

# Is a shorter working week in the construction industry smart and sustainable?

Smart and  
Sustainable Built  
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## Abstract

**Purpose** – Researchers in many countries have long argued that a harmful culture of long work hours and working weeks has become normalized in the construction industry. This has many negative impacts of workers' work-life balance, health and wellbeing, relationships and organizational outcomes. A shorter working week has been promoted by many researchers as one part of the solution to this problem. The purpose of this paper is to critique this debate and present the results of a large-scale empirical study into the pros and cons of a shorter working week in the Australian construction industry.

**Design/methodology/approach** – This paper investigates the individual and organizational pros and cons of a shorter working week based on the results of a survey ( $N = 1,475$ ) and interviews ( $N = 111$ ) with a representative sample of people and firms from across the Australian construction industry.

**Findings** – The findings show that widespread claims about the work-life balance benefits of a shorter working week should be treated with caution. The pros and cons of a shorter working week are highly contingent and vary over time, from project-to-project and person-to-person depending on a wide range of factors such as the shorter working week model employed, people's personal circumstances and life preferences, age, gender, job, marital status, wider economic conditions and the culture, nature and types of organizations they work for and projects they work on.

**Originality/value** – This research addresses the paucity of large-scale multi-method empirical research into the pros and cons of a shorter working week. It questions the overwhelmingly positive nature of this debate and highlights several methodological limitations with existing research. Contrary to most existing research, it concludes that the jury is still out on the pros and cons of a shorter working week and that the development of effective evidence-based policy in this area requires much more research across a variety of shorter week scenarios and contexts.

**Keywords** Shorter working week, 5-day week, 4-day week, Work-life balance, Health and wellbeing

**Paper type** Research article

## Introduction

Research on shorter working weeks can be traced back to economic debates about how to manage the financial and social impacts of major economic crises such as the 1930s great depression (Carver, 1936; Roos, 1935; Brouwer, 1957). Since then, the debate has broadened to address contemporary socio-economic challenges such as workers' work-life balance and health and wellbeing (Stronge and Harper, 2019; Schor *et al.*, 2022; Lewis *et al.*, 2023), structural labour market inequalities (Stronge and Lewis, 2021; Olsaretti and Kalender, 2016) and improving organizational effectiveness and workplace sustainability (Briem and Olafsson, 2015; Golden, 2010; Pang, 2022; Kotlowska, 2024). However, the results of research about the benefits of shorter working weeks are complex and contradictory. While many recent studies claim significant benefits with few downsides (Schor *et al.*, 2022; Lewis *et al.*, 2023; 4 Day Week Global, 2023), others raise concerns about research reliability and

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validity (Veal, 2023), unintended consequences such as poorer safety, reduced productivity and increasing social inequality (Spencer, 2024) and numerous intervening factors which can affect the outcomes of a shorter working week in both negative and positive ways (Backmann *et al.*, 2024; Mullens and Glorieux, 2024; Kamerade *et al.*, 2020; Briem and Olafsson, 2015). Most recently Joyeaux's (2025) policy evaluation of Iceland's formative 4-day working week experiment between 2015 and 2019, challenges the increasingly accepted assumption that a shorter working week represents a solution to the growing levels of work-related health, economic and social challenges faced by contemporary society.

This empirical uncertainty about the merits of a shorter working week are also evident in construction industry research. As both Tijani *et al.* (2022) and Adah *et al.* (2023) show, despite many claims about the universal impacts of a shorter working week in construction, research is still inconclusive, embryonic and lacking large-scale empirical samples which are representative of the industry's diversity of roles, projects and organizations. The aim of this paper is to respond to this gap in research by reporting the results of a large-scale empirical research project which involved surveys and interviews with people working across the Australian construction industry. Specifically, two research questions are explored.

- (1) What are the pros and cons of a shorter working week for employees in the Australian construction industry and what is the preferred model?
- (2) What are the pros and cons of a shorter working week for employers in the Australian construction industry and what is the preferred model?

We defined a shorter working week as any requirement to work fewer days than the construction industry norm. In the context of the Australian construction industry, this industry norm is a 6-day week of 10 or more hours per day and 4–8 h on Saturday with an occasional Sunday (Lingard and Francis, 2004; Lingard *et al.*, 2021; Crook and Tessler, 2021). This standard working week is considerably longer than in other industries and is mirrored in other countries. For example, 13% of construction workers in the UK report working 60 h per week, which is more than 5 h more per week than the average worker (Hertzog-Young, 2021).

This paper commences with a review of research relating to pros and cons of shorter working weeks within and outside the construction industry. After describing the methodology employed to explore the above research questions, the research results are reported and discussed in relation to extant research with the aim of advancing empirical understanding of these important questions. The paper concludes by identifying several new contributions to the advancement of existing shorter working week research in the field of construction and more widely. These contributions include: raising new questions about the widely assumed universal benefits of shorter working weeks; distinguishing between the merits and risks of hard and soft five-day week models; highlighting the largely ignored interdependence of worker and business risks; emphasizing the dangers of treating the construction workforce as homogeneous group and focussing primarily; and the limitations of overly focussing on individual outcomes at the expense of organizational outcomes. The paper finishes with some practical recommendations for managers and policy-makers about the most beneficial shorter working week model to improve health and wellbeing in the construction industry by emphasizing the need for equitable flexibility or what we call a "soft 5-day week" which we find best balances the interests of employees, employers and clients.

### **The pros and cons of a shorter working week**

The contemporary shorter working week debate is being driven by claims that it represents a potential solution to several current concerns around the changing nature of work within and outside the construction industry. For example, increasing numbers of people are reporting

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feeling overworked, with many studies reporting direct links between long working hours and poor physical and mental health, relationship quality and life happiness (Wong *et al.*, 2019; World Health Organization and International Labour Organization, 2021; Lefrançois and Trottier, 2022). A recent UK report by O'Halloran and Thomas (2024) argued that longer working hours are a far greater threat to national productivity and health and wellbeing than increasing absenteeism and recommended that the UK move towards a "health-led" economy. In Australia, where this research was undertaken, the evidence shows that levels of unpaid overtime are increasing and that a healthy work life balance is an increasingly unachievable aspiration for many working Australians (Standing Committee on Economy and Gender and Economic Equality, 2021). This trend is reflected in the international construction industry, with numerous international researchers linking long hours of work to poor mental and physical health, high levels of burnout, work-to-family conflict, deterioration of personal, family and marital relationships, sleep problems, alcohol abuse and antisocial behaviours (Francis *et al.*, 2006; Bowen *et al.*, 2018; Downey and Stough, 2018; Kotera *et al.*, 2019; Hanna and Markam, 2019; Holdsworth *et al.*, 2020; Bowen and Zhang, 2020; Crook and Tessler, 2021; Lingard and Turner, 2022).

The shorter working debate is also being driven by several gender-related concerns in the workplace. These include: a need for greater gender diversity and equality; increasing gender segregation; the extra pressures that long working hours place on women who often carry the additional burden of caring responsibilities; the increasing numbers of single parents, particularly mothers; changing attitudes towards men and women's role in society and the sharing of domestic and caring responsibilities; the decline of the traditional male breadwinner model; and higher qualification levels among women (Standing Committee on Economy and Gender and Economic Equality, 2021; International Labour Organization, 2022; Commonwealth of Australia, 2023). Again, this is reflected in the construction industry. For example, the Committee for Economic Development of Commonwealth of Australia (2023) recently labelled construction the most gender segregated industry in Australia and numerous researchers have linked this to its culture of long working hours and presenteeism (Townsend *et al.*, 2011; Holdsworth *et al.*, 2020; Galea *et al.*, 2020).

Technological advancements and the global shift towards flexible and hybrid work have also driven calls for a shorter working week. As the World Economic Forum (2020) noted, rapid advances in digital technologies around the world are fundamentally changing the nature of work and the opportunities for people to work more flexibly. However, they also present increase risks of remote worker monitoring, constant connectivity and unmonitored overworking which could undermine worker health, safety and wellbeing. While the construction remains digitally immature compared to other sectors, McKinsey & Company (2020) predicts that new technologies will also fundamentally disrupt the way that people work in the industry.

