

Jumping the flexibility hurdle – Published by CCH Australia

adidas is an international leader in the field of sports clothing, footwear and accessories. In Australia, the company supplies many of Australia's national and international sports teams. It also provides product to many sporting stores and consumers around the country.

In Australia, adidas employs over 300 staff, many of whom are based at the head office in Melbourne. During the last two years, adidas has implemented a comprehensive strategy to develop a workplace culture that is supportive of staff who want and need to work flexibly. In that time, the company has moved from a position where flexible work arrangements were only accessed by a few working mothers—to one where an additional 21 staff members now working flexibly. Five of these are male.

The company's return rate from parental leave has increased from 51% to 100% over a two year period. adidas Australia's Human Resources Director, Kate Valerio, believes that the high return rate from parental leave has not only retained valuable staff and knowledge, but has also saved the business more than three quarters of a million dollars in recruitment and re-training costs.

Ms Valerio says that *"whilst this really is just the beginning of the journey to achieving real flexibility within the business, we are very proud of what has been achieved since late 2009 when we developed our business case via the executive team of adidas Australia"*.

The presentation to the executive team followed a series of focus groups that the human resources department conducted with staff. The results of the focus groups highlighted the most pertinent areas requiring action, namely—flexibility (with regards to work / life balance) and managing family and work responsibilities. The focus groups were followed up by a short workplace survey to all staff to identify their specific work/life flexibility needs and the potential impact on the business if these needs were not met. Managing Work|Life Balance International (MWLB) and the Diversity Council (with significant involvement from the senior management team) assisted adidas to formulate and implement their policy and implementation plan.

During the rollout of the policy and plan, and to assist the managers to implement this cultural change, a series of half day Manager Flexibility Workshops (12) were facilitated to equip managers with the necessary soft skills to assist them with responding to Flexible Working Arrangement requests and managing a worker who had a flexible work arrangement in place. One of the most important 'takeaways' for managers from these workshops was that it is okay to say 'no' to a request, providing that they could justify their decision and there were strong business reasons for saying no.

Employees who attended the one hour workshops, conducted in May 2010, not only learnt more about the process of applying for flexible work arrangements but also gained an understanding of what was possible and how they might, in some circumstances, modify their requests (if required). adidas uses a customised version of a Flexible Work Options Tool Kit (supplied by MWLB) to support managers and employees during the application and decision making process.

Since 1 May 2010, all staff have been able to request a flexible working arrangement, which has included options such as telecommuting, flexible core hours, part-time work, job share and compressed work weeks. All staff are able to access two weeks of purchased leave to better assist them with managing their work/life balance needs. Where required, employees are provided with appropriate tools/technology such as notebooks and blackberries.

Whilst on parental leave, female staff are provided with eight weeks paid parental leave. One week of paternity leave is provided to fathers.

adidas Australia supports staff making the transition from parental leave to the workplace through:

- the provision of a "Childcare Kit", developed by MWLB (this provides information on what to expect during and after the pregnancy)
- regular contact with their Line Manager and/or human resources so that they are kept up to date on changes in the business, and
- private meeting rooms being available should they wish to breast feed when they have returned to work.

Ms Valerio says that *"the involvement of the MD in the early stages of their strategy implementation played an important part in their success. The MD took part in a series of 'coffee huddles' with staff throughout the business where he asked such questions as 'what's good about this company? What's going wrong? And what keeps you awake at night?'* These small group meetings allowed him to hear about such issues as flexible working and work/life balance and gain a greater understanding of what employees needed to work more effectively".