



**JOHN
HOLLAND**

NSW Government
Women In Construction Industry Innovation Program

Flex from the Start: Evaluation Executive Summary

9 July 2024

Executive summary

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Highlights

- As one of Australia's biggest employers, the construction industry could be a game changer for women's equality. But inflexible masculine norms and working practices are locking women out of construction.
- Flex from the Start empowered workers on three construction sites to co-design their own flexible work trials, which were observed over an eight-month period.
- The interventions that were role modelled by leaders and adopted by all team members were the most successful.
- Successful interventions included a compressed working week, rostered time off, and flexible working plans tailored to individuals' needs.
- While the move to flexible work is positive, unless there is a change to the overall long working hours in construction there will be ongoing negative impacts on worker wellbeing and women's participation.
- A longer study period would allow more time to gather information on how to shift workplace behaviours and attitudes to flexible work.



Introduction

The construction sector continues to be Australia's most male-dominated industry, despite efforts to correct the gender imbalance. A key barrier to women's participation is the inflexibility of working practices and long work hours, which are incompatible with the domestic and caring responsibilities that many women carry. Until now, there has been little research to evaluate what types of flexible work could make the construction industry more inclusive.

About Flex from the Start

In the Flex from the Start project, Australian construction firm John Holland invited a Melbourne University-led research team to study flexible work initiatives on three Sydney construction sites. Workers on the three sites were given education about flexible work ('flex') and supported to design interventions to suit their needs. The project set out to understand what types of flexible work could improve conditions for all workers on construction sites, particularly women. The results will guide John Holland in its wider roll out of flexible work strategies and could be adopted by wider industry.

This report outlines the initiatives that were trialled, and contains analysis of the results, including the factors that enabled and constrained the interventions, the outcomes and benefits. The report also highlights the experiences of John Holland employees and project leaders and what they found valuable in the interventions. It contributes novel and practical information on the types of flexible work initiatives that showed promise on construction sites and the factors in their success.

The research was conducted from October 2023 to May 2024, however not all of the interventions operated for this entire period. Flex from the Start was funded by the NSW Government Women in Construction Industry Innovation Program (IIP).

Project Sites		
Next Rail	M7-M12 Integration Project	Waterloo Over Station Development
Interventions		
No Meetings Monday Blocking the entire project team's calendar so that meetings could not be scheduled on this day.	Flex boards Each team member had a whiteboard showing what flex was being taken up by whom and when.	Early finish Site supervisors and engineers had the opportunity to finish at 3pm once a week.
Trial 9 A compressed nine-day fortnight roster with increased daily work hours over nine days, and a scheduled day off on the tenth day.	Five-day work week Working Monday to Friday, no work on weekends.	Individual flex plans Each team member has their own plan for flexible work.
		Five-day work week Working Monday to Friday, no work on weekends.

The challenge of flexible work in construction

Achieving flexible work in construction is vital if the sector is to be a more inclusive, satisfying, and safer place to work in the future. Flexible work has been found to improve job effectiveness, job satisfaction, and help manage work overload for both men and women. It helps companies attract and retain employees who feel positively about their employer. It could be transformational in the construction sector, where women currently make up only 12% of the workforce.

In industries where long and rigid hours are the norm, flexibility carries stigma. As it is usually women employees who need to seek alternatives, they are penalised with the resulting embarrassment or guilt. A lack of leadership and trust in the workplace can also stand in the way of flexibility. The construction industry is not alone in facing these obstacles. But there are additional factors unique to the sector which make the introduction of flexible work more challenging.

More than employees in other sectors, construction workers' time at work is not their own. They are at the mercy of contractual arrangements, the demands of clients, the activities of other contractors and the schedules of special machinery on site. Some workers are incentivised to work more hours, and across the board, workers are valued if they can be available for long working days.





Key findings

Direct outcomes of Flex from the Start were:

- Participants' knowledge about flexible work and the factors that enable flexible work improved.
- Participants' experience of different flexible work options for different onsite roles improved.
- Long working hours remained a significant issue on all three projects. Even after the introduction of successful flexible working interventions, more than half of survey respondents reported working more than 50 hours per week.

Interventions that improved flexibility were:

- A compressed work week, in the form of a five-day week and a nine-day fortnight
- Rostered time off, in this case, an early finish once a week
- Individual flex plans, which gave everyone in a team access to flex that was tailored to them.

Factors in the success of the interventions were:

- **Leadership:** where leaders actively role modelled flexible work and shared why it was important to them, the rest of the team was more likely to participate.
- **Resource planning:** putting thought into how to cover for team members who were working flexibly, and adequate staffing for projects.
- **Commitment:** where teams took flexible work seriously and showed an 'all-in' approach, the intervention was more likely to succeed than where they were treated as optional and ad hoc.