Most recently, the COVID pandemic accelerated already changing employee expectations about the nature of work with construction among those most impacted by the post-pandemic "Great Resignation" (Morgan, 2023). In Australia, the pandemic forced about 40% of workers to experiment with working from home (Productivity Commission, 2021) and in Germany many jobs were saved by companies allowing their employees to reduce their hours of work (International Labour Organization, 2022). These forced experiments have subsequently prompted longer trials of shorter and hybrid working weeks across many industry sectors including construction (International Labour Organization, 2022; World Economic Forum, 2020; Mullens and Glorieux, 2024).

In response to the above trends an increasing number of construction companies are experimenting with shorter working week models, with numerous researchers advocating benefits to people's work life balance, physical and mental health and wellbeing, relationship quality and performance in work (see Townsend *et al.*, 2006a, b, c, 2012; Lingard *et al.*, 2007, 2008, 2021, 2024; Lingard and Francis, 2009; Berman, 2009; Bradley *et al.*, 2010; Brown

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*et al.*, 2010; Galea *et al.*, 2020; Hertzog-Young, 2021; Lingard and Turner, 2022). These highly positive results are based on several key arguments in these studies which include:

- (1) That the economic costs of adopting a shorter working week are minimal and worth the social and health benefits of giving people time to spend with families and other non-work activities;
- (2) That the benefits of a 5-day week are particularly strong for women, people with caring responsibilities, people at risk of poor mental health and young people who must balance study, work and other responsibilities etc.;
- (3) That businesses benefit significantly from shorter working weeks in terms of reduced absenteeism and improved staff engagement, retention, recruitment and productivity.

Research also describes a range of different shorter working week models being trailed in construction. These include:

- (1) A hard 5-day week – where sites are shut down on weekends apart from in exceptional circumstances where activities pose unacceptable risk to worker and public health such as tower crane dismantling, erection and maintenance and demolition. This includes two sub-models:
  - Compressed hard 5-day week– where people work 1–2 h longer every day to make up for the lost weekend;
  - Pure hard 5-day week – where people work 5 days rather than 6 days and have to increase their productivity to keep their wages and hours the same during the week;
- (2) A soft 5-day week – where people work a rotating schedule of 5-days per week while keeping sites open for 6 days (for example by giving people alternate Saturdays and weekdays off). This model includes two common sub-models:
  - Compressed soft 5-day week– where people work 1–2 h longer every day to make up for the lost weekend;
  - Pure soft 5-day week – where people work 5-days rather than 6-days and have to increase their productivity to keep their wages and hours the same during the week;
- (3) Hybrid soft 5/6-day week – where people have the option of working 5 or 6-days and work alongside each other. For example, some trades people prefer to work weekends rather than extended hours during the week because of less interference from other trades and greater access to limited resources such as crane time. These options may also be conditional on factors such as project progress, criticality to the program and ability to safely and productively work longer working hours during the week.

However, concerns have been raised about the overwhelmingly positivity of research in this area with claimed benefits being highly contingent and being difficult to measure and verify (Kodz *et al.*, 2002; International Labour Organization, 2022; The Society for Human Resource Management, 2021; Soga *et al.*, 2022; Swinney *et al.*, 2023). For example, Ditzell *et al.* (2024) found that outcomes from Unilever New Zealand’s four-day week trial were not guaranteed and required careful planning and cultural change. Similarly, Backmann *et al.* (2024) question many of the assumed benefits in the German context, while the UK’s Confederation of British Industry acknowledged that a 4-day week is not a “one-size-fits-all” solution and would be economically unviable in many industries and potentially lead to exploitation by unscrupulous employers who may see it as a way to reduce staff numbers, pay, pensions and other workplace entitlements which support worker health and wellbeing. In construction, Tijani *et al.*’s (2022)

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review of related research argued that the pros and cons of shorter working weeks remain contentious and that there is a need for more large-scale empirical research. Our research is a response to the above concerns and the gap in existing evidence and the following section describes the methodology and method employed to explore the research questions posed at the start of this paper.

## Method

To capture the multiple perspectives of people from a range of demographics, roles and firms across the Australian construction industry we employed an interpretive mixed methods approach to data collection and analysis, which triangulated both qualitative (semi-structured interviews) and quantitative data (industry-wide survey). This approach was adopted to address the numerous methodological challenges in conducting research in this area which have been too often neglected in previous studies:

- (1) The need to consider the full diversity of lived experiences and views from across the whole industry (age, gender, ethnicity, role, onsite/offsite etc.);
- (2) The need to consider the interests of the wide variety of firms which operate across the industry (small, medium and large contracting firms and trade subcontractors operating in different geographical regions and industry sub-sectors);
- (3) The highly personalised and dynamic nature of work life balance which means different things to different people at different times in their lives;
- (4) The potential for researcher and respondent bias linked to the inherent commercial and ethical considerations around work life balance which may encourage participants to give a certain response which they perceive to be the right thing to say;
- (5) The need to consider impacts across the whole industry rather than only on individual and often unique projects where trials are being conducted.

Data collection and analysis occurred in three stages as explained in more detail below:

Stage one: Semi-structured interviews with cost and time experts.

Using a key-informant approach (Tremblay, 1957), semi-structured interviews were undertaken with a representative sample of 47 project planning, cost, project management, human resource management and safety experts from 28 contracting and development firms across the construction industry in the state of New South Wales (NSW) Australia. The NSW construction industry employs 401,564 people which is just under 40% of the total construction industry workforce in Australia (ABS, 2023). It is therefore considered a representative sampling frame.

Following ethical approval from the Human Research Ethics Committee of the University of Technology Sydney and in collaboration with a major industry association, firms were invited to nominate experts, who then independently contacted the research team to ensure anonymity. A random, representative sample was then selected from this initial sampling frame for interview. Each interview lasted about one hour and explored the cost, time, safety and productivity implications of transitioning to various shorter working week scenarios. Many participants also provided documentary evidence (e.g., cost and time estimates) to support their responses. Applying the concept of theoretical saturation and an abductive approach of concurrent data collection and analysis, interviews continued until no new insights emerged. The stage 1 sample is outlined in Table 1.

Stage two: Semi-structured interviews with a cross section of the construction industry

Semi-structured interviews were undertaken with a cross section of people from across the NSW construction industry to understand the work life balance and other personal and health

**Table 1.** Sample summary – stage 1

Demographic	Sub-groups	Frequency	Percent
Role	Executive director	4	8.5
	Senior planner	6	12.8
	Senior estimator	10	21.3
	Pre-construction manager	1	2.1
	National operations manager	1	2.1
	Project manager	7	14.9
	Construction director	1	2.1
	Chief operations officer	2	4.3
	Construction manager	1	2.1
	Head of conversations and strategy	1	2.1
	Managing director	7	14.9
	Contracts administrator	2	4.3
	Contracts manager	2	4.3
	Project engineer	1	2.1
	WHS manager	1	2.1
	Total	47	100.0
	Firm size	Large (250+ employees)	13
Medium (50–249 employees)		9	32.1
Small (1–49 employees)		6	21.4
Total		28	100.0
Location	Urban/city	24	38.7
	Regional	16	25.8
	National	14	22.6
	International	8	12.9
	Total	62	100.0
Market	Commercial	24	21.4
	Industrial	10	8.9
	Residential	20	17.9
	Aged care	7	6.3
	Health	15	13.4
	Education	16	14.3
	Infrastructure civil	7	6.3
	Retail	8	7.1
	Hospitality	5	4.5
	Total	112	100.0
Project value range	\$0–50 million	9	24.3
	\$50–300 million	12	32.4
	\$300 + million	16	43.2
	Total	37	100.0

and wellbeing implications of moving to various shorter working week scenarios. We defined work-life balance as “The individual perception that work and non-work activities are compatible and promote growth in accordance with an individual’s current life priorities” (Kalliath and Brough, 2008: 324). Using a purposive, stratified sampling approach and with support from the partner industry association, 50 randomly selected firms were invited to nominate five potential participants each. From this sampling frame of approximately 250, a second random sampling ensured anonymity with interviews continuing until theoretical saturation was reached. This resulted in a sample of 64 respondents (see Table 2).

