



## Better Work and Family Balance Probuild Constructions

### Moving to a More Family Friendly Construction Industry

It is a longstanding tradition that people working on construction sites work long hours, including most Saturdays. The competitive nature of the industry and the constant drive to meet deadlines makes it difficult for construction companies to ensure employees achieve a balance between work and family. Probuild Constructions, however, is committed to developing a workplace culture which supports work and family balance.

For CFMEU Shop Steward Paul Portelli, work and family balance means **“having a job that I like and having enough time to be the sort of dad I want to be to my four boys as they grow up”**.

**“My family is the most important thing in my life but sometimes we forget that. At times, we have to put in the hours when things go wrong but our new approach to work and life balance means I will no longer feel I have to be at work for excessively long hours just to be seen when I could be at home kicking the footy with the boys”**.

Phil Mehrten established Probuild Constructions in 1987. Fellow Director, Ted Yencken, joined in 1995. The company has been involved in such major projects as the new Grandstand at Flemington Racecourse, the Victoria Gardens Shopping Centre and Toyota's Corporate Headquarters in Port Melbourne.

For Phil, work and family balance is a key element in the company's ability to succeed. **“As we focus on growing the company, we must be aware that it is unhealthy and unreasonable to expect our people to live their lives without appropriate balance...we must work smarter to remain successful but do it in a way that shows we recognise and respect that our people have many responsibilities and interests away from Probuild. Our work and family balance programme is designed to do that”**.

In May 2005, Probuild successfully applied for a Victorian Government Better Work and Family Balance grant. The company wanted to investigate work/family balance at Probuild and develop a program that would work for both the employees and the company.

A working group made up of staff, union and management representatives was established to oversee a survey of all staff and the development of initiatives as part of a work/family balance program.

The survey, distributed to all 150 employees in Victoria, was designed to

- gather information about the work, family and life pressures currently impacting on them and their families
- assess initiatives already in place to assist staff to manage these pressures and
- identify new initiatives that would have the greatest impact on staff satisfaction.

To gain a picture about the impact working at Probuild was having on families, a separate survey was also prepared and circulated to the partners of all employees.

The response to the surveys was very good, with a 57 per cent return rate from employees and some 60 surveys returned by their partners. Overall, employees reported that they were happy working for Probuild but that the constant pressure and long hours made it very difficult to successfully combine work and family. Several responded that the long hours – particularly working Saturdays – were having an adverse impact on their personal relationships.

And the response from employees' partners was even stronger. They reported that the long hours and workload meant that they

had to take almost full responsibility for day to day household management and family care, even though many were also engaged in paid work.

Probuild decided that the response from partners required further discussion so invitations to take part in a focus group were sent home via payslips. Sixteen female partners took part in the focus group. This led to recognition that the company's work/family balance strategy needed to include:

- Flexibility for different employees and their families to make choices that suited them best, with acknowledgement of the differing needs of salary and hourly rate employees.
- Reassurance that taking up work/family balance options would not undermine anyone's employment or position with Probuild.
- A commitment to reducing the number of Saturdays people are required to work.

Working from all the information gathered by the survey and the focus groups, the working group met regularly to move the Probuild project to its next steps.

A work/family policy was developed based on five guiding principles:

- All initiatives must be of mutual benefit to the individual and company.
- Achieving better work and life balance is a team effort involving individuals and managers.
- There is not one solution that will meet everyone's needs.
- Hard work can be done flexibly.
- Good communications is fundamental to success.

All employees and their partners were invited to attend a major launch where they received an information pack outlining how the

company intended to develop a better work and family culture. The pack contained a booklet to provide practical information for staff and their partners so they could assess their own needs and then set and achieve goals to bring about better work/life balance.

Specific action plans were developed to address key issues and performance review processes were changed to ensure that each individual's work and family responsibilities were documented.

For Director Ted Yencken, the new work/family balance program is a key element in Probuild's ability to retain and attract employees.

**"As Directors, we rely on having a team of people committed to maintaining a safe workplace, achieving our business goals, providing exceptional service and having satisfied clients. But we recognise that employees have very complex lives and increasing demands place on their time both at work and away from work."**

**"The work and family survey indicated many of our people feel dissatisfied with their current family balance. This has to change because eventually it will take a toll both physically and mentally. And this is no good for our people, their families or our business".**

**"The development of our work/life balance policy and principles are the first fundamental steps to creating a workplace culture which will be more supportive of work and life balance".**

#### Lessons Learnt

- Flexible work environments require flexible managers.
- Employees and managers must communicate openly and honestly to ensure a safe and productive relationship and workplace.
- Achieving a degree of work/family balance is possible in the construction industry.

## 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.**

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