

# Part-time work, part-time care: The radical yet strangely sensible proposal for our future

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FROM: NEWS.COM.AU

SEPTEMBER 01, 2015 12:38PM

**A LOT of people think Jennifer Nedelsky's plan for the future of work is crazy, but when most hear her radical manifesto, their reaction is: "Where do I sign?"**

The Canadian professor, a fellow for the Institute for Social Justice, has this theory that everyone, and she means everyone, should work part time.

Have we got your Mondayitis affected attention yet?

If Professor Nedelsky's ideas were to be implemented, when the full-timers among you arrived at work today it would have been the beginning of a minimum 12, maximum 30-hour week. And if you're one of the increasing number of graduates looking to gain employment or struggling to find that next opportunity, it wouldn't be a problem.

The catch in this utopian labour model is that everyone would also be required to participate in part-time, unpaid care work for the same number of hours, 12 — 30.

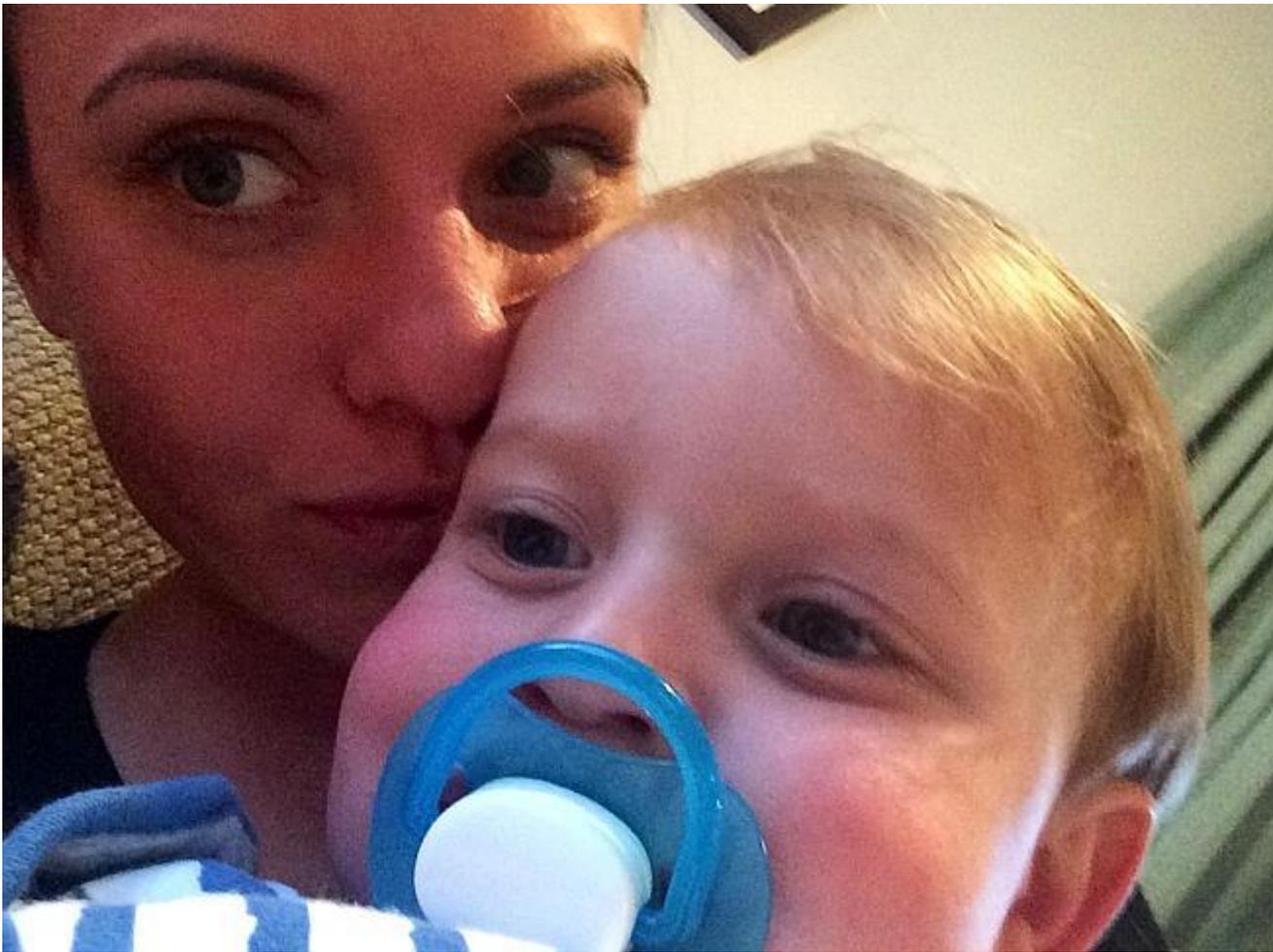
Of the 11.8 million strong labour force in Australia, around 3.6 million of us work part time according to the latest Australian Bureau of Statistics data.