Each interview in stages 1 and 2 was audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim and analysed using thematic analysis in four stages following Guest *et al.* (2012) and Gioia *et al.* (2013). In stage one, researchers immersed themselves in the transcripts to gain data familiarity. In stage two, guided by the research questions, each researcher independently conducted open (inductive) coding, organising and generating an initial list of items/codes (first-order coding)

**Table 2.** Sample summary-stage 2

Demographic	Sub-groups	Frequency	Percent
Age	16–29	16	25.0
	30–39	26	40.6
	40–49	12	18.8
	50–59	9	14.1
	60–69	1	1.6
Sex	Male	49	76.6
	Female	15	23.4
	Non-binary	0	0.0
Marital status	Single with children	3	4.7
	Single no children	16	25.0
	De factor partner	3	4.7
	Married with children	35	54.7
	Married no children	7	10.9
Role	Senior director/executive management	4	6.3
	Head office-based management, administration	16	25.0
	Site-based project management, site management, supervision, administration	20	31.3
	Construction worker/tradesperson and labourer	24	37.5
Area and market	Urban/city	34	53.1
	Regional	32	50.0
	National	30	46.9
	International	5	7.8
Sector	Total		
	Commercial	53	82.8
	Industrial	10	15.6
	Residential	30	46.9
	Aged care	9	14.1
	Health	19	29.7
	Education	20	31.3
	Infrastructure civil	5	7.8
	Earthworks and remediation	5	7.8
	Retail	21	32.8
	Hospitality	7	10.9
	House building	4	6.3
	Firm size	Large (250+ employees)	13
Medium (50–249 employees)		41	64.1
Small (1–49 employees)		10	15.6

from the data set that had a reoccurring pattern. In stage three, recurring patterns and categories were identified and grouped into overarching themes. In stage four the emergent themes were further refined by revisiting the data, allowing further expansion and connections between overlapping themes. Following an abductive approach, analysis ran concurrently with data collection and continued until theoretical saturation was achieved.

### Stage three: Online survey

An online survey was conducted to complement the stage 1 and 2 interview data. Sampling involved the partner industry association asking its member organizations to distribute an invitation letter and survey link (with consent form) to their staff. We kept the online survey open until we met the required sample size of 383 for all questions, calculated using [Newbold et al.'s \(2013\)](#) formulae based on a population size of 401,564 which is the NSW construction industry labour force (ABS statistics 2023). This resulted in the sample in [Table 3](#).

The survey was split into six sections and employed a combination of open, categorical, interval and Likert-scaled questions. [Section 1](#) asked for general demographic information

**Table 3.** Sample summary-stage 3

Demographic	Sub-groups	Frequency	Percent
Gender	Male	1,180	80
	Female	286	19.4
	Non-binary	9	0.6
	Total	1,475	100
Age	15–24	160	17.4
	25–35	231	25.1
	36–45	199	21.6
	46–55	164	17.8
	56–65	118	12.8
	Over 65	50	5.4
	Total	922	100
Marital status	Single	108	28.4
	Married or long-term de-facto partner	272	71.6
	Total	380	100
Dependent children	No	210	56.9
	Yes	159	43.1
	Total	369	100
Role	Senior director/executive management	224	18.5
	Head office-based management, administration	206	17
	Site-based project management, site management, supervision, administration	528	43.7
	Construction worker/tradesperson and labourer	251	20.8
	Total	1,209	100
Employment contract	Permanent	343	92.5
	Fixed term	18	4.9
	Casual	10	2.7
	Total	371	100
Pay	Fixed salary (no paid overtime)	271	73.4
	Fixed salary (paid overtime)	22	6
	Hourly wage (paid overtime)	76	20.6
	Total	369	100
Employer size	Micro business (fewer than 10 employees)	80	21.3
	Small business (10–49 employees)	69	18.4
	Medium-sized business (50–249 employees)	91	24.2
	Large business (250 or more people employees)	136	36.2
	Total	376	100
Employer sector	Commercial building	192	50.9
	Residential building (apartments)	49	13
	House building	74	19.6
	Civil and infrastructure	62	16.4
	Total	377	100
Employer region	City areas	275	72.2
	Regional areas	102	26.8
	Remote areas	4	1
	Total	381	100

about the respondents (age, gender, occupation, etc). [Section 2](#) asked about the participant's current working week (worked hours, days, overtime, etc.). [Sections 3 and 4](#) asked about the participant's current work life balance using a range of standard validated work life balance instruments ([Amatea et al., 1986](#); [Carlson et al., 2000](#); [Greenhaus et al., 2003](#); [Kodz et al., 2002](#)). [Section 5](#) asked about the potential impact of several 5-day week scenarios on their work life balance and general health and wellbeing, productivity and safety etc. [Section 6](#) included an open question about what an ideal working week would look like.

Based on a Kolmogorov–Smirnov (KS) test which confirmed the non-normal distribution of the data, survey data was analysed using a variety of descriptive and non-parametric tests. A Relative Importance Indexing (RII) method was used to provide relative comparisons of survey items (Holt, 2014). Qualitative data from the open questions which included 450 detailed comments were analysed using the same thematic analysis approach as described for the interviews.

## Findings

*RQ1.* What are the pros and cons of a shorter working week for employees in the Australian construction industry and what is the preferred model?

On average across our survey sample, 39.8% worked more than five days per week, 26.1% worked over 55 h per week and 36.7% more than 10 h per day. Table 4 shows that hours worked varied greatly with the highest being worked by on-site salaried workers, young people in relatively junior roles and some waged workers – especially those working on large projects in inner and infrastructure locations who were especially vulnerable to long hours due to the high value of weekend working on those projects.

On average, 61% of people surveyed across our sample had an acceptable, good or very good “self-perceived” work-life balance. When asked about the best ways to improve work-life balance, respondents emphasized the need for greater flexibility and control over when, where and how they worked. However, there was a high level of inequality of access to flexible working across our sample which was a key factor in driving support for a mandated 5-day week for everyone.

Many people aspired to work significantly fewer hours and days than they were currently working (within the range of 35–45 h a week, for 4/5 days a week) (See Table 5). However, not everyone wanted to work shorter working weeks. For example, young people in wage earning roles who were paid hourly and who most valued overtime pay by working weekends.

When asked about their preferred model for a shorter working week, Table 6 shows that support for a 5-day week varied across our sample. Qualitative data indicated that this support depended on a range of factors such as: payment method (waged or salaried); existing hours of work; working conditions; current work-life balance provisions such as flexible working; the shorter working week model employed; the level of physical and mental fatigue involved in a job; the value of weekend working (overtime pay); general economic conditions which influence factors such as cost of living; and individual demographics such as sex, age, job, ethnicity, personal preferences and circumstances. However, most respondents (81.5%) favoured a hard 5-day week working five days with every weekend off, compared to just 18.5% who preferred working a soft 5-day week of five days with alternative weekdays and Saturdays off.

Working a shorter working week has consequences for employees in the construction industry if clients are not prepared to alter project program parameters and to further explore the most preferred 5-day week model, respondents were presented with three possible scenarios:

- (1) Working 5 days and being more productive each day to avoid a pay cut;
- (2) Working 5 days and extending daily hours to avoid a pay cut (compressed working week);
- (3) Working 5 days and accepting a pay cut to avoid weekend work.

