

THE DEAL

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PUSHING THE LIMITS

Could Australians receive unlimited time off like their US and UK counterparts? Story by **Joseph Lam**

As Goldmans Sachs delivered its unlimited leave policy to senior executives in Britain this week, many Australians watched and wondered if one day they too would be able to take as much time off as they like.

Unlimited paid time off policies, which emerged several years ago among big US tech companies including Netflix, recently have shot to fame as a way to appease staff during the pandemic and a tool to entice potential employees amid labour shortages.

Many big tech companies in the US, including LinkedIn, Netflix and Glassdoor, still offer some sort of unlimited PTO or "unlimited vacation" policy, while corporations such as Goldman Sachs have only just introduced the scheme.

Down Under, however, very few companies have followed the trend.

Asked if Australians will likely ever experience unlimited PTO, Marian Baird says most likely no.

The head of discipline at the University of Sydney business school says the scheme wouldn't fly with Australian employers and employees may even be reluctant to take it up.

Baird says holiday schemes such as unlimited PTO are never without strings attached. "From what I gather, there are limits," she says. "As I understand it, it's unlimited time-on as well."

Baird isn't the only sceptic. Many have wondered what the scheme means for other entitle-

ments and whether it's the corporate equivalent of dangling the carrot in front of one's head.

US recruitment website Indeed defines unlimited PTO as "a vacation policy that allows employees to take as much free time as they want as long as it does not interfere with their ability to complete their work".

Under such a policy, employees are not assigned a set number of paid leave days; rather, they negotiate leave throughout the year with their boss.

Baird says any scheme that sounds too good to be true often is. "It's definitely a catch-22 type situation. It sounds really appealing and any employer that offers it probably expects extra time on as well," she says.

Take Netflix. Under the streaming giant's "work-life philosophy", employees "intermix work and personal time quite a bit", it says.

"Time away works differently at Netflix. We don't have a prescribed 9-to-5 workday, so we don't have prescribed time-off policies for salaried employees, either. We don't set a holiday and vacation schedule, so you can observe what's important to you - including when your mind and body need a break," the company says.

One exception to the rule might be an Australian company that was an early adopter of unlimited PTO. Inventium, an innovative consulting firm, brought in the policy in 2017.

"We might have been the first company in

Australia to offer unlimited paid leave," Inventium founder Amantha Imber says.

Imber says her consultants often work overtime and odd hours so the program was meant to offset time off in lieu, a different approach to the US where unlimited PTO replaces most, if not all, leave entitlements.

"We were trying to bring back an assemblage of balance in our consultants' lives," Imber says. "There was no formal program. It's more of a trust system as we don't keep track of time-sheets."

While the program was exciting for staff initially, in 2020 Inventium shut it down.

"It's since been superseded by the four-day week, which we find infinitely better for flexibility and engagement," Imber says.

"Unlimited PTO was good to debut but it was very easy for it to get taken for granted. Some people can certainly feel guilt around leave. The four-day week is pretty straightforward. It's also had a far bigger impact; staff now work 80 per cent of the hours but are 100 per cent productive."

Baird says the American annual leave system is far different to Australia's and many Aussies would be sceptical of employers who offered an unlimited PTO policy.

"My sense is that in Australia it would be treated with huge suspicion. It's taken 1000 odd years just to get paid time off," she says. "Covid would have had an impact on unlimited PTO. If

we're all working at home, and a lot of those tech company people do, what's the difference and do we need it?"

While Australian leave entitlements may be better than most countries, Baird says it's time to renegotiate.

"It's an area that has been neglected, especially in a period of low-wage growth," she says. "To attract and retain, maybe leave and time is something you can bargain for. If an employer can't give money and they want to attract and retain, maybe leave and time is the thing that they enhance."

It was back in 1973, she adds, that the Whitlam Labor government gave four weeks leave to federal public servants. That then started to move through the rest of the award system but has remained a static model.

"In those years, just over 50 per cent of workers were part of a union and in any case everyone is covered by the outcome. Those four weeks are really a 70s phenomenon."

Imber says she did see a few Australian businesses adopt the unlimited PTO scheme after hers caught traction in the news cycle but it's likely they'll follow Inventium into the four-day work week.

"I personally think the four-day week will continue to gain traction and will replace unlimited paid leave," she says. "I daresay the experiences will be similar to those who compare them."

BREAK DOWN BARRIERS

IncludeAbility aims to get more people with disability into jobs. Story by **Jane Nicholls**



When tennis champion Dylan Alcott was anointed Australian of the Year in January, he jovially warned in the conclusion of his stirring speech: "We're not just ready to work, we're ready to take your jobs ... We are coming, we are coming."

Alcott was talking about the estimated 4.5 million Australians who live with a disability, as he does. He also was lamenting that only 54 per cent of them were in the workforce. "The unemployment rate is double that of able-bodied people," he said, adding that the figures hadn't moved in 30 years. In 2011, Australia ranked 21 out of 29 OECD countries for the employment of people with disabilities.

