

Working Time Arrangements and Recreation: Making Time for Weekends when Working Long Hours

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Abstract

Work time spread across the entire week, rather than the conventional five day working week, has meant that workers are now less able to utilise longer stretches of recreation time especially in gaining access to a full two-day break over a weekend. This paper explores the issues contributing to workers' acquisition of longer recreation time. It seeks to determine the effects of this acquisition on the quality of working and non-working time for the employee through a study of work-life balance in the construction industry. It finds that weekends are more important to achieving work-life balance than shorter days over a six-day week when working long hours. Further, 'personal time' is a key element in achieving satisfactory work-life balance for employees, and this type of 'time' is often forgone in trying to integrate the necessary and desired non-work activities in the shorter time available to workers.

Introduction

Early industrial campaigns to reduce long working hours across the entire week also provided a defined break between sets of working days. The 40-hour week campaign featured the notion of eight hours labour, eight hours rest and eight hours recreation (Love, 2006). While each day can deliver a full eight hours work and eight hours rest, the main unbroken length of time for eight hours recreation

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is a long break, typically a weekend. Since the 1980s, however, there is evidence to suggest that opportunities for weekend 'long breaks' are being eroded through work intensification, longer working hours, split shifts and casual employment (Roberts 2007; La Valle et al. 2002). Such situations have had negative impacts on employees' ability to enjoy unbroken periods of recreation time, and the effect is particularly acute in industries characterised by a long hours work culture and pressured work environments (Campbell, 2002).

Unions have a history of mounting campaigns to reduce working long hours (Love 2006); but some industries, such as construction, retain long working hours (Lingard and Francis 2004). Within the construction industry, the six-day working week and long working hours have become an industry standard (Lingard and Francis 2004, 2005, 2007). This standard has resulted in the inability of many employees within the industry to acquire longer stretches of recreation time. Long work hours have been consistently linked to difficulties in balancing work and personal life (Guerts, Rutte and Peeters 1999; Moen and Yu 2000; Batt and Valcour 2003). The relationship between work hours and work-life balance is reported to be strong and direct. For example, Tausig and Fenwick (2001) report that as work hours per week increased, employees' work-life balance declined sharply. Hence it is reasonable to suppose that employees in the construction industry working more than 60 hours a week over six days, with only one day per week break, have scope to improve their work-life balance by alterations to their working time commitments. The question this paper examines is: how do these alterations affect the use of recreational time?

We explore the notion of the 'long break'—that is, a break of at least two days between the end of one working week and the beginning of the next. The literature review is structured around exploring the notion of long work hours and the consequences of balancing work and non-work activities. A brief overview of the long work hours nature of the construction industry is then presented, followed by the methodology used for the research. The findings illustrate the importance of quality recreation time and the 'long break' to the work-life balance of construction employees and present implications for research and organisational practice.

Literature Review

Work-life balance (WLB) has emerged over the last twenty years as an important social and employment issue. Guest's (2002, p. 263) definition of this term is a 'perceived balance between work and the rest of life'.

While work and family are an important sub-set of the work-life literature (Pocock and Clark 2005), studies are also examining a wide range of considerations that allow for combining work with other activities such as recreation. Ransome (2007) argues that the assumption that 'work' means paid work and 'life' refers to care work and family responsibilities is limited in that it ignores the importance of recreation. Work-life balance policies and working time arrangements are key elements in providing a satisfactory balance between work and non-work activities; but may create tensions within organisations.

WLB and Time Allocation

The deleterious effects of work-life imbalance have received extensive attention. Evidence suggests that these effects can range from family relationship breakdown (Pocock 2003), stress and burnout (Lingard 2004) and fatigue (Dawson et al 2001; Sluiter, Van Der Beek and Frings-Dressen 1999). Long and extended hours, irregular shifts and weekend work are some of the factors that contribute to negative work-life balance. Chatzitheochari and Arber (2009) examine the long work hours culture in Britain, and in particular the impact on sleep duration, finding that both men and women working very long hours were most likely to have short sleep duration. It has been long established that disrupted sleep and sleep deprivation can have a significantly deleterious effect on work performance (Dawson et al. 2001).