As shown in Table 7 working more productively each day to avoid pay cut was the most preferred scenario, followed by working extra hours and then taking a pay cut for not working weekends. Once again this varied across our sample, with relatively stronger support for increasing productivity from women, onsite professional salaried workers in supervisory

**Table 4.** Days worked a week, hours worked per week and hours worked per day across the sample ( $N = 581$ )

Demographic	Percentages (%) working days a week							Percentages (%) of working hours a day					Percentages (%) working hours a week					
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Less than 8	8	9	10	More than 10	Less than 35	36–40	41–45	46–50	51–55	Over 55
All respondents	0.7	1.1	2.6	4.9	50.9	37.5	2.3	4.4	15.1	17.4	26.4	36.7	2.5	15	17.6	18.7	20.2	26.1
Male	0.9	0.9	1.5	4	47.5	42.6	2.6	3.7	13.1	16.1	28.8	38.3	1.9	12	16.1	19.3	20.6	30.2
Female	0	1.8	7.1	8.8	65.5	16.8	0	7.5	24.5	23.6	17	27.4	5.1	28.6	25.5	16.3	18.4	6.1
Single	0	2.6	2.6	7.7	64.1	20.5	2.6	2.6	33.3	15.4	17.9	30.8	9.8	14.6	24.4	12.2	17.1	22
Married or long-term de-facto partner	0.8	0	2.5	2.5	52.5	40	1.7	6.5	16.3	20.7	25	31.5	1	7.1	20.4	24.5	18.4	28.6
Job role Group 1 (off-site salaried workers in administrative and managerial roles)	0.6	0.6	3.9	3.2	62.6	24.5	4.5	4.82	18.7	17.5	25.9	33.1	3.2	14.7	21.8	21.8	16	22.4
Job role Group 2 (on-site salaried workers in supervisory roles)	0	0.9	1.8	6.4	50.7	39.3	0.9	2.7	7.2	13.1	28.5	48.4	2	11.8	13.2	16.7	26.5	29.9
Job role Group 3 (on-site waged workers in trade and operative roles)	0	1.1	1.1	2.1	34	58.5	3.2	4.6	26.4	25.3	23	20.7	2.9	21.4	23.3	20.4	15.5	16.5
(15–24)	0	3.3	6.7	20	35	33.3	1.7	5.2	13.8	13.8	27.6	39.7	3.4	23.7	16.9	16.9	27.1	11.9
(25–35)	0	0	2.1	3.2	53.7	40	1.1	3.2	17.2	18.3	25.8	35.5	1	13.5	16.7	17.7	19.8	31.3
(36–45)	0	2.7	1.3	0	52	42.7	1.3	3.6	14.5	15.7	27.7	38.6	1.5	8.8	29.4	17.6	19.1	23.5
(46–55)	1.6	0	0	4.7	43.8	50	0	4.9	9.8	14.8	34.4	36.1	1.7	8.6	13.8	22.4	22.4	31
(56–65)	0	0	2.2	0	60.9	32.6	4.3	8.5	12.8	12.8	34	31.9	4.8	14.3	16.7	28.6	14.3	21.4
(Over 65)	0	4.2	0	8.3	62.5	16.7	8.3	5.6	38.9	22.2	16.7	16.7	9.1	22.7	18.2	9.1	18.2	22.7
Fixed salary (no paid overtime)	1	0	1.9	6.8	55.3	32	2.9	4.3	12.8	11.1	32.5	39.3	1	14.7	15.7	14.7	25.5	28.4
Fixed salary (paid overtime)	0	12.5	0	12.5	37.5	37.5	0	0	20	20	30	30	0	33.3	11.1	11.1	33.3	11.1
Hourly wage (paid overtime)	0	0	3.2	9.7	29	58.1	0	11.5	30.8	19.2	11.5	26.9	3.4	10.3	24.1	20.7	20.7	20.7
Principal contractor	0	0.8	2.4	8.1	54.8	31.5	2.4	4.6	13.8	14.7	28.4	38.5	1.8	14.2	17.7	14.2	23.9	28.3
Sub-contractor	0	0	4.8	0	42.9	52.4	0	8.3	16.7	25	25	25	20	26.9	12	29.6	9.4	13.5
Consultant	0	0	0	0	72.7	27.3	0	7.7	38.5	7.7	15.4	30.8	16.7	25	16.7	25	16.7	0

*(continued)*

**Table 4.** Continued

Demographic	Percentages (%) working days a week							Percentages (%) of working hours a day					Percentages (%) working hours a week					
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Less than 8	8	9	10	More than 10	Less than 35	36–40	41–45	46–50	51–55	Over 55
Micro business (fewer than 10 employees)	0	7.4	3.7	0	48.1	37	3.7	7.7	26.9	15.4	11.5	38.5	2.7	24.3	32.4	10.8	13.5	16.2
Small business (10–49 employees)	0	0	11.1	3.7	48.1	33.3	3.7	0	21.2	24.2	27.3	27.3	3.7	14.8	22.2	22.2	14.8	22.2
Medium business (50–249 employees)	0	2.9	0	5.9	61.8	23.5	5.9	0	6.5	22.6	32.3	38.7	0	23.8	16.7	9.5	16.7	33.3
Large business (250 or more people employees)	0	1.9	1.9	13.2	41.5	41.5	0	1.8	10.7	16.1	21.4	50	0	8.6	5.2	20.7	31	34.5
Commercial buildings	0	2.2	4.3	3.2	46.2	43	1.1	2.5	6.3	17.5	26.3	47.5	4.8	9.5	15.9	20.6	17.5	31.7
Residential buildings (apartments)	0	0	0	5.3	57.9	31.6	5.3	5.3	21.1	15.8	31.6	26.3	0	30.8	7.7	7.7	0	53.8
House building	6.9	0	0	6.9	55.2	31	0	5.9	20.6	17.6	29.4	26.5	0	14.8	25.9	18.5	22.2	18.5
Civil and infrastructure	0	0	3.8	3.8	53.8	34.6	3.8	0	0	29.4	17.6	52.9	0	20.8	16.7	12.5	20.8	29.2

**Table 5.** Aspiration for working (hours, days, weekend) in construction industry (N = 220)

		I would like my weekends free	I would like to work less days a week	I would like to work less hours a week	Work commitments prevent me from participating fully in life outside work	I need to work overtime to get my job done	I would like my weekends free and could safely increase my productivity during the week to compensate	The culture at work can negatively affect relationships outside work	I would like my weekends free and could safely work longer hours during the week to compensate	I would like to work a rotating schedule where I get alternate weekdays and Saturdays free	I would like my weekends free and could take a pay cut for it	Life commitments prevent me from performing fully at work	I would like to work more hours a week	I would like to work more days a week
All respondents	RII	0.89	0.78	0.78	0.74	0.73	0.72	0.67	0.66	0.60	0.54	0.53	0.40	0.36
	Rank	1	2	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
Male	RII	0.89	0.77	0.77	0.74	0.75	0.71	0.67	0.66	0.62	0.54	0.54	0.43	0.38
	Rank	1	2	3	5	4	6	7	8	9	10	10	11	12
Female	RII	0.91	0.84	0.83	0.73	0.65	0.75	0.66	0.63	0.53	0.53	0.50	0.32	0.30
	Rank	1	2	3	5	7	4	6	8	9	9	10	11	12
Single	RII	0.89	0.80	0.79	0.81	0.72	0.75	0.72	0.61	0.70	0.56	0.55	0.42	0.37
	Rank	1	3	4	2	6	5	6	8	7	9	10	11	12
Married or long term defacto partner	RII	0.83	0.79	0.76	0.72	0.73	0.71	0.64	0.63	0.59	0.51	0.53	0.43	0.39
	Rank	1	2	3	5	4	6	7	8	9	11	10	12	13
Age group (15-24)	RII	0.92	0.79	0.79	0.82	0.69	0.75	0.69	0.61	0.68	0.59	0.57	0.41	0.39
	Rank	1	3	3	2	5	4	5	7	6	8	9	10	11
Age group (25-35)	RII	0.90	0.82	0.81	0.77	0.72	0.76	0.70	0.68	0.61	0.41	0.56	0.40	0.36
	Rank	1	2	3	4	6	5	7	8	9	11	10	12	13
Age group (36-45)	RII	0.88	0.79	0.79	0.70	0.77	0.75	0.70	0.72	0.59	0.50	0.49	0.41	0.35
	Rank	1	2	2	6	3	4	6	5	7	8	9	10	11
Age group (46-55)	RII	0.87	0.75	0.78	0.79	0.86	0.62	0.69	0.67	0.58	0.61	0.60	0.42	0.35
	Rank	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
Age group (56-65)	RII	0.86	0.76	0.78	0.64	0.68	0.63	0.62	0.61	0.59	0.51	0.48	0.50	0.43
	Rank	1	3	2	5	4	6	7	8	9	10	12	11	13

