



Working Families Regional Case Study

A flexible workplace can mean the difference between keeping and losing staff in Horsham

For employees having to balance work and family needs, the flexibility and support of their employer can often be the deciding factor in staying or leaving a workplace.

The Telstra Shop at 67 Firebrace St, Horsham in Western Victoria, has been in operation since late 2001. Employing 12 people in a mix of full-time and part-time roles, the Shop is designed to meet the telecommunication needs of people living in a regional area, including phones and Internet services.

Carolyn Baker has been a Senior Sales Consultant with the Telstra Shop for the past three years. Recently she was offered a position with another employer, but after considering the offer, she decided to stay where she was.

“My job here is very flexible and I know that if I need time off to look after my children, I take it. I wasn’t sure that would be the case with the other job and I actually love my job here, so I decided to stay”.

Business owner, Gary Howden, is pleased Carolyn made that decision and glad that he is able to offer his employees the support and flexibility they need to remain with his business.

“When someone like Carolyn decides to stay, it’s a small victory in itself. We are in a very competitive environment and we need to be able to keep our staff”.

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

Gary Howden believes that it is good business to give his staff the opportunities to balance their needs inside and outside work.

“We wouldn’t have half the crew we have if we were very stringent about them working 9-5, Monday to Friday. We would have lost a lot of good people by operating that way and we would continue to lose them”.

“There are a lot of phone offers out there and to be successful, I need to make sure that I have the right staff who can give customers what they need”.

Gary has several staff members who work around family commitments, while another two are working part-time while they build their own homes in the area.

Gary develops rosters in consultation with staff members and it is then up to them to make sure that any changes to their rosters don’t leave gaps that will affect the business. And weekly team meetings help keep communication lines open.

“We have some people who have Mondays off or Tuesdays, others who work Saturdays rather than a weekday. We also

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have a lot of students who work with us over their holidays and that helps us get through the busy times without putting more onto the regular staff.”

When Gary takes on new employees, he is required to send them to Melbourne for two days of training. As this training costs his business \$1000 per person, this gives him an added incentive to keep employees with his business for as long as possible.

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.

“While the needs of the CFA do not impact as much on our workplace as they do on some others, some of our staff do need to help out in the school canteen, for instance, or at the kindergarten, so they change their shifts around to suit these commitments,” says Gary.

“In a rural area like ours, we know more about what our employees do in their lives outside work so we need to make sure we can help them wherever we can”.

Lessons Learnt

- That attracting and retaining good staff is vital if a business in regional Victoria is to succeed.
- That flexible working arrangements can be accommodated by a small business.

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

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Industrial Relations Victoria Department of Innovation, Industry and Regional Development