The IncludeAbility project, launched by the Australian Human Rights Commission last year, lays out the myriad benefits of finally extinguishing this depressing narrative. The AHRC says companies that lead with disability initiatives also report 30 per cent higher profit margins, and that the Australian economy's gross domestic product could be boosted by \$50bn by 2050 if workforce participation of people with a disability rises to 70 per cent.

"Companies pursuing diversity and inclusion need to recognise that people with disabilities are diverse, and disability itself is diverse too," AHRC Disability Discrimination Commissioner Ben Gauntlett says. "Among Australia's working-age population, approximately one in eight people lives with disabilities. Employers need to access this wonderful talent pool of people."

The IncludeAbility project has a suite of resources to help them do that, and has 16 leading Australian companies and public sector organisations in its Employer Network, including Woolworths, ANZ Bank, Australia Post, PwC, Rio Tinto and the ABC.

Gauntlett talks about the "three Ls" of disability employment. "It's leadership, long-term and learning," he says. "The highest levels of an organisation need to commit to it, it needs to be in place long-term, and you need to learn from what you've done, and have a continuous feedback loop to do it better."

Workplace adjustment passports are one way to enshrine particular changes that make a job for a person with a disability easier - or simply possible. They record the agreed reasonable adjustments between employees and managers, and the ambition is that the passport can travel with the employee throughout the company or perhaps to a new company.

"There are clear benefits of the workplace passport in terms of not having to constantly repeat yourself in terms of what you need," Gauntlett says. But he cautions that it can't be set and forget. "People with a disability are often affected by the environment, so you need to make sure what's recorded in the passport still reflects their needs. It could be a quick check-in rather than a detailed conversation."

Gauntlett says 80 per cent of disabilities are invisible, and 47.3 per cent of the population lives with one or more of 10 underlying conditions, including mental and behavioural health, back pain and asthma, as defined by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. Often, a disability is "temporary and episodic ... all employees should be educated about the ability to be provided with reasonable adjustments".

Paul Harpur, an IncludeAbility ambassador and associate professor in the law school at the University of Queensland, which is also in the employer network, thinks workplace passports are a good idea.

"Herbert Smith Freehills, which is in the IncludeAbility network, has them, which is great because they're a big global firm," he says. "When a worker goes from the Sydney office to the Brisbane or London office, they don't have to say, 'What I need is the following', which is a really big drain. People start a new job and spend the first few weeks just trying to get the systems working."

It's working well, needs such as assistive technology or adaptive furniture "should already be in place when the person sits down at their desk", says Harpur, who was left blind after he was hit by a train at the age of 14. Reasonable adjustments extend to flexible working arrangements, more frequent breaks, training, or time to complete tasks, or workplace measures that reduce noise and distractions.

Certain workplace adjustments - including technology, physical workplace modifications, Auslan interpreting and disability awareness training - may be funded through the federal government's JobAccess Employment Assistance Fund.

Harpur says there's a mountain to climb for employees in discussing their requests, a problem he canvasses in his book, *Ableism at Work*. "To get all the support you need, you need to put all your vulnerabilities out there at once," Harpur says. "There's a lot of self-censorship - people often think: 'I'll ask for what I think they'll definitely say yes to, but not so much that I sound like I'm incompetent.'"

Proactive work around recruitment can help remedy this. Harpur says companies should include a link to their disability policy in job ads, giving information about how to get in touch for support. He suggests they also offer candidates separate time to discuss a disability if needed, rather than waste precious time in the job interview talking about that rather than their skills.

"People with disabilities are very good problem solvers," Harpur says. "Most people hop in the car and on the train to get to work and don't even really think about it. If you have a disability, it's more complicated and you plan out what happens if something goes wrong. If you're in a wheelchair and the lift's broken, you can't just sit there looking sad, you've got to think of the way around it. It's harder, but for your entire life you've been thinking about how you deal with changes as they arise. People with disabilities are incredibly innovative."

Gauntlett agrees that the work needs to begin with recruitment, and that reasonable adjustments need to apply to recruit, retain and advance people with disabilities.

"The cost of reasonable adjustments is negligible, but the benefit is extraordinary for both the person with the disability and the organisation they work for," he says. "It might be a piece of software that costs very little, or the ability to turn up for work at a different time, which costs nothing, and you get access to this talent pool. You also see other employees who may not have felt confident disclosing one of those underlying health conditions. If they feel comfortable opening up about what they need, that creates loyalty within your organisation. All these people want to not only stay with you, they want to work hard for you, too."

WELCOME TO CORPCHELLA

PwC wants to win the talent war. Story by **Joanna Panagopoulos**

The employees call it Corporate Coachella.

It's 8.30am on a Monday and there is a pop concert on the main stage. Corporate cover band Song Division blasts a rendition of Harry Styles's Watermelon Sugar, the lead singer is dancing on tables, the crowd is heaving and a smoke machine blankets the employees. No drinking yet, though; that happens only after dark.

