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PETER KERR The West Australian October 5, 2009, 5:49 am

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WA's biggest company, Woodside, has entered the retail trading hours debate, with the firm's legal chief saying yesterday the lack of flexible shopping hours in Perth was hampering its efforts to attract international staff.

Woodside executive vice-president Rob Cole also revealed that internal company polling showed 94 per cent of its 3500-strong workforce wanted extended trading hours on weeknights because their jobs often prevented them shopping before the 5pm to 6pm closing time.

The development came as Opposition Leader Eric Ripper gave his clearest indication yet that the Labor Party would not support Premier Colin Barnett's compromise deal to extend shopping hours to 8pm on weeknights.

Mr Cole said WA was no longer a nine-to-five economy.

"We have multi-billion-dollar projects being built to a global time-table," he said.

"We have global competitors that are working around the clock in vibrant cities."

Mr Cole said that 800 of Woodside's total workforce, two-thirds of whom are based in Perth, had responded to a 24-hour email survey asking if they supported greater flexibility in metropolitan shopping hours. Of those, 94 per cent said yes.

He said the accompanying feedback showed a high awareness among staff of the retail hours debate.

He said the company had no agenda other than to "make life easier" for its staff and help in "the constant battle to attract the world's best oil and gas talent to Perth".

The Liberal Party is pushing to extend metropolitan shopping hours to 9pm on weeknights, but Mr Barnett has offered Labor a compromise of an 8pm extension in an effort to ensure some reform.

Labor plans to discuss the issue in caucus next week, but Mr Ripper has said he would need to be convinced West Australians had changed their opposition to the move after a 2005 referendum rejected the idea.

"No doubt the Woodside staff surveyed were among the 41 per cent that voted yes to extended trading hours in the 2005 referendum," he said.



Mr Barnett called on Mr Ripper to back reform. "Eric Ripper keeps on saying he's looking for evidence, well there is some evidence," he said.

"But the point is for those people who do not like longer weeknight shopping, don't go shopping, don't stand in the way of those people who do want to shop on weeknights."

Independent Grocers Association president John Cummings dismissed the survey as a "straw poll" and not as comprehensive as a referendum.

But Mr Cole said opinions changed over time and the referendum did not mean the issue was set in concrete.