



## Quality Part-Time Work for Nurses

### Assisting with work and family balance

An effective solution to balancing work and family creates a productive workplace, as well as a rewarding family life.

Today's workplace must respond to a changing labour force, the need for increased workplace flexibility and the importance of a skilled and engaged workforce.

Quality part-time work is about attracting and retaining skilled staff who have family responsibilities. Putting quality part-time work firmly on the agenda is one step towards an effective response to contemporary needs and demands.

The information set out below is designed to encourage hospitals and other health industry workplaces to consider quality part-time work to assist with the balance between family and work.

Nurses returning from parental leave or those whose family requirements mean that working part-time is a short or long term strategy to assist the balance between family and work may benefit from quality part-time work.

However, quality part-time work is not just for people with family responsibilities. It can assist nurses to combine work with study or other life pursuits or can be used to assist in graduated retirement.

We encourage you to think about the information within these guidelines and to use it to assist your staff with balancing work, family and other life matters.

Putting quality part-time work in place is good for everyone.



Victorian Employers'  
Chamber of Commerce  
and Industry

This guideline has been developed by Industrial Relations Victoria in partnership with the Australian Nursing Federation (Victorian Branch), the Health Services Union Victorian Branch, the Victorian Employers' Chamber of Commerce and Industry and the Victorian Hospitals Industrial Association. The guideline provides information to employers in the health industry about how to put in place quality part-time work arrangements to assist nurses who have family responsibilities. It is not meant to be prescriptive. The ideas and industry examples are meant to stimulate interest in and commitment to quality part-time work.



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## Part-time work for nurses

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The key to success in the health industry is ensuring that patients and residents have good health outcomes. This is achieved by matching the needs of staff with the needs of patients, resources and service requirements. And many nurses, particularly those with family responsibilities, appreciate being able to work less than full-time hours.

Part-time work is here to stay and part-time nurses are critical to meeting service needs. They must be taken seriously. Most want a career in the health industry and will move around to find a good employer.

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## Good jobs, whether part-time or full-time, attract good people

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The Victorian health and community services industry already has a high percentage of part-time workers. Across the health and community services industry:

- Forty-four per cent of all staff are part-time (29% of Victoria's workers are part-time);
- Half of all female staff are part-time (46% of Victoria's women workers are part-time);
- Almost a quarter (23%) of the male staff are part-time (across Victoria 15% of men work part-time)
- And while there is a lot of part-time work in health, some of it is not quality part-time work.

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## What makes for a quality part-time nursing job?

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While each organisation is different, the one thing that does distinguish *quality* part-time nursing jobs from other part-time jobs is that people doing them are seen as *part of the regular workforce*.

### **Quality part-time work at the Epworth Hospital**

*At the Epworth Hospital staff are seen as the most valuable asset. The provision of quality part-time work to assist with the balance between work and family is a major strategy to attract and retain skilled nursing staff.*

*Epworth tries to ensure that the full-time and part-time staff are treated in the same way, except in the hours they work.*

*Director of Operations, Melissa Carfax-Foster, explains it this way: "The focus is on looking at what is required to meet both the hospital's needs and the staff needs. Communication is the key and it's important to canvass all options and if possible come up with a win-win situation for all."*

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## Myths about quality part-time work in nursing

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There are many views about part-time work – many of these have no basis in fact. Here are just a few that might apply to nurses:

- **Nurses who work part-time aren't interested in getting ahead**  
People who work part-time are like everyone else. Some will want to move ahead in their careers and others will not. There should be no disadvantage in working part-time. Make sure you don't assume people who are working part-time aren't interested in promotion – either to a full-time position or a part-time position. And certainly don't assume that their experience and commitment are less than those of full-timers. Give them an equal chance.
- **Senior nurses and nurse managers can't be part-time**  
Quality part-time work should be available to all, except where genuine job requirements make this unreasonable. With senior nurses or nurse managers a job-share arrangement might make good sense, or perhaps jobs could be redesigned to accommodate part-time work.
- **Only women want to work part-time for family responsibilities**  
Men have family responsibilities too. And there are men working in nursing who also choose to reduce their hours to help with family care.
- **Part-time work is very hard to set up and manage**  
Quality part-time work is all about fairness, transparency and consistency. See below for some steps to ensure success.

Use the following checklist to see if the part-time jobs in your organisation are quality jobs.

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## The quality part-time work checklist

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- Our organisation gives both men and women the opportunity to work part-time. Depending on organisational requirements, nurses can work part-time across all areas.**  
What sets organisations with quality part-time work apart from others is that part-time work is found throughout the organisation and both men and women work part-time. In the health sector this is certainly possible. Remember that if part-time jobs are only available at the junior level, experienced nurses who choose to return to work part-time after maternity leave, might choose to work elsewhere.
- The nursing staff who work part-time in our organisation have the same protections as the full-time workforce, including job protection, predictability of hours and choice of shifts.**  
Job security, predictable working hours and choice of shifts are very important to people with family responsibilities, for example those with children in child care may need to fit their work around the child care centre hours.

✔ **People who work part-time receive pro-rata wages and access to benefits.**

This includes any benefits full-time staff might accrue, such as holiday and sick leave, as well as access to other job-related benefits.

✔ **Nurses who work part-time in our organisation are encouraged to participate in our training programs and can apply for promotion if they wish.**

Quality part-time work means equal access to training, education, promotion and career progression. Staff who work part-time bring a full set of skills to the workplace. Organisations who are serious about quality part-time work never assume part-time staff do not want to add to their skills or move ahead in their careers.