The increase in weekend work has also been examined, especially the effects of 'unsociable' work hours. Bittman (2005) argues that weekend work is justifiably considered 'unsociable' because of the numerous negative effects it has on family time and recreation. Bittman found that employees who worked on Sundays had less personal care time (e.g., sleeping, bathing and grooming), less involvement in community activities and fewer opportunities to catch up on domestic work, and experienced reduced social times and recreation. Working on Sunday was clearly associated with reductions in family time and the opportunity to pursue leisure activities. More importantly, Sunday workers were found to be unable to recuperate the lost time on other days of the week, with significant negative implications for work-life balance.

Work-life balance is a pertinent issue for Human Resource Management (HRM) as it is a key element of recruitment and retention strategies (De Cieri et al 2005). There is evidence to suggest that poor work-life balance leads to low morale, poor performance and risks to mental and physical health (Townsend et al. 2003; Mesmer-Magnus and Viswesvaran 2006). There is some evidence that where WLB initiatives are introduced successfully, there can be a positive association

with reduced absenteeism, organisational performance and productivity (Allen 2001; Konrad and Mangel 2000; Perry-Smith and Blum 2000). For example, Perry-Smith and Blum, in their study of a national sample of U.S firms, suggest that firms with more extensive work-family policies have higher perceived firm-level performance. The perceptual measures of firm performance included organisational performance, market performance and profit sales and growth. Similarly Konrad and Mangel found that work-life balance programs have a positive impact on workplace productivity, which is measured by a standard measure of productivity – the logarithm of sales per employee. A number of studies has examined the take-up and effectiveness of work-life balance options and has identified a number of barriers to their implementation. A negative and unsupportive work-life culture is also a key issue for many firms (De Cieri et al. 2005; Bryan 2007). One way of promoting WLB is to shorten the duration of the working week while preserving the number of working hours. This type of initiative retains salary at the same level while delivering a shorter working week, particularly giving access to a weekend for those working six-day weeks. The compressed work week (CWW) refers to compressing the number of hours worked in a week into fewer days. CWWs are not new (Barton-Cunningham 1981, 1982), and certainly are an area with substantial research interest, especially in terms of improving the work-life balance of employees (c.f. Bamba et al. 2009). Compressing the number of hours worked in a week to fewer days is a means with which organisations have attempted to experiment in their production/service capacities. The majority of research on CWWs indicates positive effects on the WLB balance of the workers involved, particularly, the reduction of job-related stress and fatigue (e.g., Pierce and Dunham 1992; Freer and Murphy-Black 1995; Vega and Gilbert 2001; Townsend et al. 2003), although there are some studies reporting worsening WLB results (Todd et al 1993; Campolo et al. 1998). The purpose of this study is to understand better the way employees perceive their WLB and make use of their altered recreation time patterns once they have shifted to a CWW. The examination of the change to long work hours over a shorter working week provides a novel way to examine changes to work-life balance without a reduction in working hours per week. The contribution of this study to existing literature is the focus on the impact of increased recreation time over a full weekend and the way in which this can be achieved through workplace initiatives.

Policy and Regulation of Working Time

The prevalence of a long work hours culture within Australia has been attributed to the nation's weak working time regulation which contributes to extended working time for many employees (Peetz et al. 2003; Van Wanrooy and Wilson

2006). Compared to other European countries such as France, Australia has few institutional working limits to long working hours (Campbell 2002).

Unions have long been involved in efforts to reduce long working hours for their members (Blyton 2008; Campbell, 2002). In the United Kingdom, the Trade Union Council (TUC) has developed a range of campaigns to address imbalances in working time expectations (Kersley et al 2006) and the 35-hour week legislation in France was driven by unions, leading to a greater role for them in determining working time controls (Alis 2004). Although more recent Australian Bureau of Statistics Labour Force data indicate that the overall number of hours Australians have been working has declined in recent years (ABS 2009). Gregory and Milner's (2009) cross-national study of the role of trade unions in WLB found that unions have a marginal impact on the process of introducing and implementing work-life policies. This is attributed to the fact that while unions have a role to play in improving work-life initiatives, they are largely dependent on leveraging opportunities structured around national working time legislation, social policy and organisational initiatives (Townsend et al 2009). Attention to ensure long breaks over a weekend to deliver WLB may engender a return to the union movement's agenda as an important contribution to balancing work and non-work.

