

Mercy Health

A better future (article from Human Capital Magazine, March 2011)

Work-life balance is frequently cited as a near impossible challenge to master. The tough task of juggling work commitments, personal activities and family life are all too familiar for most. As employers, getting the ratio right is critical to a strong, motivated and healthy workforce.

For health and aged care provider, Mercy Health, offering flexible working arrangements is just 'good business'.

Mercy Health has seen its employee retention rate rise to 98%, from around 88% six years ago, through the introduction of a number of fair and flexible workplace initiatives.

"The benefits of offering a highly flexible working environment have been enormous," says Kate McCormack, Mercy Health director of people, learning and culture.

"With a 90% female workforce, we didn't think twice about making sure Mercy Health was family-friendly. Initiatives such as the Parents' Network and Mercy Bank Program have been largely attributed to our high retention and attraction rates."

Many employees on parental leave or extended leave fear loss of skills, confidence or a reduction in family income; for others, there is a need to maintain a social network.

"Much of your social network is, in fact, from work. The Parents' Network is an opportunity for employees to maintain their peer group while they're on leave," McCormack says. Through the Mercy Bank Program, employees taking parental leave can work on a casual basis without losing access to full-time employment benefits.

Associate Nurse Unit Manager (ANUM) Emergency Department, Tianay Hyndam, says she was delighted to return to work on a casual basis following her maternity leave.

"For me, stepping back into the workforce was made easy by the option to work casually. Many of my nursing friends from other workplaces struggled to re-enter the workforce because of a lack of flexibility," Hyndam says.

"Many felt they had no other option but to join a nursing agency in order to gain the same level of flexibility - but unfortunately this meant they had to work across different hospitals in various areas of nursing, adding the additional stress of a new work environment. I also had the benefit of rejoining the workforce at the same senior level I was at when I left," she adds.

And while 90% of Mercy Health employees are female, it has not forgotten about the male minority.

"Male employees have access to the same opportunities and flexible options as women, but we were hearing feedback that fathers in particular were experiencing a sense of loneliness," says McCormack.

"We had comments like 'I just want to have a trivial conversation about football [with other staff members]'."

Another major problem that both fathers and mothers were facing was childcare.

"After hearing about the strain this was putting on families at our Parents' Network Forum, we put the API Childcare Referral Service into place," McCormack says. "This gave employees free access to consultants who can find local childcare to suit their individual needs."

Another popular initiative that has led to improved employee and business outcomes is the Mercy Health School Holiday Program. It was established in partnership with Camp Australia in 2006 to help parents maintain a better balance between work and caring responsibilities.

"Not only has the school holiday program helped families, it has also seen a substantial reduction in sick leave taken during the school holiday period. This is just one tangible example of the business benefits associated with retaining skilled, talented people," McCormack says.

Mercy Health has seen a reduction in costs spent on recruitment advertising, lower sick leave rates throughout the year and a reduction in nursing agency costs by enabling employees on parental leave to work casually through the Mercy Bank Program.

"The response to the numerous fair and flexible work initiatives has been strong, with 51% of employees across the organisation accessing flexible work arrangements at all levels including management," McCormack adds.

Flexible arrangements include part-time work, job share, variable shift options, work from home, children at work in emergency situations, phased return to work from parental leave and phased retirement options.

These initiatives have seen Mercy Health recognised as an Employer of Choice for Women by the Equal Opportunity for Women in the Workplace Agency for the third year in a row. The Victorian Government's Working Families Council has also acknowledged Mercy Health as a 2010 Fair and Flexible Employer.

"Innovation is one of our core values and we will continue to develop new workplace initiatives to promote a happy, productive and rewarding working environment in order to deliver the highest level of care for over half a million people each year," McCormack concludes.

Mercy Health's leading flexible work practices

- Parents' Focus Groups
 - Established to monitor flexible workplace policies and ensure employee needs are aligned.
- Parental Leave Checklists and Manager Guidelines
 - Provides guidelines for managers and employees to discuss Parental Leave processes to ensure employees are aware of the support available during this period.
- API Childcare Referral Service
 - Mercy Health sponsors the API Childcare Referral Service to provide employees with access to consultants who can research the availability of child care to suit individual needs.

- School Holiday Program
 - Analysis of sick leave data demonstrated that parents were taking more sick leave during school holidays than at other times during the year. Consequently, the School Holiday Program was established to assist staff and other parents in the local community to balance work and parenting responsibilities.
- Mercy Bank Program
 - An internally managed pool of employees on parental leave and other casual employees, established to fill ad hoc shifts without affecting leave entitlements or continuity of service.
- Breastfeeding Accreditation
 - Australian Breastfeeding Association (ABA) accredited breastfeeding facilities are available for staff at Mercy Hospital for Women (MHW) and Werribee Mercy Hospital (WMH).

Source: Human Capital Magazine, March 2011, <http://www.hcamag.com/features/a-better-future/60586>.

In Kate's interview with the MWM MasterClass, she stated that their next focus was on mature workers and that many of the flexible work options would be developed and extended to cater for this demographic eg grandparents' leave