(continued)

**Table 5.** Continued

		I would like my weekends free	I would like to work less days a week	I would like to work less hours a week	Work commitments prevent me from participating fully in life outside work	I need to work overtime to get my job done	I would like my weekends free and could safely increase my productivity during the week to compensate	The culture at work can negatively affect relationships outside work	I would like my weekends free and could safely work longer hours during the week to compensate	I would like to work a rotating schedule where I get alternate weekdays and Saturdays free	I would like my weekends free and could take a pay cut for it	Life commitments prevent me from performing fully at work	I would like to work more hours a week	I would like to work more days a week
Age group (over 65)	RII Rank 1	0.84 1	0.80 2	0.80 3	0.56 7	0.72 4	0.64 5	0.64 5	0.60 6	0.48 9	0.60 6	0.52 8	0.40 11	0.44 10
Job role Group 1	RII Rank 1	0.87 1	0.75 4	0.76 3	0.68 5	0.77 2	0.65 7	0.66 6	0.62 8	0.55 9	0.54 10	0.52 11	0.40 12	0.36 13
Job role Group 2	RII Rank 1	0.94 1	0.83 3	0.84 2	0.79 4	0.71 6	0.76 5	0.71 6	0.65 7	0.61 8	0.52 10	0.55 9	0.34 11	0.32 12
Job role Group 3	RII Rank 1	0.84 1	0.71 4	0.67 5	0.72 3	0.66 6	0.74 2	0.65 7	0.74 2	0.67 5	0.51 10	0.54 9	0.57 8	0.49 11
Fixed salary (no paid overtime)	RII Rank 1	0.92 1	0.79 3	0.80 2	0.76 4	0.72 6	0.75 5	0.59 9	0.66 7	0.60 8	0.55 10	0.52 11	0.35 12	0.31 13
Fixed salary (paid overtime)	RII Rank 1	0.90 1	0.75 3	0.70 4	0.70 4	0.75 3	0.80 2	0.80 2	0.70 4	0.60 5	0.70 4	0.40 7	0.45 6	0.35 8
Hourly wage (paid overtime)	RII Rank 1	0.89 1	0.78 3	0.73 4	0.80 2	0.67 5	0.80 2	0.53 8	0.73 4	0.64 6	0.67 5	0.60 7	0.49 9	0.36 10
Principal contractor	RII Rank 1	0.91 1	0.82 2	0.82 2	0.77 3	0.75 4	0.77 3	0.66 6	0.70 5	0.57 7	0.56 8	0.53 9	0.36 10	0.34 11
Sub-contractor	RII Rank 1	0.88 1	0.77 2	0.73 4	0.67 5	0.75 3	0.75 3	0.63 6	0.67 5	0.55 7	0.43 9	0.55 7	0.47 8	0.42 10

(continued)

Table 5. Continued

		I would like my weekends free	I would like to work less days a week	I would like to work less hours a week	Work commitments prevent me from participating fully in life outside work	I need to work overtime to get my job done	I would like my weekends free and could safely increase my productivity during the week to compensate	The culture at work can negatively affect relationships outside work	I would like my weekends free and could safely work longer hours during the week to compensate	I would like to work a rotating schedule where I get alternate weekdays and Saturdays free	I would like my weekends free and could take a pay cut for it	Life commitments prevent me from performing fully at work	I would like to work more hours a week	I would like to work more days a week
Consultant	RII	0.88	0.72	0.68	0.56	0.68	0.72	0.68	0.76	0.52	0.56	0.52	0.52	0.52
	Rank	1	3	4	5	4	3	4	2	7	6	7	7	7
Micro business	RII	0.83	0.73	0.72	0.67	0.67	0.68	0.57	0.67	0.52	0.58	0.53	0.47	0.45
	Rank	1	2	3	5	5	4	7	5	9	6	8	10	11
Small business	RII	0.89	0.77	0.86	0.67	0.74	0.67	0.67	0.60	0.71	0.56	0.51	0.40	0.37
	Rank	1	3	2	6	4	6	6	7	5	8	9	10	11
Medium business	RII	0.87	0.79	0.79	0.77	0.74	0.74	0.70	0.64	0.59	0.37	0.51	0.41	0.39
	Rank	1	2	2	3	4	4	5	6	7	11	8	9	10
Large business	RII	0.89	0.75	0.72	0.75	0.70	0.76	0.76	0.71	0.66	0.54	0.55	0.43	0.37
	Rank	1	3	4	3	6	2	2	5	7	9	8	10	11
Commercial buildings	RII	0.90	0.78	0.78	0.77	0.78	0.76	0.70	0.73	0.68	0.46	0.54	0.40	0.38
	Rank	1	2	2	3	2	4	6	5	7	9	8	10	11
Residential buildings (apartments)	RII	0.90	0.72	0.76	0.78	0.90	0.74	0.68	0.74	0.64	0.66	0.58	0.38	0.34
	Rank	1	5	3	2	1	4	6	4	8	7	9	10	11
House building	RII	0.77	0.70	0.70	0.67	0.70	0.59	0.57	0.46	0.56	0.43	0.50	0.47	0.47
	Rank	1	2	2	3	2	4	5	9	6	10	7	8	8
Civil and infrastructure	RII	0.84	0.76	0.71	0.71	0.76	0.84	0.71	0.78	0.53	0.69	0.53	0.49	0.38
	Rank	1	3	5	5	4	1	5	2	7	6	7	8	9
City areas	RII	0.92	0.80	0.79	0.72	0.79	0.77	0.67	0.68	0.64	0.52	0.47	0.37	0.34
	Rank	1	2	3	5	3	4	7	6	8	9	10	11	12
Regional areas	RII	0.91	0.80	0.80	0.64	0.67	0.74	0.57	0.66	0.54	0.56	0.56	0.36	0.41
	Rank	1	2	2	6	4	3	7	5	9	8	8	11	10

**Table 6.** Support for 5-day working week ( $N = 584$ )

Demographic	Working 5 days and having every weekend off (percentage)	Working 5 days and getting alternative weekdays and Saturdays free (percentage)
Male	80.1	19.9
Female	87.9	12.1
Single	73.9	26.1
Married or long-term de-facto partner	74.5	25.5
Job role Group 1 (off-site salaried workers in administrative and managerial roles)	82.8	17.2
Job role Group 2 (on-site salaried workers in supervisory roles)	86.7	13.3
Job role Group 3 (on-site waged workers in trade and operative roles)	61.5	38.5
(15–24)	75.8	24.2
(25–35)	82.2	17.8
(36–45)	78.4	21.6
(46–55)	86.2	13.8
(56–65)	85.5	14.5
(Over 65)	70.6	29.4
Fixed salary (no paid overtime)	92.9	7.1
Fixed salary (paid overtime)	57.1	42.9
Hourly wage (paid overtime)	59.1	40.9
Principal contractor	83.3	16.7
Sub-contractor	94.7	5.3
Consultant	80	20
Micro business	64	36
Small business	76.2	23.8
Medium business	82.9	17.1
Large business	90.2	9.8
Commercial buildings	86.1	13.9
Residential buildings (apartments)	70.8	29.2
House building	67.7	32.3
Civil and infrastructure	66.7	33.3
City areas	86.6	13.4
Regional areas	85.4	14.6

roles, younger workers and those working in larger businesses. Waged workers saw no benefits from working more productively since they were generally paid by hours worked not output.