WLB and Other Areas of 'Life'

The importance of recreation in relation to work-life balance has recently gained increasing recognition. In particular, work to date in this area suggests that recreation should be viewed as an integral part of work-life balance rather than something that is achieved once the other 'life' activities such as chores and child rearing have been completed (Ransome 2007). Robert's (2008) study argues that the current perception of work-life balance is simplistic and creates an artificial separation between 'work' and 'life'. The study found that paid work time is easily categorised and therefore time outside of work is seen as less productive and thus is bundled into the term—'life'. The findings demonstrate that 'work' and 'life' are interconnected and more importantly, that the participants of the study were subjugating work to their overall life in order to create 'me time'. Similarly, Ransome (2007) highlights the need to recognise recreation as an important factor affecting work-life decisions. Ransome (2007) holds that recreation should be distinct from market and non-paid work (chores). Furthermore, the importance of rest to better undertake activities is well understood, particularly in the Occupational Health and Safety literature (Di Milia and Bowden 2007); however, the relationship that recreation shares with work, in particular long working hours, has been under-examined. While there is increasing recognition of recreation as an integral part of WLB, it is arguable that greater information is needed on the effects of long

working hours on an employee's recreation, in particular the inability to acquire longer stretches of recreation through a long break or weekend.

In view of this need in the literature, the current research seeks to contribute to this body of knowledge by examining long work hours and the impact on a workers' ability to achieve adequate recreation time. The notion of eight hours work, eight hours rest and eight hours recreation means that for many employees, uninterrupted time for recreation is only available on the weekends or a long break, but long work hours, work intensification and atypical work schedules have threatened the ability of workers to acquire such time. In order to examine the effects of WLB and recreation time through the acquisition of the long break, this research seeks to answer the following questions:

- What are the effects of long work hours on workers' recreation time?
- What is the impact of longer stretches of non-work time on recreation?
- Background to Working Time in the Australian Construction Industry

The Australian construction industry is a very demanding work environment characterised by long work hours and non-standard working weeks involving weekend shifts. A survey conducted by Lingard and Francis (2004) indicate that the average site based employee in the construction industry works 62.5 hours per week. Research in this context has identified a number of problems associated with the industry's current work environment. The long work hours, tight deadlines and competitive tendering are argued to affect significantly the non-work lives of employees. These effects include disruption to family life (Lingard and Sublet 2002), fatigue and burnout (Smallwood and Ehrlich 1999; Lingard 2004), implications for health and general well-being (Brenner and Ahern 2000), and risks in relation to Occupational Health and Safety (Biggs et al, Davey 2005). Furthermore, experiments with altered working time arrangements in Australia's construction industry have found that compressed hours can lead to increased employee recovery time, increased satisfaction with working time arrangements, better relationships with family, and increased workplace safety (Townsend et al. 2009). Despite this evidence and unions attempts to address workplace health and safety issues, employees within construction continue to face a number of work-life balance challenges that are particular to the industry's culture of extended work hours.

Method

Data were collected through a longitudinal case study approach which involved a large Queensland infrastructure project. The case selected was an alliance project

comprising a number of major contracted construction firms. At commencement of the project, the site was operating on a 57.5 hour week spread over six days, and working within a pressured work environment with tight project deadlines. This typically involved 10 hours per day on week days and seven and a half hours on Saturday. This configuration is not uncommon within the construction industry and as research suggests, places employees at greater risk of work-life conflict (Lingard and Francis 2005). In an attempt to alleviate this, management in consultation with employees and unions implemented a compressed working week model — a significant change from the industry standard of the six-day working week. The new model involved a compulsory five-day working week with an extra hour added to each day during the week (Monday to Friday). This marked a major change to the roster and to worksite management by allowing employees to utilise the full weekend. The objective was to enable employees to use this time for non-work responsibilities and activities without impacting upon pay or site productivity as the total number of working hours remained the same.

A longitudinal study allowed an examination of the participants' views of the working arrangements, both 2 months after the change, and their sustained reactions 3 months later, giving the change opportunity to take effect. The first round of data was collected via semi-structured interviews in March 2005 and the second round three months later in June. Efforts were made to capture the same participants in time two, and as such, 14 participants were interviewed in both rounds. The nature of this intervention meant that the working hours across the week remained the same; therefore, by controlling for working hours, this provided a good means to understand in particular the effects of compressed working hours and the 'long break'.