More than half of working women are in part-time employment, with 46.4 per cent working full time hours or longer, while only 26.3 per cent of men work part time. Like most other countries, Australian women make a much larger contribution to unpaid care and domestic work the [Australian Work and Life index](#) suggests.

Professor Nedelsky uses feedback from employers who take on new mums who come back from maternity leave more efficient than ever, and those who complain about taking on workers with limited life skills, to support her "new norms".

She says implementing part-time work for all would not only lead to full employment, it would break down gender inequality, lead to a better family life, and obviously see those in need of care in our community much better looked after.

Not only would these ideas work, she says, but they would lead to an outcome that is "urgently needed if we are to survive on this planet".



Tess Barns and her son Jackson. Source: *Supplied*

### **SO CRAZY IT JUST MIGHT WORK**

There doesn't seem to be anything too remarkable about Tess Barns' work and family status apart from an apparently enviable work-life balance. The Sydney mother to 18-month-old Jackson has recently returned to her primary school teaching position two days a week.

But break it down and she's practically living out Nedelsky's shared work and care proposal, albeit on a much smaller scale.

When Tess clocks off from teaching her primary school class on Tuesday afternoon, she hands over to a fellow teacher who takes over for the next three days after having spent the beginning of the week caring for her two-year-old.

On Wednesdays, Tess can give her attention not only to her son, but to her baby nephew AJ as well after they've been in Tess's sister's care for the past two days.

While Tess and her colleague job-share, she and her sister have found a way to care-share as AJ's mum works the other three days in her accounting job.

"I wouldn't have it any other way and I know I'm in a situation where I don't really have to worry," Tess says.

"I was kind of struggling to see how I was going to go back to work and pay for childcare, and working was important to me, I needed that outlet and that stimulation as well — to use my brain."

It's not a complete model but Tess's situation goes some way to show the benefits of unpaid care combined with paid work among a community of willing participants.

Nedelsky's argument is that if this is implemented across the board, it would address three serious problems: the unsustainable structure of work and family that puts enormous stress on families and forces workers into untenable choices; the slowly-shifting gender norms leaving women with less pay, economic security, leisure time and access to top jobs; the policy/care divide meaning those in top policy making positions are almost always people with very little experience of the demands of care taking.

It's not people like Tess that need convincing that these issues need to be addressed, it's the businesses that employ them.



Kathryn MacMillan runs a recruitment company that specialises in part-time work and flexible hours. Source: *News Corp Australia*

## **CONVINCING THE BOSS**

It was after Kathryn MacMillan started picking up odd accounting jobs when she'd stepped back from work after giving birth to her first child she realised there was a demand for part-time work, and an army of willing and efficient workers ready to pick up those jobs.

Twelve years later and her employment agency Nine2Three Employment Solutions, specialising in part-time positions and only employing part time workers within the business, is thriving.

Though her agency now attracts business from large and loyal clients, she says she still has to convince nervous employers of the value of a part-time workers.

"They've got to think of flexibility and communications to deal with people sharing jobs or working different hours, but it's only because it's a norm that people have difficulty thinking strategically how to do it," she says.