Some key enablers for flexible work were identified:

- **Raising awareness:** Before Flex from the Start, there was limited understanding about what flexible work was, and the different ways it could be applied. Facilitated training and education challenged long-held misperceptions about flexible work and allowed teams to take a more considered and creative approach to designing their interventions.
- **Communication:** When interventions were supported by effective communication, team members felt engaged, had clear instructions on how to get involved, and understood each other's flexible work needs. Communication also helped to make the interventions transparent and helped to normalise participation in flexible work.

Some factors that constrained flexible work were:

- **Long working hours:** To deliver projects to the schedule set out in their contracts, site teams were required to work more hours than the national employment standard or else face financial penalties. As demands on sites increased, the use of the flexible work interventions declined.
- **Gender norms, values and behaviours:** The rigid work practices in construction operate around gender norms that position men as breadwinners and women as carers. Construction work has not moved on – it still values employees who uphold these norms by being present for long, inflexible shifts. Despite the education and training, there were still workers who rejected flex, or who perpetuated shame and stigma around taking flex.

The experiences of participants

Workers who were involved in successful interventions reported a range of benefits, from increased wellbeing and work-life balance, to reduced stress, better fatigue management and improved planning and productivity at work.

Participants in the five-day work week said:

"... it's probably brought me closer to the family ... I've got a seven-year-old that's starting to play cricket and soccer ... So, it's obviously allowed me to be around a lot more, which is great, personally."

—Management

"It's definitely a good thing to have a five-day work week. It's like, you don't get stressed as easily about things as well, like if you've got multiple things on your plate during work. Able to make better decisions. Work better. So, I think it's definitely a good thing that we should continue."

—Non-management



Participants who had an early finish once a week said:

"Got more freedom. Have a better interaction with the team [sic]. They're a lot more relaxed. They feel close[er] together."

—Management

"I think it improves the relationship [with co-workers] because I think there's something nice about you covering someone while they take their early day and vice versa."

—Non-management

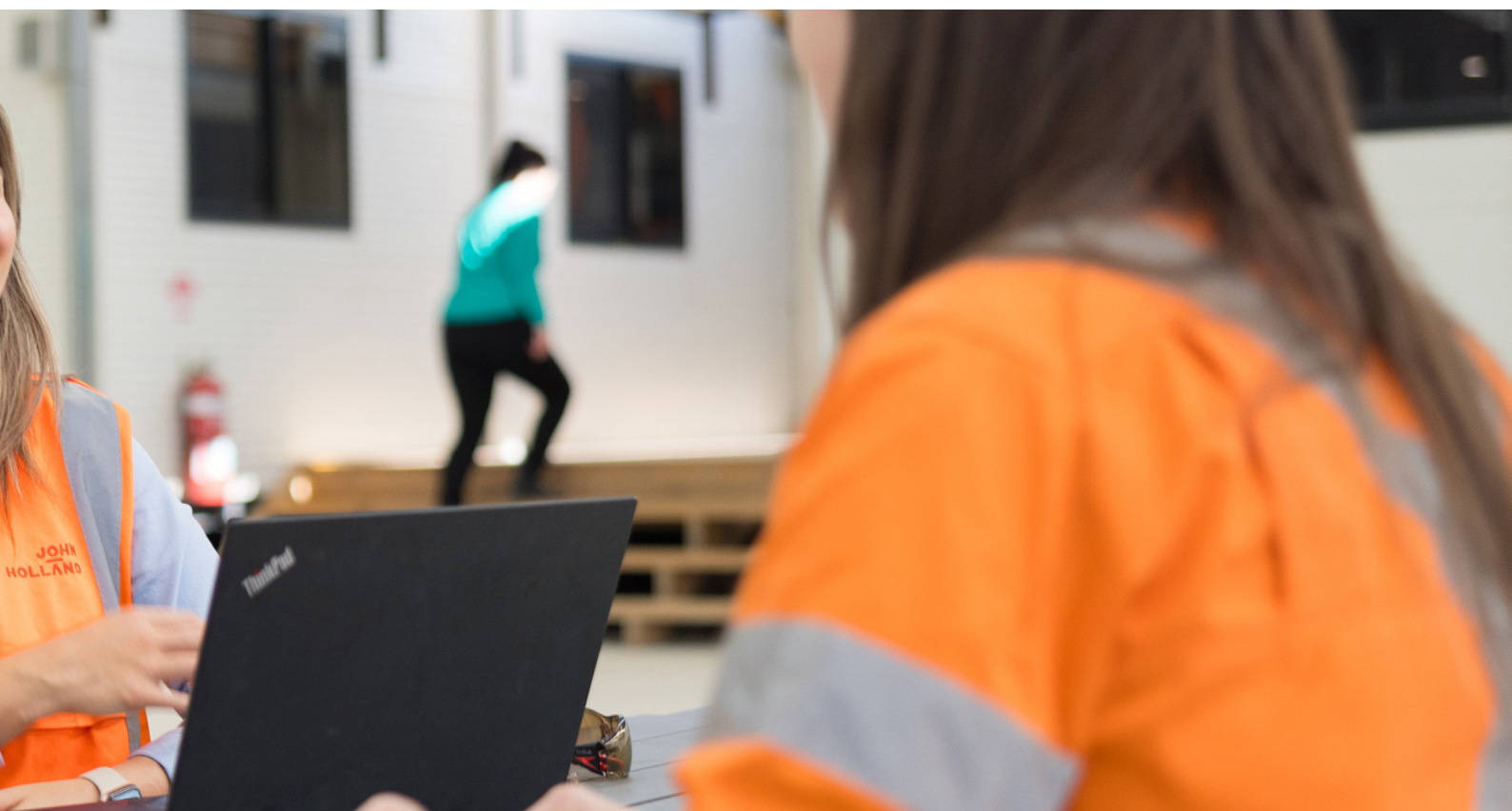
Participants in the trial of a nine-day fortnight, known as Trial 9, said:

"It's been good for me. I spend Thursdays now with my grandson, so it's really good. Don't really get a chance to see him that much on the weekends, really, and Trial 9 gave me the ability to spend some valuable time with him."

—Management

"You just wanna smash out the work. You just wanna get everything done. It doesn't matter if I have to work more than like I'm used to. I'm like, 'I'll do it. I don't care,' because I know I'm refreshed. I feel good. I don't have to feel like I have to rush home all the time to do stuff 'cause I've already done it. It feels good."

—Non-management



Key recommendations

This report makes 18 recommendations, in no particular order, to John Holland on how to successfully embed flexible work initiatives into its business. Many of these recommendations can also be applied to wider industry. The recommendations are grouped into six focus areas: skill building, accountability, adherence, leadership, transparency and resource planning. These are some of the highlights.

The detailed recommendations include:

Theme	Recommendation
Skill building	1. Develop leaders' skills in operationalising flexible work
	2. Use inhouse expertise to roll out flex
Accountability	3. Act on work hours and presenteeism
	4. Allow workers to rest on weekends
	5. Manage and eliminate psychosocial risks
	6. Align company values and leaders' behaviours
	7. Incorporate flexibility in the company values, action statements
Leadership	8. Lead by example
	9. Develop people management skills
	10. Empower leaders to work flexibly
	11. Listen to leaders on how to support flexible work.
Adherence	12. Take an 'all in' approach
	13. Move from the enabling to the implementing
	14. Use pilots to encourage innovation
	15. Monitor progress
Transparency	16. Communicate widely
Resource planning	17. Plan a workforce with adequate coverage
	18. Audit technology to find efficiencies

Develop skills in how to operate a flexible workplace

Project leaders and team members must be supported to gain more knowledge about flexible work, and how to apply it to frontline construction roles. Participants from Flex from the Start could be invited to deliver the training, making it more authentic and providing first-hand case studies.

Act on work hours and presenteeism

The benefits of flexible work may be undermined unless excessive working hours are reduced. One recommendation is to make reduced work hour targets a KPI for leaders. To overcome presenteeism, it is important that leaders shift their mindsets. It is not the number of hours worked that matters, but the delivery of outputs.

Leaders must role model flexible work.

The research found leaders must 'walk the talk' – not only actively communicating the benefits of flexible work but taking advantage of it. However, project directors and project managers were often either too overburdened or otherwise reluctant to take flex. One recommendation is for further study into how flex can be applied to these leadership positions.

Communicate widely to normalise flex

Communicating about interventions while they are operating helps to make the processes transparent and accessible to everyone.

It is also important to continually reinforce the many reasons why flex is important, and the many ways it can be adapted. Stories about how flexible work is also benefiting men and linking flex to safety (e.g. reducing psychosocial risks) will help to normalise it.

Put more time into workforce planning

Flexible working is more successful for frontline construction roles when individuals can be substituted while they are offsite. More time should be invested into workforce planning that allows this coverage to happen, including resourcing plans, rosters, flexible work schedules and handover procedures. This should be factored into projects from the tender stage.

Continue the research into flexible work

Because Flex from the Start studied the interventions for only a brief period (eight months), it is recommended to continue the interventions and do a follow-up study to understand the longer-term effects. An economic evaluation of the interventions could also be of benefit after initiatives are rolled out across John Holland, to measure the value for money, cost effectiveness and cost-benefit.

"18 recommendations to John Holland on how to successfully embed flexibility... can also be applied wider industry."





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