Data Collection and Method of Analysis

Semi-structured interviews were undertaken across various positions within the alliance to ensure a wide cross-section of roles was included in the study given that the intervention affected all occupational groups. Positions included managerial, administration staff, engineers, and labourers. A total of 33 interviews were conducted. Nineteen participants across this spectrum of roles were interviewed at time 1, including 14 salary and five wages staff. Three months after the introduction of the compressed week, 14 of these participants were interviewed again (10 salary and four wages).

The first round of interview questions were structured to gather information about the participant's current workload and responsibilities, including non-work activities and responsibilities, work-life challenges and how the participants negotiated these

challenges. Demographic information was also collected at this time. The second round of interview questions focused on changes to work or non-work activities, and descriptions of the employee's work-life balance to identify if there was a change from the first round of interviews. Analysis of the data involved thematic coding of main work-life issues and the constant comparative method to uncover the main issues and themes that arose during the interviews and to compare the observations and ensure consistency of responses (Cavana et al, 2001, 170).

Findings

Two main themes emerged from both the blue collar and white collar participants' discussions of their WLB prior to the introduction of the five day working week. These were fatigue, and a lack of time for leisure and 'enjoyable' activities. The data collected at Time Two highlighted significant differences in the way that the participants allocated their time with an evident shift towards more recreation and rest.

Time One

Fatigue

The interviews conducted at Time One of the research found that the staff often commented on the long work hours and the various negative implications this had on their non-work time and their physical and psychological well-being. Fatigue was a common complaint of the staff, with many employees feeling physically and mentally tired after working six days a week. This is best reflected in the following statement:

Yes, it is 100 per cent on how it was. Used to get home Saturday afternoon at half past two and all you wanted to do was have two or three hours camp because you were buggered from the week. (White collar employee)

The long work hours and Saturday shifts clearly had a detrimental effect on the work-life balance of the participants, with many complaining of tiredness and fatigue. This in turn hindered their ability to enjoy the weekend, with many expressing that they were not able to do anything other than rest after work on Saturday which reduced their time to pursue 'enjoyable activities'. As another white collar employee participant commented: 'You do Saturdays, and you get home Saturday afternoon—just tired, you couldn't do anything that afternoon.'

Similar feelings of fatigue that hindered the employee's ability to enjoy the weekend were common statements among the participants. Physiological effects such

as fatigue can have serious detrimental effects on the health and well-being of employees if continued for a long period of time (Sluiter et al, 1999).

Reduced Time for Leisure Activities

The six-day work week also hindered the employee's ability to pursue recreation time, thus further compounding the feelings of fatigue discussed above. For many participants, the only time available to complete non-market work such as chores, family duties and community activities was on the weekend. However, this left very little time for anything else as both non-market work and leisure was restricted to Sunday.

Because we used to work on a Saturday. So you got one day to sleep in. And usually on that day you had to do all the chores around the house. There was always something to do. So you never really got plenty of time. (White collar employee)

Furthermore, the inability to utilise the whole weekend limited the participants' choice of recreation, with some noting that planned trips away were often not feasible when working six days a week because of the preparation involved. In particular, one participant noted that the ability to have a weekend away was very important and that this would not have been possible working six days.

But we do plan more long term things—like overnight, camp on the boat, or getting away which we didn't use to have the luxury of doing. So I would be loath to have to give that up. Absolutely. (White collar employee)

It is evident that a longer stretch of time for recreation was needed for the participants to 'get away' from work. Working six days a week, however, clearly hindered the participants' ability to pursue those activities which are important aspects of work-life balance. Other activities that the participants enjoyed during non-work time include sailing, woodwork, surfing and exercise. The interviews revealed that being able to participate in these activities was important but restricted due to fatigue or lack of time.

