Self-employment no silver bullet

Being your own boss can bring conflicting demands, writes Natalie Skinner.

Same, same but different? Is self-employment the deal solution to the ubiquitous “struggle to juggle” work-life conflict? As I work for a research centre that focuses on work-life interaction, I’m often asked how people can engage in paid work and have a good quality family and personal life, without sacrificing time or quality of experience in either domain.

This is a question that comes up on a fairly regular basis, as many people think of being self-employed as “living the dream”. Be your own boss, set your own hours, have all the autonomy and control that you want, and get paid to follow your passions and do something that you love doing. Forgive me if I begin to sound a bit like a motivational speaker, but these claims are commonplace in the marketing and promotion of self-employment.

Like most social scientists, I’m often reluctant to give a definitive answer on whether one particular “solution”, such as self-employment, can help address the complex social and economic issues such as work-life conflict. Although it is somewhat exasperating, my answer to this is “it depends”.

Since 2007 I’ve been involved in running six national surveys of Australians’ attitudes and experiences of their working lives, including their working hours and work-life conflict (work restricting or interfering with family, social and leisure time). In each of these surveys we have compared self-employed respondents with those who are employees. Each survey has produced consistent results, showing that self-employment is neither better nor worse for work-life conflict than being an employee.

At first glance this seems a bit odd. There has been a lot of talk recently about allowing workers to have more flexibility around when, where and how much they work. Working at home, reducing working hours and having more control over start and finish times are all examples of the types of flexibility that can make paid work more accessible to working parents and carers, and can have a positive impact on work-life balance.

One view is that self-employment offers much more flexibility; be your own boss and you can control when, where and how much you work. On the other hand, in tougher economic times particularly, self-employed workers may feel pressure to accept all work offered to them due to uncertainty about the availability of future work.

Business administration, finance and the sole responsibility for meeting deadlines can add further pressures to those who choose self-employment. This “mixed bag” is the most likely explanation for our survey results showing little difference between employees and self-employed workers when it comes to their work-life conflict. It’s interesting to observe that equivalent work-life conflict was observed for self-employed men and women who are employees, despite self-employed men working longer hours (almost a full day longer each week in our 2012 survey).

One possible interpretation is that for self-employed men, the greater autonomy and control over working time that being your own boss can offer may offset the negative work-life impact of working longer hours. This was not the case for women; work hours and work-life conflict were equivalent for self-employed women and women who are employees.

I’ll finish by coming back to the original question of whether self-employment is the perfect solution for achieving work-life balance. My best answer is caveat emptor – buyer beware. Or, to be more contemporary, “don’t believe the hype”. Yes, it’s possible that self-employment is the ultimate work-life solution – for some.

However, our research at the UniSA Centre for Work + Life indicates more modest outcomes. Overall, self-employment does not bring all the strong benefits or disadvantages to work-life interaction, and many other factors also contribute to being able to juggle different responsibilities and feeling on top of the daily balancing act.

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