

The potential for and limitations of electronic agreement making in Australia

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ABSTRACT

An integral part of the package of federal industrial relations 'reforms' enacted in Australia in 1996 were individual employment contracts. To allay fears that the individual contracts (known as Australian Workplace Agreements - AWAs) would result in unfettered exploitation of workers, the government introduced a new industrial relations institution, the Office of the Employment Advocate (OEA). Its central statutory role was to ensure that individual contracts met certain minimum conditions before they were registered. Also, the OEA was expected to facilitate the spread of AWAs across Australian workplaces. Part of this process has involved the development of easily accessible 'model' pro forma agreements and, for a demonstration effect, the OEA placed a number of "best practice" AWAs on its website.

While a literature is emerging on electronic HRM practices, to date there has been little discussion of the potential and limitations associated with electronic agreement making. While the OEA website and AWAs represent an operational example of electronic agreement making we consider the potential for extending electronic agreement beyond individual agreements and beyond single workplaces.