Time Two

The data collected at Time Two, three months after the initial round of interviews, clearly highlighted the benefits of being able to acquire longer stretches of recreation though the five-day compressed week. These benefits ranged from more time for family and social activities, increased opportunities for leisure interests, improved

wellbeing and reduced feelings of fatigue. There was strong support for the change with many participants citing improvements to work-life balance. In particular, the interviews revealed that under the five-day working week, the participants utilised the extra time on the weekend to pursue recreation and leisure interests. This is best reflected in the following statement:

I wouldn't get home until three o'clock, so that pretty much cans that day. So nothing much gets done that day. Sunday there is always the lawns to mow or there's all the other jobs to do around the place. So it was just a consistent, working, working...whereas, now, there is break time, there's quality time. So it's excellent for me, personally. (Blue collar employee)

One participant recounted that the change had encouraged his family to pursue recreation activities that were not possible under the six-day week, for example, camping and weekend trips away. Another employee started surfing again which he believed would not have been as easy under the old working pattern. Overall, there was clear support for the change with many participants in favour of the five-day week even though they were still working the same hours. The ability to pursue leisure interests through the longer stretch of recreation time was a significant positive change for the workers, with many citing improvements to overall work-life balance and well-being.

Improved Work-Life Balance and Well-Being

It is evident from the interviews that the pursuit of leisure and recreation was important for the participants, and therefore being able to participate in these activities was a significant advantage of the change. As one participant expressed:

I think one of the things about working a five-day week here has made me realise that I'll never work six days again. (Blue collar employee)

It is arguable that the longer break led to greater satisfaction with work-life balance and well-being. Feeling more refreshed and ready to return to work on Monday was a change experienced by most of the participants. Having the full weekend allowed the employees to experience a 'break' from work which was not possible under the six-day week, despite keeping the same number of hours worked across the working week.

This 'break' is distinct from non-market work such as chores, with many participants perceiving that it gave them the ability to pursue 'enjoyable' activities. The longer stretch of time afforded the participants more time to fulfil the necessary non-

market work, including rest, but also to undertake the activities in which they were interested. Rather than combining non-market work and recreation into one day, employees found that having the full weekend more easily enabled the pursuit of activities such as socialising, hobbies and spending time with family. The benefits of recreation, in particular increased energy levels, are highlighted in the following comment:

I find that you do feel tired but the weekend rejuvenates you. So gives you a bit more energy because you get to do the things you want to do and you look forward to the weekends a bit more. (White collar employee)

This is further demonstrated in the following statement which highlights a greater ability to pursue activities of personal interest, resulting in similar reported improvements to well-being.

I've got more time on the weekends. I am more energetic. The weekends I have now can be productive as well. I am finding I am doing everything I need to do. Whereas before I couldn't really do much apart from the general chores, Couldn't do anything outside... (White collar employee)

The feelings of greater energy and an improved work-life balance are attributed to the longer break, and are significant improvements to the complaints of fatigue and stress identified in the interviews conducted in Time One.

Discussion

Lautsch and Scully (2007) highlight the reasons behind why working class employees may strongly oppose overtime reduction despite benefits to work-family balance, especially when reductions to work hours leads to lost overtime hours and a reduction in pay. The study found that employees 'chose' overtime over a reduction in hours in order to meet financial responsibilities. Our findings support this research as although the majority of employees strongly supported the compressed working week model, there was some resistance from two wage staff who perceived the loss of the Saturday penalty rates to be a significant disadvantage of the change. While the 'take-home pay' for the wages staff remained the same under the new roster, in the winter months the reduced weekly working hours resulted in a slight reduction of income for wage employees. However, only two staff out of the total participants were unhappy with the loss of income and these two employees reported they preferred to work rather than have the weekend time off:

Yes. When winter comes—less hours during the day because of darkness—and we'd have to work the Saturday. But that hasn't happened. Because the idea of this, we do the hours—keep the pay the same, wouldn't lose any money. If we are not working Saturdays when we are supposed to be, we are losing cash. (Blue collar employee)

In comparison, the income of the salary staff remained unaffected by the change, and there was undivided support for the weekend break despite the longer hours during the week. This finding demonstrates that while the compressed work week's objective was to improve the work-life balance for all employee groups, there was a mixed response due to the different wage structures for salaried and wage staff. This finding highlights the tension between being able to pursue recreational activities whilst still maintaining the same income. These time-versus-money tensions have been discussed in depth elsewhere (Townsend et al. 2009; Lingard et al. 2008), and highlight that salary staff and wages staff are two distinct groups of workers within the Australian construction industry, and this distinction influences their responses to the compressed work week. While the increase in leisure did not incur a financial trade-off for the salary employees, the potential loss of Saturday penalty rates for wages employees was a concern as it reduced their weekly 'take home' pay.

