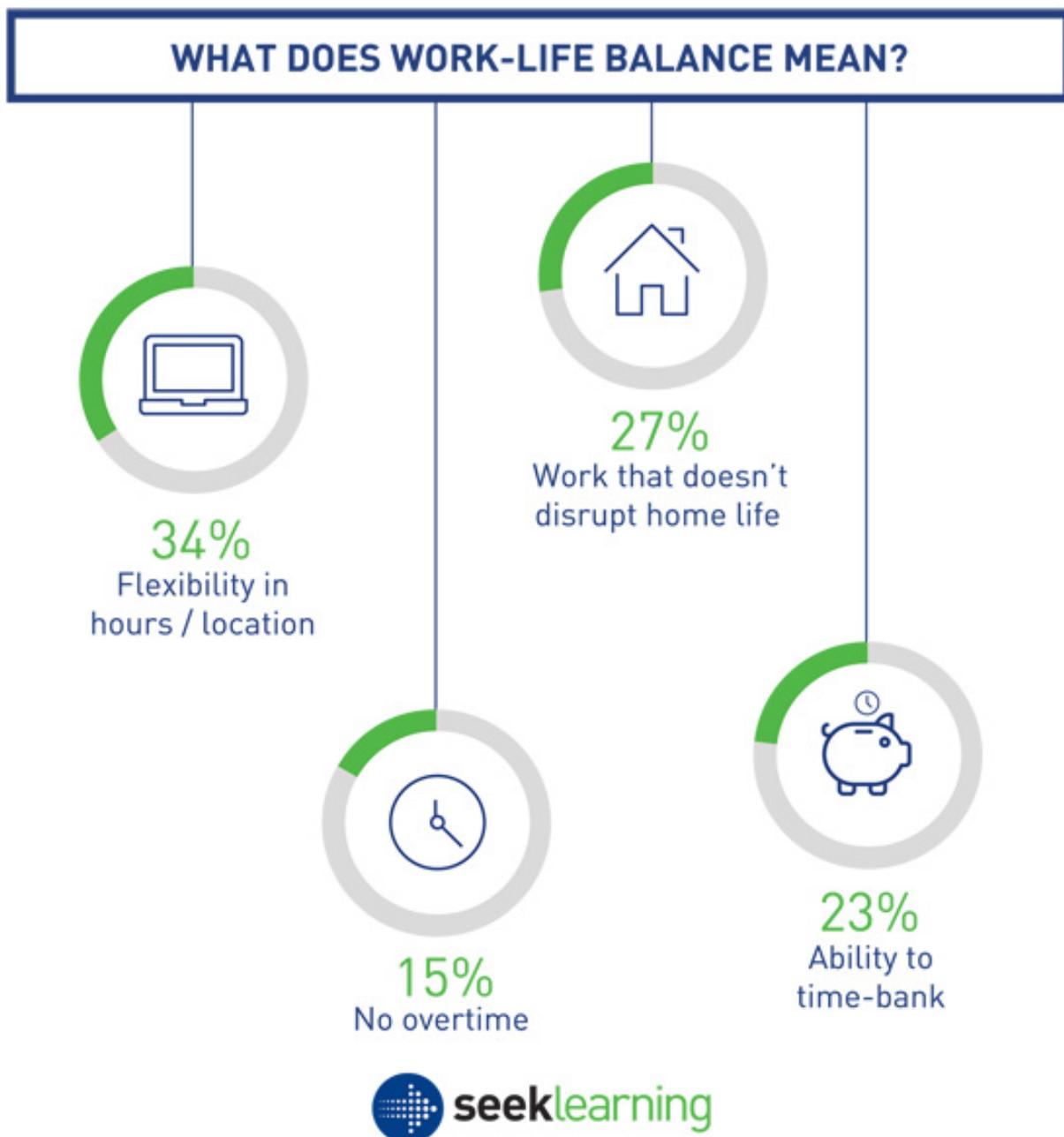
What is work-life balance anyway?

Philosopher Alain de Botton may have [declared](#) that "There is no such thing as work-life balance. Everything worth fighting for unbalances your life," but those buried in work with little time for other pursuits probably have other views.

