

ATO employees reject nine-minute increase to their working day, but does the 9-5 apply to the business community anymore?

EMMA KOEHN / Monday, February 20 2017

Australian Taxation Office Enterprise bargaining agreement Working time



Staff at the Australian Taxation Office have reportedly rejected a suggestion to add nine extra minutes to their workdays, but business groups and human resources experts say the days of the classic 9-5 office hours are well and truly over.

As part of ongoing enterprise bargaining agreement negotiations, the tax office put an initial offer to staff that included a proposal to increase the length of a normal working day from seven hours and 21 minutes to 7 hours and 30 minutes, which the [ABC](#) reports would mean a finish time of 5:00pm instead of 4:51pm.

“This was included in our proposal to staff in late 2015 to ensure the productivity improvements to underpin a pay offer were in line with the requirements of the bargaining policy at that time,” an ATO spokesperson told *SmartCompany*.

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Productivity was a key part of the discussions, with suggestions the extra nine minutes of work could have boosted productivity two percent, reports the *ABC*.

However, the proposal was eventually shelved, with the *ABC* reporting that a briefing pack from the negotiations said the proposal had to go because it was the idea staff disliked the most.

The ATO said in a statement to *SmartCompany* that subsequent offers in the negotiations “maintained conditions that our employees told us mattered most to them, including the standard working day (that is, removing the proposal to increase the length of the working day).”

Productivity no longer linked to time sheets

However, when it comes to working hours in the business community, the days of working from 9am to 5pm are no longer needed, or even desired, by employers or staff, says Kathryn MacMillan, managing director of recruitment firm Nine2Three.

“I think that is not necessarily driven by business, I think that’s a societal change,” MacMillan says.

“In general terms, there is no doubt that workers need to have a substantial rest period between their days, but keeping that in mind, we see that a lot of people are happy to entertain different hours—they might start earlier and finish earlier.”

Scott Barklamb, director of workplace relations at the Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry, agrees, saying that while the situation speaks to a need for a “responsive, engaged ATO” that has services available when clients need them, overall the business community now accepts that daily start and finish times do not come down to the minute.

Discover Productivity bargaining agreement negotiations substantial rest period

“For the most part, what we see is greater diversity around when these [work hours] stop,” Barklamb says.

“We think there’s actually a new deal at work...in that people have the flexibility now.”

While flexible work hours certainly can’t be achieved everywhere, smaller business in particular are uniquely placed to ask their staff when they want to clock on and clock off and why, Barklamb says.

“I think we want to make the point that it can’t be done everywhere—people in restaurants need to be at work at certain times. That said, small business work very closely personally with their employees. They’ve got a head start to discuss how they do this,” he says.

The value of a move away from the standard nine to five work day is the acknowledgment that staff will work hard for the business when asked, while the business understands the lives of its workers, says Barklamb.

“A more diverse workforce is going to have more diverse needs for managing their work and non-working lives,” he explains.

Ultimately, any discussions around how long staff work and when they do the bulk of their activities should now focus on productivity, rather than the minute-by-minute calculations, MacMillan believes.

“I think the old management style of your workers having to sit at their desk from nine to five is gone,” she says.

“I think it comes down to having really good communication with your workers. If they’re doing 8am-4pm, 7am-6pm or whatever [is okay], as long as you get the work done.”

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