



Working Families Regional Case Study

Flexibility from the shop floor up

Retail businesses in regional Victoria must attract and retain good staff to ensure good customer service. A successful timber and hardware business in Colac has found that flexibility is the key.

Civic Home Timber and Hardware, located in Colac, South Western Victoria, is one of a chain of hardware stores specialising in hardware and building supplies and meeting local needs. Some 22 people are employed in a mix of full-time, part-time and casual positions.

Stephen Rippon started as a sales assistant with Civic Home Timber and Hardware 16 years ago and is now one of the part-owners of this successful retail business. He also recently opened another store in nearby Apollo Bay.

Stephen believes that providing his staff with flexibility is the key to being able to attract and keep good people working for him. **“I believe that if you treat your staff well and show them that you understand they have to work times that suit them and their families, they will pay the favour back more than double,”** he said.

While balancing work and family responsibilities is an increasingly significant concern for employees, employers and the broader community, in regional and rural Victoria, there are additional factors for consideration. Often there are added difficulties with accessing supportive infrastructure such as transport, training and quality child care. This makes the availability of flexible work arrangements that enable families to choose a mix of employment and care arrangements even more important.

Two of the female employees at Civic Home Timber and Hardware are employed on the shop floor on a permanent part-time basis and have been able to arrange with Stephen to arrive at work after they have dropped their children at school and leave in time to pick them up. Many of the men in the store have weekly football and cricket commitments and they are also able to work their shifts around these.

Stephen Rippon develops a 12 month roster in consultation with staff. Copies are then always available in the staff area. If staff members need to swap shifts or work different times, the only condition required is that they make sure there is someone else available to cover for them.

Casual employees wanting to work additional hours are also able to access this roster, which Stephen says takes the pressure off the supervisors who are now only required to work one weekend per month.

The need for many people in rural and regional areas to volunteer their time means that it is often not just a case of balancing work and family, but also meeting essential community obligations. Many people need to be able to volunteer for such organisations as the CFA to ensure the functioning of their community and this requires flexibility on the part of their employer

Working Families Program

And while there is currently no-one on Stephen's staff that is part of the CFA, there have been in the past and Stephen believes there will again be in the future. **"The guys involved realised they couldn't necessarily get away if we were frantic, but they could then go when things were quieter."**

With three other hardware businesses in the area, Civic Home Timber and Hardware's ability to retain good staff is crucial to its ability to remain competitive. **"We need to be able to rely on having good people who have the knowledge and the ability to serve and satisfy the customer so that they keep coming back to us, not go to our competitors."**

Stephen notes that **"often wages are not the only important thing to people. It's being able to do a job they like and get satisfaction from, and it's about me as an employer being supportive"**.

Stephen also concedes that he has had to work hard to achieve a better work/life balance of his own. **"When I was building the business, I just basically worked all the time as that was what was needed at the time. And maybe if I hadn't done that, we wouldn't be here now. But, I also learnt some valuable lessons along the way and now make much more of an effort to take time off myself"**.

The Civic team are in the process of developing an induction manual for the benefit of new staff. This has involved team meetings so that all staff could have input into the new manual, which will formalise for the first time such conditions as starting and finishing times, work breaks and other policies.

Stephen believes that the consultative process established will continue, with staff and management keen to examine the possibility of establishing clear goals and targets and rewards for meeting those goals.

'We've always got to keep changing and thinking of new and better ways to do things so that we keep good staff and make sure that there is a real point of difference to our competition'.

Lessons Learnt

- Employees given the opportunity to work hours that meet their needs outside work will repay that support with loyalty and commitment.
- Business owners must also strive to maintain their own work/life balance.

Contact for further information

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The Work and Family Balance in Regional Victoria Project

Industrial Relations Victoria and Regional Development Victoria recently carried out an investigation into work and family balance in regional Victoria by looking at four areas – Bendigo, Colac, Horsham and Latrobe City. The study was aimed at identifying the impacts on, and issues surrounding, work and family balance and the services to support working families.

Data was collected and consultation was undertaken with local stakeholders. Employee focus groups and employer forums were also held to provide a comprehensive picture of the current situation.

This study found that:

- Many families in regional areas have work and caring responsibilities, either for young children, dependents or ageing parents.
- There is growing awareness in these areas of the need to balance work and family life.
- There is the additional "community" factor in regional areas, not only is balancing work with family responsibilities a key issue, people are also concerned about their ability to volunteer their time.
- Fewer job opportunities in these areas mean families are less able to choose the mix of jobs and mix of caring opportunities that they require.
- The availability and quality of child care is a significant impact on regional families' ability to juggle work and family needs.

The study also found that there was an awareness among many regional businesses and organisations that their ability to retain and attract loyal, effective staff was increasingly linked with their ability to provide family friendly provisions such as flexible hours, employee choice rostering, quality part-time work and, in some case, assistance with child care.

For further details about the Work and Family Balance in Regional Victoria Project, see www.irv.vic.gov.au