



Working Families Regional Case Study

A regional water authority focuses on work life balance

For Gippsland Water, flexible working arrangements can mean the difference in attracting and retaining good staff in a competitive, regional environment.

Gippsland Water supplies water, sewerage and prescribed waste services to more than 130,000 people in the Central Gippsland area. With a head office in Traralgon, it employs about 220 people in a mix of full-time, part-time and casual positions ranging from administrative to water supply operators. It services a region of some 5,000 square kilometres.

As a senior manager with Gippsland Water and a mother of three, Belinda Bywaters has a personal understanding of some of the difficulties people face in balancing work and family responsibilities in regional areas.

“The school bus my daughter needs to get to and from school doesn’t drop her close enough for her to be able to walk home so my partner has to leave work at the same time each day to pick her up. Sometimes, this isn’t easy for him so he has to call me and I have to go. This is a real issue for us and for a lot of other families in the area.”

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 in accessing supportive infrastructure such as public 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.

Belinda and colleague, Fiona Plant, are both involved in Gippsland Water’s Work/Life Balance Committee, which has been in place since early 2005. The establishment of the Committee, comprised of a mix of employee and management representatives, has **“created an environment where we can have open discussion between employees and management about managing work life balance”**, according to Belinda.

“And it is a two-way process, which means that our employees are not just thinking about how flexible work arrangements might assist them, but also the effects of their implementation on the organisation,” says Fiona.

Belinda believes that the organisation’s family friendly culture and practices are vital to its ability to attract and retain quality staff in a regional area. **“Being a regional employer, we can’t always pay the same salaries as in Melbourne and we lose a lot of young people who want to move to the cities.”**

“We are also in a competitive regional area here as there is a lot of industry which means people have a lot of choice when looking for employment. We need to be able to offer them something that some of the others don’t.”

Employees of Gippsland Water are able to take flexi-time, purchase additional leave via 48/52 leave arrangements and can also access a designated breastfeeding room. For parents returning from maternity leave, the organisation endeavours to

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accommodate their preference for permanent or temporary part-time arrangements. And one employee has moved to a 3-day working week rather than retire.

When first established, the Work/Life Balance Committee conducted a survey of all employees to find out their needs and responsibilities. A second survey is being planned and this will have a wider focus so that the organisation can find out what is most important to employees. **“This might be health and wellbeing for example”**, says Fiona.

The Committee is also planning to look at the benefits of employees being able to better balance their work responsibilities with volunteering commitments in the local community.

Gippsland Water’s CEO, John Mitchell, is a keen advocate of the Work/Life Balance Committee and has encouraged the organisation’s employees, from top down, to proactively incorporate these values into their working lives.

Belinda believes it is vital to act as a role model when it comes to managing work and life balance. **“While I understand that being a manager requires a much more structured approach, I also believe it is important to be a role model and a champion for work/life balance so we can continue to move forward in this area”**.

Recently taking time away from work to see her daughter graduate from primary school, Belinda was pleased to bump into another Gippsland Water manager doing the same thing with his child.

Lessons Learnt

- That work, family and life balance must be managed and championed from the top down.
- That a regional employer’s inability to match city salaries can be offset by workplace flexibility and support, particularly if people are seeking to enjoy the benefits of a regional lifestyle.
- Employers and employees can work together effectively to create flexible programs that suit both the organisation and employee’s needs and priorities.

Contact for further information

Belinda Bywaters

Manager, Organisational Development

Gippsland Water

Telephone: (03) 5177 4654

Email: Belinda.bywaters@gippswater.com.au

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