"The thing is that a lot of organisations are missing a large segment of society and a growing segment, there's now more women graduating from university than men, so in the future your workforce is going to be predominantly women, and if you're knocking a lot of them out as soon as they reach a certain stage of life, those businesses are going to be worse off."

## **THE VALUE OF CARE**

When she does eventually talk those employers around, Ms MacMillan says bosses couldn't be happier with a part-time worker who is also a carer, more often a mother, who can bring those life skills to the jobs.

"We'll have clients that'll say if I could get a mother that would be perfect," she says.

“The perception is that if you are able to manage a couple of children and you’re multi-tasking, cooking dinner, managing homework, listening to saxophone practice and also have in your head when they have to be picked up from ballet — those skills transfer to the workplace.”

When newsreader and journalist Jacinta Tynan returned to her part-time presenting job at Sky News, she said she wasn’t the only one who noticed her increased efficiency, in a rarity for many workplaces, her boss had even anticipated it.

“I know I’m lucky to have a job that I thrive in, but more so to be in a company that has that culture where it’s not only OK to take leave and come back part time after having a couple of kids, it’s highly valued,” she says.

Jacinta now works two days a week, pulling a double shift on one of those so it’s the equivalent of three.

She says that she’s noticed an increased efficiency in her work and commitment to it, because she “feels lucky to be there”.

“For working mums it’s kind of the ‘Holy Grail’, but really it should be the norm,” she says.

“In terms of where I am in my career I don’t feel like I’ve had to pull back or have been held back in advancing my career by having kids, taking time off and coming back part time.”

Unfortunately, Jacinta realises this is not the norm in many workplaces, and says she’s realised “we don’t have a culture in Australia where part-time work is considered valuable”.

As Nedelsky notes, it’s a cultural shift that needs to happen, and it’s men in high powered positions that need to accept people are going to just as valuable and just as committed when working part time.



Jacinta Tynan pictured with her children Otis and Jasper. Source: *Supplied*

## **NOT JUST FOR MUMS**

The crux of Nedelsky’s proposal is not just about making life easier for mums who want to work.

“The bottom line is that people need the experience (of care), and so they need to be persuaded of the many benefits,” she says.

It’s a concept echoed by employers of school or university leavers who say [they enter the workforce with “no skills to work at all”](#).

Nedelsky argues, if everyone engages in care work, they will at least be equipped with social and practical skills that can assist them in paid work in the future.

“I think many women already know (the value of participating in care), and evidence is that when men do care, especially for infants, they form lasting bonds,” she says. “There’s also interesting evidence about how as men care more, the link between violence and masculinity is eroded. Another huge advantage.”

## **BABY STEPS**

With such attitudes from people and employers in place, Professor Nedelsky realises the changes she’s proposing aren’t going to come around quickly. But there are ways to make a start.

“There is mounting evidence that people working the long hours common in commonwealth countries and the US are actually less productive, in the sense of less efficient, than those who work fewer hours,” she tells news.com.au.

“The growing stress on employees costs businesses a huge amount in missed days of work, poor attention etc.”

If you’ve got an argument against her proposal she’s heard them all before. High pressure jobs that require plenty of face time? They don’t have to, and those employees require rest. People who don’t want to engage in care work? It’s part of human nature and human responsibility to, so they can find something they’re happy to do. The disintegration of social hierarchies? That’s kind of the point, along gender lines at least.

But ultimately, it’s not about taking a few extra hours off work each week and putting in some extra time to prepare meals or help out those in need, she says, it’s about a better quality of life.

“I think the first step is widespread conversation about real alternatives to the current structures. People are very unhappy with the current state of affairs, but have been persuaded that ‘the competitive global economy,’ or the inevitability of housing prices that require a dual income, or something else makes that change impossible,” she says.

“People need to think about how they really want to live, and what kinds of changes could make that possible.”

<http://www.news.com.au/finance/work/part-time-work-part-time-care-the-radical-yet-strangely-sensible-proposal-for-our-future/story-fnkgbb6w-1227506257170>