



Better Work and Family Balance Council on the Ageing

Assisting 10 small organisations to become family friendly

Before a group of small organisations could become more family friendly, employees had to be reassured that work and family initiatives wouldn't just help families with young children. After that hurdle was overcome, the organisations moved through a process which has now set them up for a more family friendly future.

When Cheryl Lacey began liaising with 10 small organisations to investigate their employees' work and family needs, she had to firstly convince them that the project was not just about meeting the child care needs of people with young children.

"I realised very quickly how essential it was to have conversations with people about what work and family balance means. Their immediate thought was that it was just about mums and kids and child care. We had to talk about how work and family balance covers all workers at all stages of their life".

Sue Hendy, CEO of the Council on the Ageing (COTA) Victoria, which both coordinated and participated in the project, agrees. **"One of the things we really tried to focus on was that work and family balance applies to any carers, not just those with young children. This much broader focus can fall easily out of the conversation".**

Clearing up this misunderstanding was especially pertinent as the employees of these agencies were predominantly older workers. **"Overall, these agencies have many more older people working for them as they have trouble attracting young people. Hopefully, work/life balance initiatives will be able to play a part in attracting young people in the future,"** says Cheryl.

The Better Work and Family grant funded project was set up after a series of applications from non-government organisations interested in assessing the needs of their employees and the potential work and family solutions.

Rather than undertake this work individually, ten of the organisations agreed to participate in a project coordinated by COTA Victoria. Cheryl Lacey was then employed to act as project manager.

The project was designed to raise awareness of better work and family initiatives in the workplace, conduct needs assessments based on employee questionnaires and focus groups and then establish work and family balance policies for each of the participating organisations.

The 10 organisations which took part in the project were the Broadmeadows Employment Service; Broadmeadows Disability Service; Centacare Ballarat; COTA Victoria; Diversitat Geelong; DutchCare; Financial Industry Complaints Service Limited; Glastonbury; Open Family and the South Central Migrant Resource Centre.

The project began with the establishment of a steering committee made up of representatives from each of the organisations. Work and family balance information sessions were then held for the staff of each organisation and a reference group was established in most of the organisations.

Each organisation was then given a questionnaire to distribute to all staff, including casuals, people working offsite and those on leave.

Of more than 700 questionnaires distributed across the 10 organisations, some 420 were returned. This data was then compiled and presented to each organisation in a 'powerpoint'

format to make it easy for them to present to employees, managers and, where applicable, committees of management or boards.

The final step in the project was the development of draft policies for each organisation based on the data gathered, focus group discussions and the structure of the organisation and its workforce.

For residential and community aged care provider, DutchCare, the project should provide a useful foundation for the renegotiation of its Enterprise Bargaining Agreement.

CEO Petra Neeleman says that the project **“has given us some very rich data to include in the new EBA and so, in that sense, it is a very living outcome”**.

DutchCare, which has operated in Melbourne’s southern and eastern suburbs for more than 30 years, has two residential sites, runs day programs and provides services to people in their own home. The staff profile is a mix of permanent, casual, full-time and part-time catering, domestic, caring, nursing, maintenance, leisure and lifestyle employees.

Of the 160 surveys distributed to DutchCare employees, 105 were returned – a very good response that Petra attributes to the **“enthusiasm and motivation of our reference group, which brought together a really good cross section of our people, some from the residential service, some from the community arm”**. Two focus groups of between 10 and 15 employees then worked on the survey results.

“Most people said in the surveys that they felt confident about raising work and family issues with management, because they knew they would be listened to. They also said that they felt that there was a lot of support for people when they found themselves in emergency situations. Being allowed to bring their children to work when necessary was given as an example,” Petra said.

Staff members also expressed satisfaction with the organisation’s ‘widespread informal flexibility’. However, one of the recommendations that followed from the survey was for DutchCare to consider documenting existing benefits so that employees can be reassured that they will remain in the future.

“Another recommendation concerned us looking at some of our management positions to see if there are changes that can be made there, such as people job sharing, for example. These are positive things that we can look at in the future”, Petra said.

Cheryl Lacey said that several of the organisations are also planning to use the project data to prepare their next enterprise bargaining agreements.

Cheryl believes there were many positive outcomes for the organisations which took part in the project, including, but not restricted to, greater awareness of:

- What is currently happening in their organisations and what needs to be done for their employees to achieve better work life balance.
- Why work/family initiatives are necessary.
- The need for communication between staff and management.
- Improvements that could be made to such areas as induction, exit interviews, staff handbooks and succession planning.
- The fact that there are informal work and family practices already in place, but these are not necessarily formalised into policies.

Lessons Learnt

- The focus on work/family was too narrow for this sector and the preference was for a focus on work/life.
- Any workplace initiative requires ownership and commitment from a number of parties to make the initiative valued.
- Communication is essential in the introduction, implementation and sustainability of any workplace initiative.

Program Background

Balancing work and family responsibilities is an increasingly significant challenge for individual employees, their families and the broader community.

In responding to this challenge, the Victorian Government implemented the Action Agenda for Work and Family Balance in 2003. A key initiative within the Action Agenda is the Better Work and Family Balance Grants Program.

Better Work and Family Balance Grants have provided funding to small businesses and non government organisations to implement policies and programs to assist employees’ work and family balance while improving business performance.

Industrial Relations Victoria has been working with organisations to implement flexible working arrangements, including quality part-time work, employee choice rostering and nine day fortnights, as well as the investigation of employee work and family needs and the development of model clauses and agreements.

For more information about the Better Work and Family Balance Program contact Industrial Relations Victoria on 03 9651 9200.

Contact for further information

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