This is day two of a four-day outdoor festival for mostly 20-something PwC consultants.

If actual Coachella had Billie Eilish on the main stage and Big Sean in the Sahara tent, then Corpchella is headlined by Parramatta Eels mental skills coach Andrew May and human behaviour PhD Jemma King hosting a biohacking workshop somewhere in the line-up.

Women in activewear and bare-calved men weave between teepees in the sprawling green hills of the Hunter Valley in NSW to experience tear-filled workshops about unlocking your "inner child" or to learn the ancient art of weaving. If you want to get into the hottest immersion in town, you need to wait in line for about an hour. Bondi lifeguard Deano Gladstone guides a breath-work session before you jump in an ice bath with your colleagues.

Intentions are sincere. Those keen to share say they want to look after themselves find their inner strength and form friendships.

Consultants for big firms such as PwC are taught to do things with uncompromising efficiency. They advise all levels of government and business about how to do more things with fewer people and lower costs. One workshop host says many employees feel like robots, and a participant discusses "compartmentalising" his

"personalities" at work. So, PwC has sent 600 senior associates and managers each week, for five weeks, to learn how to get out of the "corporate box", "manage emotions" and find themselves with fireside chats and sound baths.

Glowing recaps about #theoutside are posted to LinkedIn and Instagram, reflecting on personal and professional growth.

WELCOME TO 'THE OUTSIDE'

The new \$15m annual event is about "future-proofing" their 3000 senior associates and managers who choose to join in.

Consultancy is ultra competitive. The big four consultancy firms - PwC, KPMG, Deloitte and EY - have long fought it out for the best young talent. In 2022's candidate-short market, this one-of-a-kind corporate festival may be the thing to help win the war on talent.

"(The war on talent) is a huge motivator for why we should do it - because we need to," the event's lead curator and PwC's future of work lead partner Lawrence Goldstone says.

"No.1, we need to invest in people. No.2, we need to invest in people in a way that's different but also shows who we are and is really about our growth and development as a firm. And three, if we create amazing experiences like this, of course people are going to want to come here. And they'll want to stay. This will be an annual calendar event that we will invest in for our senior associates and managers."

"What a great reason to join PwC, but if you're a graduate or a consultant coming through your career (at PwC), how great that you know you get to do this at that point in your career." The com-



pany forks out about \$5000 per employee, but it's free for any staff member to attend.

"There's no PwC content," Goldstone says. "This isn't a PwC training course. This is kind of curating a global experience of providers and thought leaders, like the best conference you could ever go to ... and you've been given the free ticket to go."

"I've had the ability to go to many different experiences around the world, whether that be South by Southwest, Coachella, TED (Talks) or learning conferences, and we said: what if we curated and built something that brought the best of that, and created something that doesn't exist in the southern hemisphere?"

Each day has a different theme. Sunday is about connection to country, Monday is about self-discovery, Tuesday touches on the future of technology, trends and skills, and Thursday involves building connections to colleagues via an "un-conference" - the opposite of a conference.

Four colleagues who started as grads together in 2019 emerge from a raw, emotional immersion about "finding your inner five-year-old" and all agree they want to be more authentic in the office. "It was very intense," financial advisory senior associate Aleksa Ozegovic, 26, says.

"There was definitely a lot of vulnerability and a lot of people opening up about their life and their experiences. But ultimately, it was super positive."

Senior associate in consulting Tershana Fernando, 28, says many people in the tent shared his feelings that they had to "compartmentalise our personalities" at work. "One of the points that came up was about the vulnerabilities we face ... Particularly in a corporate setting, I find it very difficult to be my true self," Fernando says.

Workshop host Alishia Francis, of the REACH Foundation, says those who have attended the workshop in the past few weeks "feel like they're robots or they feel like they're just trying to fit into a box". She says they show them "the other side and what it could be like if they didn't just have to fit in and conform".

Some leave an immersion about "activating the social needs of the human brain" to improve performance feeling energised.

"There's lots to bring into my team in terms of providing a sense of belonging and interconnectedness ... that is more long lasting than just transactional," senior consultant in risk assurance Sanaa Ali, 29, says.

Senior associate in digital transformation Carol Huang says: "I'm learning how to manage my emotions. How to balance work and life, which is what I need at this stage. PwC work can get a bit hectic."

Many employees say the festival has made them feel valued by the company. For others, it is about making connections with peers. "I think they show they really want to care for their employees after the past few years where it's been a bit rough working from home and we all have to shift away from each other ... and also making it sort of like a party, so it's fun and encouraging," consulting senior associate Kevin Sie says.

Goldstone wants "The Outside" event to be a big deal in the corporate world. "Forget the \$15m, that's locked in for next year I believe, what's the next \$15m? This is for the senior associates and managers," he says. "Let's do it for the senior managers and directors, let's do it for the partners, let's do it for our clients."