



Working Families Regional Case Study

Flexible work arrangements help attract new staff to regional Victoria

A veterinary supplies company in Bendigo believes flexible working arrangements may help in attracting new people from Melbourne metropolitan areas.

Intervet Australia is part of Intervet International, one of the world's biggest suppliers of animal pharmaceutical products. The company's production plant in Bendigo employs about 80 people on a full and part-time basis and utilises a pool of about 30 casual staff.

Intervet Australia is involved in the research, development, marketing and distribution of vaccines, antibiotics and pharmaceutical products for livestock and domestic animals throughout Australia.

As Human Resources Manager for Intervet Australia, a leading animal health company based in regional Victoria, Sue Bice says it is difficult to attract senior staff to move from city areas.

"Historically, we have had difficulty finding a range of candidates for the more senior positions. We usually advertise in the metropolitan papers as well as locally, but this means having to attract people who are interested in moving to a regional area".

"When we advertise in the metropolitan papers, the number of candidates we receive is low and it appears it is because we only receive interest from those willing to move to a regional area – quite often the interest comes from people who have previously lived in regional areas".

However, Sue says that the company's move to offer existing and potential employees more flexible work arrangements is helping in its efforts to be seen as an employer of choice. **"We don't struggle now when looking for people to fill full-time positions and I believe we have a very good reputation locally".**

Intervet Australia has recently launched its first Flexible Work Policy, which Sue Bice says is designed to **"let employees know that the company recognises the importance of work/life balance and is open to employees suggesting changes that would help them in their working and home lives".**

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.

HR administrator, Suzi Sordan, says that Intervet Australia has many employees either starting or planning to start families. **"It is very much an issue for us. We have a number of people either wanting to take maternity leave or wanting to negotiate to come back from maternity leave on a different basis to the full-time work they were doing previously".**

Working Families Program

“They are either looking at part-time work temporarily or sometimes on a permanent basis. We are certainly open to sitting down with these staff and trying to work out a solution because it is in our best interest to have them back,” she said.

Sue Bice says Intervet Australia also recognises that there are issues with employees moving closer to retirement age. **“We have an ageing workforce and if we want to retain some of our good people beyond the normal retirement age, we need to think about employing them differently, being able to offer them some flexible options so we don’t lose their experience and knowledge”.**

As a result of developing Intervet’s Flexible Work Policy, one employee has purchased additional leave so she can better manage school holiday periods. She is now working at a reduced salary, but with an additional two weeks leave each year.

Another employee has sought information about changing shift arrangements. And Sue Bice says the company expects to consider several applications relating to working from home.

The need for many people in rural and regional areas to volunteer their time means that they are concerned not only with balancing work and family, but also with 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. This requires flexibility on the part of their employer.

In meeting these particular needs, an Intervet Australia employee has contacted Sue Bice about balancing her role with the State Emergency Service with her work responsibilities at Intervet. And Sue is keen to take this as an impetus to develop a policy around combining volunteering and working.

“From our company’s point of view, we are fully supportive of these activities as we believe they are important and we want a situation where our employees feel comfortable about approaching us and discussing with us their needs both at work and outside work”.

Lessons Learnt

- Flexible working arrangements can give companies in a competitive environment an edge in attracting employees.
- That companies must be flexible and supportive to retain experienced staff returning from maternity leave.
- That flexible work options can also be important in retaining valued staff beyond their regular retirement age.

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