While increasing productively was the most favoured option, there were considerable concerns about the feasibility of doing so. Safety implications were raised for workers performing mentally and physically demanding jobs and concerns were also raised about how to measure productivity accurately due to the intangible nature of management roles or complex interdependencies between different jobs/trades. Concerningly, 24.7% of participants also said they would look for a second job to earn income on their free weekends and 15.3% predicted that their employers would require them to work weekends from home anyway or on an alternative 6-day week project (if a 5-day week was not mandated) (Table 8). Many expressed concern that many second jobs would be in the unregulated grey economy where worker exploitation and safety risks were higher and that this would increase existing levels of fatigue and associated physical and mental health risks even further on existing projects.

**Table 7.** Effects on work life balance for different 5-day week scenarios across sample demographics ( $N = 570$ )

Demographic	Working 5 days and taking a pay cut for not working the weekend					Working 5 days and extra hours every day to avoid a pay cut					Working 5 days and more productively every day to avoid a pay cut				
	Significantly improve	Slightly improve	Not affected	Slightly worsen	Significantly worsen	Significantly improve	Slightly improve	Not affected	Slightly worsen	Significantly worsen	Significantly improve	Slightly improve	Not affected	Slightly worsen	Significantly worsen
Male	20.1	13.9	28.8	21.6	15.6	16.5	20.1	36.8	17.7	8.9	30.5	26.4	34.6	5.4	3
Female	15.4	8.7	43.3	21.2	11.5	9.6	14.4	41.3	19.2	15.4	35.6	25	33.7	1.9	3.8
Single	20.5	15.4	20.5	28.2	15.4	12.8	7.7	28.2	43.6	7.7	28.2	35.9	20.5	12.8	2.6
Married or long-term de-facto partner	15.3	11.2	31.6	20.4	21.4	13.3	24.5	37.8	14.3	10.2	30.6	28.6	33.7	4.1	3.1
Job role Group 1 (off-site salaried workers in administrative and managerial roles)	11.4	10.2	46.7	19.2	12.6	10.2	17.4	48.5	13.2	10.8	18.6	26.9	48.5	3	3
Job role Group 2 (on-site salaried workers in supervisory roles)	18	17.5	24.9	24	15.7	14.3	17.5	33.2	24.9	10.1	38.7	25.8	27.2	4.6	3.7
Job role Group 3 (on-site waged workers in trade and operative roles)	37	8.7	20.7	16.3	17.4	30.4	17.4	26.1	15.2	10.9	32.6	22.8	27.2	10.9	6.5
(15–24)	29.7	18.8	18.8	20.3	12.5	17.2	12.5	26.6	26.6	17.2	42.2	29.7	17.2	3.1	7.8
(25–35)	18.8	13.5	26	24	17.7	18.8	16.7	34.4	17.7	12.5	38.5	22.9	28.1	4.2	6.3
(36–45)	32.4	15.5	28.2	15.5	8.5	23.9	21.1	40.8	5.6	8.5	32.4	21.1	38	7	1.4
(46–55)	11.1	13.9	37.5	19.4	18.1	16.7	13.9	44.4	16.7	8.3	22.2	16.7	54.2	5.6	1.4
(56–65)	13.9	8.3	44.4	16.7	16.7	8.3	30.6	41.7	16.7	2.8	27.8	19.4	47.2	2.8	2.8
(Over 65)	10	0	45	35	10	5	10	65	10	10	20	5	60	10	5

*(continued)*

**Table 7.** Continued

Demographic	Working 5 days and taking a pay cut for not working the weekend					Working 5 days and extra hours every day to avoid a pay cut					Working 5 days and more productively every day to avoid a pay cut				
	Significantly improve	Slightly improve	Not affected	Slightly worsen	Significantly worsen	Significantly improve	Slightly improve	Not affected	Slightly worsen	Significantly worsen	Significantly improve	Slightly improve	Not affected	Slightly worsen	Significantly worsen
Fixed salary (no paid overtime)	19.6	14	32.7	18.7	15	12.1	23.4	39.3	17.8	7.5	31.8	28	35.5	1.9	2.8
Fixed salary (paid overtime)	20	10	20	30	20	30	20	20	30	0	50	30	10	10	0
Hourly wage (paid overtime)	39.4	12.1	21.2	12.1	15.2	39.4	9.1	24.2	18.2	9.1	45.5	21.2	21.2	6.1	6.1
Principal contractor	14	10.8	34.4	31.2	9.7	10.8	21.5	39.8	21.5	6.5	35.5	29	33.3	2.2	0
Sub-contractor	26.9	11.5	23.1	26.9	11.5	23.1	23.1	23.1	23.1	7.7	19.2	38.5	19.2	19.2	3.8
Consultant	16.7	8.3	25	25	25	8.3	33.3	41.7	0	16.7	33.3	25	41.7	0	0
Micro business	6.9	3.4	44.8	37.9	6.9	13.8	20.7	48.3	6.9	10.3	13.8	13.8	62.1	3.4	6.9
Small business	31	24.1	27.6	3.4	13.8	10.3	27.6	41.4	10.3	10.3	20.7	31	44.8	0	3.4
Medium business	19.4	12.9	45.2	16.1	6.5	6.5	19.4	45.2	19.4	9.7	22.6	32.3	35.5	9.7	0
Large business	24.6	15.4	20	23.1	16.9	21.5	15.4	35.4	18.5	9.2	43.1	23.1	27.7	1.5	4.6
Commercial buildings	27.5	5.8	30.4	20.3	15.9	24.6	14.5	42	7.2	11.6	37.7	26.1	27.5	2.9	5.8
Residential buildings (apartments)	17.4	8.7	43.5	4.3	26.1	21.7	13	39.1	8.7	17.4	39.1	21.7	34.8	4.3	0
House building	7.7	23.1	42.3	19.2	7.7	3.8	11.5	57.7	19.2	7.7	11.5	26.9	50	11.5	0
Civil and infrastructure	36.8	0	21.1	36.8	5.3	26.3	10.5	21.1	31.6	10.5	47.4	21.1	31.6	0	0
City areas	23.5	18.6	27.5	18.6	11.8	16.7	19.6	34.3	12.7	16.7	32.4	22.5	36.3	3.9	4.9
Regional areas	12.5	12.5	42.5	17.5	15	2.5	17.5	45	27.5	7.5	22.5	22.5	47.5	5	2.5

**Table 8.** Employer would require working a sixth day on another project if were required to work a 5-day week on one project ( $N = 581$ )

	Frequency	Percent
Yes	89	15.3
No	297	51.1
Possibly	195	33.6
Total	581	100

While participants preferred to work more productively to keep their weekends free, the most common model employed in the Australian construction industry is a “compressed 5-day week” where people work longer hours during weekdays to compensate for not working weekends. However, support for this model was not universal and depended on factors such as pay method (salaried or waged); age; family and caring responsibilities and gender. For example, many people felt that a compressed hard 5-day week was especially bad for people with caring and family responsibilities and women who took the bulk of these responsibilities. Other negative implications associated with a compressed hard 5-day week included:

- (1) Increased fatigue and poorer safety (especially for those in physically or cognitively demanding roles or who commute long distance to work).
- (2) Increased fatigue and poorer safety from many people (around 8%) looking for a second jobs on weekends or in the unregulated grey economy. Increased fatigue due to uncontrolled weekend working because administrative work normally done in the week would need to be shifted to the weekend to be done in people’s own time;
- (3) Potential loss of overtime pay for many waged construction workers who rely on weekend working.

*RQ2.* What are the pros and cons of a shorter working week for employers in the Australian construction industry and what is the preferred model?