Long Hours and Absence of a 'Long Break' and the Pursuit of Personal Time

The findings of the study suggest that it is not necessarily the long hours that contribute to work-life imbalance, but also the absence of longer recreation time. The participants were still working mostly the same hours in the compressed working week but enjoyed significant improvements to WLB by having the whole weekend available to them. This finding supports other international studies which demonstrate that simply reducing work hours does not necessarily lead to improved work-life balance (Fagnani and Letablier 2004; Wooden, Darren and Drago 2009), especially when retaining pay levels is a key requirement for workers. The study showed that while working hours remained the same across the week, the compressed work week allowed for positive work-life benefits by affording the employees the 'long break'.

The negative effects of working six days a week such as fatigue, lack of time for enjoyable activities and a lack of personal time were the main concerns of the participants. Analysis conducted by Bittman (2005) found that employees who work on Sunday are often unable to make up for the lost personal time during

the week (Monday to Friday). This resulted in the workers experiencing a fall in recreation and social activities, less time for sleeping and personal care and less opportunity to catch up on household activities. Similarly to these findings, our research indicates that the same negative effects are incurred for employees who work Saturday shifts.

This study highlights the importance of the weekend and the long break, as for many employees the time lost on weekend shifts is often not regained during the working week, thus significantly reducing time traditionally reserved for recreation and family activities. The findings of this study illustrate that recreation and personal time are important for many employees, and that when afforded the longer break through the compressed working week, the participants allocated the extra time to pursue these activities. The ability to participate in interests outside of work and non-market work was a significant benefit that was associated with improvements to work-life balance and overall well-being.

Rook and Zijlstra (2006) highlight the importance of recovery from fatigue and sleep deprivation. They argue that the weekend is an important time for such recovery and should be protected by organisations. In line with this research, our study demonstrates the benefits of increased recreation and the ability to pursue greater personal time. Leisure activities have important benefits on mental health and well-being (Sonnentag et al, 2008) and therefore the ability to have greater time for leisure through the compressed work week clearly incurred significant improvements to the work-life balance of the participants.

Sonnentag et al. (2008) argue that the benefits of vacations are often short-lived once the employee returns to work, therefore employees would benefit more from frequent opportunities for rest. Findings suggest that the weekend or long break is an essential part of achieving these frequent opportunities for rest, and as illustrated in this study, allowing this long break accrues significant work-life advantages.

This research suggests that greater attention needs to be placed on the non-market activities of employees, in particular, recreation and the pursuit of personal time, in order to improve our understanding of work-life balance. This research contributes to the emerging literature that recreation is a vital construct of work-life balance that requires greater attention. We suggest that the ability to pursue personal time through the longer stretch of recreation time is imperative for improving the work-life balance of employees within the construction industry.

We would argue that regardless of the working time arrangements that are required for any particular commercial context, employees will benefit from regularly having two days' break between working weeks. The potential benefits of this approach are numerous, and not confined to the employee, but also to family, friends, co-workers, the organisation and the community in general. On the other hand, there is an inevitable tension as short term 'business' demands are often paramount, and thus progress in developing beneficial working and recreational time patterns in the longer term will be slow.

Conclusions

While studies have examined how the regulation of working time can assist in improving work-life balance, the findings from this research suggest that greater attention also needs to be placed on the organisational factors and the industrial context that enable greater recovery time for employees. It is evident from both the prior research and confirmed by our study that there can be significant benefits to having a full two day break available to employees. Within the construction industry, it was found that these benefits were not a result of reducing working hours, but rather allowing an extension of recovery/recreation time through the use of a compressed working week. By allowing a longer stretch of time, this initiative enabled a recovery from the work week and the pursuit of personal interests and social activities that improved the work-life balance of the participants.

Existing work-life and organisational research has studied flexibility, maternity leave, working from home, shared roles and their impacts on employee's WLB. This research contributes to the current debate by confirming the importance of recovery time and suggesting that recreation and the pursuit of personal time are important determinants of work-life balance. Further, it is argued that the long break has not been as prominent as the campaign for regular breaks during the workday and paid recompense for long hours worked in the industrial relations arena. In order to understand these issues further, research into the structural and managerial determinants of longer leisure time and personal time acquisition is required. In particular, the 'long break', or reclaiming eight hours of recreation, needs greater consideration as a mechanism to manage overall working time arrangements.

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