Work-life balance means different things to different people — what matters to some is less important to others, the [SEEK Learning Defining Work-Life Balance Report](#) found.

As Handy observes, "...it would help for companies to see themselves as communities whose members have individual needs, as well as individual skills and talents. They are not anonymous human resources".

Surveying professionals across Australia, [SEEK Learning](#) found four different interpretations of work-life balance



Flexibility brings “staggering” increase in engagement, says BAE Systems

Flexible work has been an important part of the human resources strategy for the nation’s largest defence contractor BAE Systems Australia for the past five years.

It was quite an advanced concept when it was introduced considering the “traditional” working environment, says BAE System’s Leadership and Talent Manager, Joanne Hansen.

“People really wondered how we’d make this work,” she says.

The company followed the usual path: writing a flexibility policy, then promoting it to the workforce but the key thing that helped cement its success was to check how it was working with a survey every year for the first four years.

“That really shifted things because we were able to identify the blockers to progressing flexibility in our workplace,” says Hansen.

Last year, the company stepped up its flexibility policy, using changes in the working environment and technology to improve flexibility during the working day.

“For example, in one area there’s a collaboration table, some use sit-stand desks and most of the work stations have two screens. Everyone has been given a ‘soft phone’ – the ability to make phone calls through their computer so it doesn’t matter where you’re working from, people can still reach you.”

The approach has paid off. “Recently I’ve had so many new starters comment about how flexible we are, and how we do exactly what we promise we’re going to do,” says Hansen. Tangible indicators of success include significant real estate savings and a “staggering” increase in engagement.

“Based on survey results, 95% of people work as productively, or more productively, in the new environment,” Hansen says.

Working on the balance in a not-for-profit, according to Australian Red Cross

Providing work-life balance in a not-for-profit organisation brings its own set of challenges.

Limited resources and unlimited demand are a tricky mix to navigate when considering the needs of workers and volunteers, says Australian Red Cross Human Resources Director, Chris Steinfort.

“People join Australian Red Cross because of what we stand for, the work we do and because they have a skill set they’re keen to use. It means they’re highly committed to do the best by their programs, their communities and their clients,” says Steinfort.

The organisation sees its flexibility policies – including part-time work — as an important way of achieving the work-life balance.

Steinfort points out that Australia’s industrial relations framework has been based on the notion of full-time work. In most organisations, an employee would need to give their employer a reason for flexible working hours, such as having younger children at home.

“But I may just want flexible hours and the reason isn’t relevant to the employer – I shouldn’t have to justify it. If the employer can match it, that’s fine,” says Steinfort.

Australian Red Cross has been working on a new approach that considers the needs of the organisation and the individual first, and where part-time work is seen as legitimate as full-time work.

“We’ve tried to challenge the power-balance. Part of it is redefining how you see work and the outputs of work. The most productive worker isn’t always sitting in the office at a desk,” Steinfort says.

Who’s happy with their work-life balance?

The best work-life balance in Australia is to be found outside of the major population centres.

A clear majority of professionals in the Australian Capital Territory (68%), Tasmania (62%) and regional areas were the happiest with their mix of working and personal lives, according to the SEEK Learning research. Although Victoria was the exception. Melbourne professionals (63%) were more satisfied with their work-life balance than those in regional Victoria (57%).

WORK-LIFE BALANCE: CITY VS COUNTRY

Comparison of happy workers by state



And, as you'd expect, professions and industry sectors matter when it comes to levels of work-life balance.

More than two-thirds of human resources professionals thought their work-life balance was either excellent or good. Most professionals in the real estate, consulting and strategy, and insurance or superannuation sectors agreed.

WORK-LIFE BALANCE BY INDUSTRY



Among those industry sectors where professionals ranked their work-life balance as poor or terrible were call centres and customer service; procurement, manufacturing or transport; administration or office support; and design and architecture.

Marketing and communications professionals are split on the issue — they made it to both lists.

Read what employment experiences matter most to employees on [SEEK Company Reviews](#).