Many participants argued that a shorter working week could have many business benefits for employers. These included improved: staff work life balance; health and wellbeing; staff recruitment, engagement and retention; workplace behaviour; and reduced illness and absenteeism. Many also argued that the business viability of a shorter working week has increased in recent years due to increased costs of overtime rates on weekends and reducing worker productivity and attendance. However, most participants also expressed significant concerns about the potential negative impact of a shorter working week on employer’s business competitiveness and viability and on their client’s projects. While many acknowledged these risks depended on the shorter working week model employed, there were especially strong concerns about the potentially significant business risks associated with a compressed hard 5-day week (where sites are shut on weekends except in exceptional circumstances and people worked longer days during the week to compensate). This is the most common model employed in the Australian construction industry and many respondents had undertaken detailed analysis and modelling of the risks involved which included:

- (1) Potentially significant cost and program impacts which varied between +5% and +25% for time and +0.40% to +4% for costs, depending on a range of assumptions such as: project type; value of weekend working; client willingness to share risks; liquidated damages imposed for delays; costs of overtime for weekend working etc. While some argued that there could be a reduction in overtime costs due to people not working weekends, this financial benefit was far outweighed by, increased

preliminary costs (due to longer programs) and increased risks of liquidated damages from delays (since most clients would not change their programs). Subcontractors are also currently under-pricing the risks of a shorter working week because they can spread them across 6-day week projects. But if a shorter working week was mandated across the whole industry (as advocated by some industry groups and researchers), these costs would increase by as much as 20%.

- (2) Exacerbation of critical skills shortages due to potential loss of labour to other industries where operatives can earn overtime by working a 6-day week or a migration of labour from 5-day week projects to 6-day week projects (assuming a 5-day week was not mandated across the whole industry).
- (3) Reduced productivity – While many acknowledged that the productivity of Saturday work had reduced in recent years due to increasing overtime costs and reduced weekend attendance, Saturdays were widely considered to still be valuable for some key trades and on many projects (especially on inner city CBD projects with large workforces and significant logistical challenges and where planning conditions allowed it).
- (4) Reduced safety due to the risk of greater fatigue from working longer hours during the week (especially for those in cognitively or physically demanding roles).
- (5) Increased bankruptcies given stresses already on the industry arising from increasing labour and materials costs and growing market uncertainty.
- (6) Reduced competitiveness for firms employing a shorter working week model when tendering against firms using a 6-day week model (if a shorter working week was not mandated across the whole industry);
- (7) Increased costs and programs for clients resulting in potentially cancelled projects.

Given the above risks of a hard 5-day week, most respondents agreed that it was only viable:

- (1) On selective projects where the value of weekend working is low and reduced productivity from not working weekends is minimal;
- (2) One selective projects which have been assessed, planned and designed from the very start to fit a hard 5-day week program (rather than retrospectively imposing a shorter week at tender stage which is most often the case);
- (3) If clients were willing to share the significant cost and program risks by adjusting their budgets and programs to suit;
- (4) If clients reduce uncertainty for tenderers by mandating a hard 5-day week, do not accept competing 6-day week tenders and enforcing it in practice;
- (5) If clients remove pressures for firms to work a 6-day week such as excessive liquidated damages and contractual risks distributions which shift uncontrollable delays onto contractors;
- (6) If a range of other complementary interventions are also used to avoid the potential risks listed above such as: fatigue management, discouraging people from taking second jobs on weekends, carers support, improved safety management systems etc.

Unfortunately, respondents widely agreed that the above conditions were unlikely to be met. Therefore, a hard 5-day week would produce significant work-life balance and business challenges and unintended consequences for the industry (especially small firms which are likely to get passed the risk by principal contractors).

For the above reasons, the majority respondents felt that a soft 5-day week where firms kept sites open on weekends was a viable compromise between business and individual worker

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interests. In this 5-day week model, employers, clients and individuals can negotiate a 5-day week schedule in a flexible way which responds to employees' unique needs and project constraints. This can be done using standard workplace flexibility arrangements and rotating schedules to give people an alternative Saturday and weekday free while keeping the site open on Saturdays. Many respondents had been voluntarily operating a soft 5-day week for some time for both off-project and on-project staff with minimal impact on project programs, costs and business competitiveness. Although respondents acknowledged organizational challenges that had to be managed (such as ensuring continuity of site management/supervision between weekdays and weekends and ensuring projects do regress to a 6-day week when projects run behind), this model provided employees with the flexibility to accommodate their varying work and life demands and allowed employers to remain competitive by keeping projects operating 6 days a week.

### Discussion of results

In relation to research question one, our results provide further empirical evidence that many people working in the construction industry work long hours which are potentially detrimental to their work life balance and health and wellbeing and that they support a shorter working week as a way to improve this (Townsend *et al.*, 2011; Lingard *et al.*, 2021). However, we found that this is not as universal as many previous studies suggest and that because of the potential individual and business risks involved, flexible working (rather than a shorter working week) is the preferred way to improve work life balance and health and wellbeing for most people. While the importance of flexible working has also been acknowledged in construction work-life balance research (Francis *et al.*, 2006; Holden and Sunindijo, 2018; Sui Pheng *et al.*, 2019), our findings provide further insights into the variability of access to flexibility across the construction workforce and how this drives support for a mandatory hard 5-day week where the whole industry would be forced to shut down on weekends. However, given the potential individual and organizational risks linked to this model, our findings indicate that if flexibility provisions were improved and made more equal across the entire construction workforce, that support for a hard 5-day week would fall away.

Our findings also add further nuance to previous shorter working week research which tends to treat the construction workforce as a homogenous whole. While numerous studies acknowledge that there is a divide between salaried and waged workers in their support for a shorter working week (Townsend *et al.*, 2006a, c; Lingard and Turner, 2022; Lingard *et al.*, 2024) our findings show that support for a 5-day week varies significantly across the workforce depending on a range of additional factors such as: existing work life balance provisions; the 5-day model employed; the level of risk and physical and mental fatigue involved in one's job, the location of one's job (onsite or offsite) and various demographic factors such as age etc. We also found that support for a 5-day week was driven by potential personal, relational and organizational impacts such as the risk of reduced income, the limitations of working harder and longer hours during the week; potentially negative impacts on other team members' work life balance; and potentially negative impacts on project outcomes and organizational viability and competitiveness. These interdependencies are rarely acknowledged in existing research. Our findings therefore support Lingard *et al.* (2021) who argues that the specific costs and benefits of different 5-day week models must be considered from different stakeholder perspectives. However, overall, our findings are much more critical of a compressed 5-day week (the most common model in Australia) than many previous construction studies (see for example Lingard and Francis, 2009; Brown *et al.*, 2010, Galea *et al.*, 2020). In particular, we find that there are certain groups of people who are especially exposed to these risks (young people working in relatively junior supervisory onsite roles in large commercial, infrastructure and residential projects). Furthermore, given that many women still take the main caring role in families (Standing Committee on Economy and Gender and Economic Equality, 2021), our results qualify many previous studies which argue

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that a shorter working week is always good for increasing gender equity and diversity in the industry (see for example [Lingard et al., 2021](#), [Galea et al., 2020](#)).

We also found that the most popular 5-day week option was one which involved working more productively during the week (a 4-day week type 100:80:100 model – [Lewis et al., 2023](#)) rather than longer working days (a compressed model). However, we raise new questions about how this may be viable within the context of construction where it is notoriously difficult to measure productivity ([Crawford and Vogl, 2006](#)).

Overall, our findings in relation to research question one reflect wider concerns by researchers outside the field of construction about the overwhelming positivity of the shorter working week debate ([Stronge and Harper, 2019](#); [Harlington, 2022](#)) and need for further exploration via larger scale studies (most previous studies are based on limited case studies and small sample sizes).

