

MAKING FLEXIBILITY WORK

Human Capital talks to Sharon Caffel, HR manager at Pfizer Australia, about her organisation's move towards a culture that recognises the value that flexible work practices bring to Pfizer's 1,700 employees



Sharon Caffel

Human Capital: How far along is Pfizer in terms of offering flexible work arrangements to employees?

Sharon Caffel: We're looking to implement a long-term cultural change. At Pfizer we've had a flexible working policy in place for a number of years, but we found it wasn't widely accessible. So in fact there was a large gap between policy and practice. That realisation, together with the feedback from employees and our goal to provide a great place to work, told us we needed to do something about it.

HC: Where was the interest coming from, and what did you have in place?

SC: Initially the interest came primarily from mums returning to work following maternity leave. We provide paid maternity leave, which is great, but it was becoming clear that we needed to offer support to colleagues upon their return. Interest was also emerging from other groups in our workforce, including those with carer and other family responsibilities. It also came from others who wanted help to balance work with other aspects of their lives. The existing

policy was used effectively in pockets of the organisation, and not all employees found it accessible. Furthermore, the policy was quite prescriptive, which meant most people ended up doing job sharing or part-time work.

HC: How did you overhaul your flexibility programs?

SC: Last year we set about trying to reinvigorate our approach to flexible working. Firstly, we recognised that in order for this to be successful it was going to take some time. And secondly, our 150 people managers had to be the main audience, given that they probably have the greatest impact on the day-to-day culture of our organisation.

We wanted to make it easier for people to access flexibility, and importantly, give everybody equal access to it. So instead of providing a 'one size fits all' approach, we kept in mind that a person's needs change throughout their career. This is not just for working mothers but for everyone, irrespective of where they work. So we now encourage people to talk to us about their needs, and together the manager and the employee work out a solution.

Having said that, it is not open slather! We also built guiding principles regarding its implementation. Each arrangement must be a 'win-win' – it's got to work for the individual as well as the business. Arrangements will often be subject to trial periods, and the solution must be compatible with Pfizer's business goals.

HC: How did you convince your people managers this was the best option?

SC: Some people jumped on it and instantly 'got it'. Other managers found

the approach a little more challenging. The strategy was to build the competence and confidence of our people managers to deal with flexible arrangements in the workforce. With the help of Aequus Partners, we customised their Flex-e online tool and also introduced new conversation tools, checklists and templates to help managers have the conversation and look for solutions. We use other tools for assessing the impact it has on the business, what communication is required, what extra technology we need, etc. We then designed a blended learning experience and deployed that to the HR business partners to roll out the program to their client groups.

HC: How are you measuring effectiveness?

SC: We're looking at a long-term proposition to change culture, but we are already starting to track effectiveness through engagement surveys and take-up rates. The groups I've worked with have seen increases in requests – part-time arrangements, working from home, job sharing, nine-day fortnights, etc. We're also looking at retention rates, and the associated cost savings

HC: How well prepared are you for the introduction of the National Employment Standards on 1 Jan 2010?

SC: We knew that was coming, but it hasn't really been the driving force behind our new flexible working program. Our goal is to have a sophisticated, best practice approach to flexible working. What we've found, happily, is that we're well ahead of the game in terms of the NES.

HC: How did you work with Aequus Partners?

SC: We've been working with Aequus for over a year and we're very pleased with the results. I like how they work, I like their style, and I hope we will have an opportunity to work with them in the future.