✔ **People can move between full-time and part-time work as they require.**

While the option to move between full-time and part-time work will depend upon service and organisational requirements, the option should be there. For people with family responsibilities, the need to work part-time changes across the life course. For example, when babies are small, parents may wish to work part-time, but as children go to school, longer hours might be preferred.

✔ **Part-time staff are treated no differently to those who are full-time.**

In organisations with quality part-time work in place, managers and other work colleagues see part-time workers as valuable contributors. Their work is challenging, meaningful and satisfying – not just the bits and pieces or the shifts that no one else wants.

✔ **We recognise that staff have a life outside work.**

Better balance between work and other things in life, including family, is important for everyone. A growing number of women in the paid workforce and an ageing population mean most people will have child care or elder care responsibilities for at least a part of their working lives.

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## The advantages of quality part-time work in nursing

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### The ability to recruit and retain experienced and skilled staff

The big advantage of quality part-time work is that it helps to retain experienced and skilled staff who may not wish to work full-time at particular stages in their lives. Staff returning from parental leave might return to work earlier if opportunities for quality part-time work are available, while those who are nearing retirement, may continue in the workforce if they can cut back their hours.

### Increased morale, productivity and efficiency

Morale, productivity and efficiency increase when staff know their employer has invested in them. And that's got to be good for the organisation. Putting quality part-time work in place can help reduce staff stress levels and unplanned absenteeism.

## Becoming an employer of choice

Organisations can benefit from being known in the community as family friendly. This could mean attracting better staff and an improved reputation within your community.

### **Quality part-time work at Alexandra District Hospital**

*According to the Hospital's Chief Executive Officer/Director of Nursing, Heather Byrne, "The provision of quality part-time work options for staff has enabled Alexandra District Hospital to grow into a robust organisation capable of adaptation in response to both change and opportunities at both the individual and organizational level."*

*At Alexandra District Hospital open communication is seen as vitally important to the success of quality part-time work. The management team has an open door policy and all requests are considered. And when a decision is to be made on whether a request for part-time work can be met, the first priority is to consider what will improve employee job satisfaction and then issues of how to make it workable are considered.*

*Assistant Director Nursing/Human Resources and Primary Health Manager, Elizabeth Sinclair, explains, "If we don't respond to our internal customer needs and find options that are going to work, we lose valuable staff."*

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## It's also about risk management!

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Both Federal and State legislation promote equal opportunity in the workplace and outlaw discrimination on the grounds of parental or carer status or family responsibilities. Reasonable accommodation of employee requests for flexible work arrangements to assist them balance their work and family responsibilities is important where this is possible.

This does not mean that employers have to agree to every request for part-time work. However, it does mean that before making a final decision, you should seriously consider requests case-by-case in the light of genuine work requirements, and creatively explore how the job could be performed under alternative work arrangements.



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## So what do I do when someone asks to work part-time to assist them with their family responsibilities?

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The real key to success in quality part-time work is open communication between staff and management.

### Be prepared

Every request for part-time work will be different. If you already know the steps you will take to consider a request, the process will be clear and consistent. Consider developing a written policy, including the steps to take in considering a request. This could speed up decisions and help ensure consistency and transparency.

### Suggest the employee develop a formal proposal

Before you meet to consider a request, ask the staff member concerned to write down what they want to achieve by working part-time, the impact this might have on those they work with and what it might mean for the particular work they do.

### Consider each request objectively and sensitively

Seriously consider each request. Be flexible and creative. There are not many nursing jobs that could not be adapted to part-time work. Think about and plan for how the part-time work arrangement might be best managed. Make sure you think through and plan for the reduction in the staff member's work load, as well as any impact on the work of their colleagues and on service requirements. If it is not possible to meet the request for part-time work, consider other flexible work options that could assist the employee to balance work and family responsibilities.

### Document what has been agreed

Agree in writing to a regular pattern of work and include the length of time the arrangement will be in place, as well as the dates for regular review. And remember, if you turn down a request from someone who wants to work part-time to assist with family responsibilities, explain your reasons in writing, giving clear business reasons.

### Ensure the part-time nursing staff are part of the regular workforce

Include part-time staff in all communication, consultation processes and social activities. As far as possible ensure that any training or meetings are scheduled when part-time staff can attend. Put in place a planned process to ensure that work colleagues are aware of changes to work hours and have a plan of action to deal with any problems should these arise.

### Monitor part-time work arrangements

Make a time for regular review of the part-time work arrangement to make sure it is working for everyone – if there are any doubts about whether it will work consider putting the arrangement in place for a trial period.

### Right to Request and the Family Provisions Test Case

In August 2005 the Australian Industrial Relations Commission handed down its decision in the Family Provisions Test Case. One of the relevant provisions is an employee's 'right to request' a return from parental leave on a part-time basis until a child reaches school age to assist an employee reconcile work and parental responsibilities. An employer will need to consider such a request having regard to the employee's circumstances, provided it is genuinely based on the employee's parental responsibilities. The 'right to request' also means that an employer has a right to refuse the request but only on reasonable grounds related to the effect on the workplace or the employer's business such as cost, lack of adequate replacement staff, loss of efficiency and the impact on customer service.

## For Further Information

For more information, go to the Industrial Relations Victoria website at [www.irv.vic.gov.au](http://www.irv.vic.gov.au)