In relation to research question two, in addition to raising similar concerns to those expressed by previous researchers about the risks of a compressed 5-day week model (see [Townsend et al., 2006a, c, 2011, 2012](#); [Lingard et al., 2008; 2024](#); [Bradley et al., 2010](#); [Galea et al., 2020](#)), our findings contribute a much larger array of potential business risks (such as reduced productivity, safety and increased costs) which contradict many previous research studies. These risks are especially pronounced in a hard compressed 5-day working week model and we find that these business interests cannot be separated from employee interests in considering the viability of a shorter working week. Yet this interdependence has been largely neglected in previous research which tends to look at the shorter working week from an individual employee perspective. Importantly, we also find that the unpredictability of many of these risks, the unwillingness of many clients to share them and the general lack of provisions within the industry to manage them, makes a hard 5-day week a highly risky option at both an organizational and individual level. Ultimately this will translate into risks for employees, employers and clients of the industry who will have to bear these consequences.

Overall, our results are much more cautionary about the merits of a hard 5-day week than previous construction studies which we argue are often methodologically flawed and tend to uncritically echo wider assumptions about the automatic and often universal benefits of shorter working weeks (see for example [Joyeaux, 2025](#) who comes to similar conclusions). In contrast, our results favour a “soft 5-day week” where sites are kept open on weekends and people negotiate a 5-day week to fit in with individual project requirements and co-worker needs. The value of this soft 5-day week model is that there is considerable experience and organizational data available about the potential risks. Furthermore, these risks are minimal to individuals, businesses and clients in the industry making a soft 5-day week the best compromise between business and individual worker interests of all the models we explored. It is therefore surprising that a soft 5-day week model has not previously been explored in the field of construction, although we note that one of the case studies (yet to be reported) in the [Lingard et al. \(2024\)](#) study is similar.

## Conclusion

Addressing the lack of large-scale studies into the pros and cons of a shorter working week in construction, our findings make several important contributions to advancing research in this area.

First, our results provide evidence that a culture of long working hours and working weeks, which is damaging to people’s work life balance and general health and wellbeing is common in some parts of the Australian construction industry. However, the potential benefits of a shorter working week are not as clear, universal and guaranteed that most previous studies suggest and that the workforce cannot be treated as a homogeneous whole. We find that many people’s lives could be detrimentally impacted if a 5-day week was imposed universally across the whole construction industry with risks being especially significant for young professional site-based salaried employees with large mortgages and those not able to work longer days

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during the week due to family and other weekday commitments or due to the physically and cognitively demanding nature of their work. This means that a mandatory hard 5-day week could introduce new inequities across the workforce, potentially worsen gender inequalities and exacerbate the current labour shortage crisis in the Australian construction industry.

Second, we find that there are many unexplored business and project-related risks associated with a shorter working week and that one cannot separate employee and employer interests when considering the pros and cons of a shorter working week, as most previous studies do. While these risks depend on the wide range of factors which need to be further explored, they appear to be especially concerning for projects where the value of weekend working is high (such as large complex inner city sites subject to very tight time and cost constraints where clients do share the risks and impose large liquidated damages). Our findings raise especially significant concerns about the impact of a compressed hard 5-day week which is the most common model currently employed in the Australian construction industry.

Third, our research raises new questions about who will pay for these potential risks. While there are always exceptions to the rule, few employees are willing or able to take a pay cut, to work longer hours during the week or increase their productivity to suit. Furthermore, few businesses are willing or able to accept the risks involved and few clients are prepared to adjust their programs and budgets to suit. This raises the worrying prospect that these risks will be passed down the supply chain by clients and contractors to smaller subcontractors which are least able to bear and manage them, causing potentially significant damage to them, their employees, the wider construction industry and ultimately the clients it serves.

Fourth, if a 5-day model is employed in the construction industry then our results indicate that a soft-5-day week where sites are kept open on the weekend would have the greatest level of support because it represents the best compromise between employee, employer and client interests. Furthermore, many firms have been operating this model for some time without any significant impact on their business viability.

Finally, we find that by far the least risky model would be to simply provide people with greater and more equal access to flexibility and control over when, where and how they work regardless of role, age, gender and project circumstances. If this were to happen then a mandated shorter working week and its associated risks would not be needed.

In conclusion, our findings indicate that the impact of a shorter working week at an individual and organisational level is dependent on a wide range of factors which are currently poorly understood. Therefore, reflecting recent concerns raised about the merits of a 4-day week outside construction (Joyeaux, 2025) we conclude that generalised statements about the individual benefits of a 5-day week should be treated with great caution. The jury is still out on the pros and cons of a shorter working week and that answers to our research questions are complex and will only become evident over time as more research is undertaken across a variety of contexts and shorter week scenarios.

The implications of our findings for managers and policy makers seeking to improve work life balance in construction are significant since they call into question the widespread assumption, promulgated by past research and recent media that a shorter working week will be universally beneficial for society. Rather, our findings show that improving work life balance is more than simply about reducing hours worked and days worked and that it should be only treated as one potential strategy alongside a host of other complementary strategies. For example, these might include physical and mental health support, improved leave and flexibility provisions, improved organisational cultures and management practices and improved site conditions and facilities etc. Our findings also reveal that managers and policy makers can also not assume widespread support for a shorter working week, as is often suggested. Instead, our findings indicate that the construction workforce is not as homogenous as many well-intentioned managers and policy makers assume and that support for a working week varies significantly across the workforce depending on factors such as profession, trade, pay structures, age, gender and marital and family status. Furthermore, because people's lives change, support for a shorter working week may also change over the course of a person's

working life. We also find that a shorter working week is not risk free. There are potential upsides and downsides for individuals and firms and we find that these risks and opportunities are much more interdependent than is often suggested. For businesses and clients in construction, we found potential risks to productivity, cost, safety and quality on many types of projects, especially on large complex inner city projects where clients are not prepared to adjust their project parameters to accommodate such a change. So the top-down imposition of a hard 5-day week, as is being proposed in the Australian construction industry by some groups should be avoided since there is a risk that the unintended consequences could inadvertently exacerbate the very problems managers and policy-makers are seeking to resolve. These potential risks are magnified even further for a compressed 5-day week which is the most common model being proposed in Australia. Our findings indicate that a far better solution would be to focus on improving equal access to workplace flexibility for everyone since this would allow individuals to tailor their working arrangements to suit their specific circumstances as they change over time. However, if managers and policy makers were determined to introduce a shorter working week, then our results indicate that a soft (uncompressed) 5-day week is the best option because this minimises potential risks to productivity, cost, safety and quality. Furthermore, we recommend that the imposition of any requirements needs to be better monitored and enforced to ensure that employers do what they promise, especially when projects falls behind and pressures to revert to a 6/7 days week are most intense. While our results sound a note of caution for managers and policy makers about the widely claimed benefits of a 5-day week, we end this paper by acknowledging that the shorter working week debate has been valuable in starting a much needed conversation in the construction industry about the impact of the industry's culture and work practices on worker wellbeing, what companies can reasonably expect of their employees in the pursuit of profit which is required to provide people with secure employment and what role clients play in setting healthy parameters for the projects they procure.

We acknowledge the following limitations to the above findings. First, the above research was conducted within the specific context of the Australian industry and the 5-day week models which are being trailed there. Different 5-day week models may emerge in different geographical contexts and variations in regulatory environments, economic conditions and cultures (national and industry) and this may influence the answers to our research questions. Second, while our sample was large and we used a mixed methods approach, further insights may be gained by employing more case study based and ethnographic type research which provides more in-depth individual insights into the impacts of different models on different types of employees across the industry.

#### **Ethics statement**

This research was approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee of the University of Technology Sydney, Australia. Reference: ETH22-7710.

#### **Data availability statement**

The participants of this study did not give written consent for their data to be shared publicly, so due to the sensitive nature of the research supporting data is not available.

#### **Declaration of generative AI and AI-assisted technologies in the writing process**

During the generation of this paper the authors did not use generative AI and AI-assisted technologies.

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