

WINNER
MANĀKI TANGATA INNOVATION AWARD
SOUTHERN CROSS HEALTHCARE

SOUTHERN CROSS TAKES WELLNESS HOME WITH SWITCH2WELL

As an expert on wellness, Southern Cross was determined to walk the talk with staff and address serious retention issues in the process.

Health and wellness initiatives have been a feature of the EEO Trust Work & Life Awards for several years as employers recognise their potential to improve engagement and address turnover and absenteeism.

This year, the judges noted a stand-out entry in the Manāki Tangata category for innovation. Southern Cross Medical Care Society's Switch2well is a comprehensive wellbeing programme based on solid research and staff input.

Southern Cross employs more than 550 people nationwide in a wide range of roles from clinical specialties to insurance specialties, sales and marketing. The workforce is 70% female, and ages are across the spectrum with staff under 19 and over 60. It is also ethnically and culturally diverse.

The organisation is a not-for-profit returning more than 80% of its income to members through claims. CEO Dr Ian McPherson says that obviously every business aims to keep its costs down but, as a not-for-profit, Southern Cross places a particular emphasis on managing overheads.

“However, our growth and our ability to provide excellent services and products depends on our ability to retain, engage and motivate our staff,” he says. “We operate in a tight labour market and face competition for skilled staff from our for-profit counterparts.”

Faced with high levels of employee attrition across the organisation, Southern Cross was looking for a lateral and innovative solution to ensure immediate and long-term employee engagement, motivation and retention.



"IT MAKES BUSINESS SENSE AND IT ALSO MAKES EMPLOYEE SENSE."

LISA GUNNERY, COO, INSURANCE OPERATIONS

“SWITCH2WELL PROVIDES ENCOURAGEMENT, SUPPORT AND RECOGNITION FOR PHYSICAL AND MENTAL WELLBEING ACROSS ALL ASPECTS OF PEOPLE’S LIVES.”

RACHAEL REGAN PATERSON, GENERAL MANAGER, HR

An annual culture and climate survey, exit interviews and focus groups were instrumental in identifying current perceptions of Southern Cross as an employer.

The response: “Southern Cross was not actively engaged in supporting staff wellbeing or providing recognition of the need for balance in the workplace.”

The solution was Switch2Well.

Chief Operating Officer Distribution Unit Peter Tynan says Southern Cross recognised the importance of congruity between external branding and internal practices and perceptions. “We were determined to introduce an employee initiative that would reflect our values around quality care. It also had to be available right across the organisation and we needed to be able to assess return on investment through a clear set of measures.”

Switch2well began as a series of pilot activities from early 2006. These included Weight Watchers groups on-site, a team-based walking challenge and on-site health checks.

After each pilot activity, an evaluation determined staff satisfaction and engagement with the activity, staff motivation for the activity to be continued and the cost and time spent on resourcing the activity. Discussions with staff also gained more detailed feedback on how the activities impacted on their wellbeing and their engagement with their work.

The success of the pilots led to a comprehensive wellness programme for all permanent staff to build engagement, satisfaction, motivation and productivity, and to improve retention and reduce absenteeism. It started at the beginning of this year.

“Switch2well provides encouragement, support and recognition for physical and mental wellbeing across all aspects of people’s lives,” says General Manager HR Rachael Regan Paterson. “We wanted to make a three-year commitment to a programme that would straddle home and work environments.”

The programme aimed to encourage employees who were already investing in their wellness outside work or who needed some help in getting started or finding better work-life balance. It is open to all permanent employees across the country.

The programme addresses three areas - nutrition and weight management, sports and fitness, and personal wellbeing. A large number of initiatives are offered in each area including:

- Vouchers for nutrition consultations
- On-site Weight Watchers meetings during work hours
- On-site seminars held during work time eg, healthy cooking classes
- Subsidies for off-site weight management programmes
- Team walking challenge – Southern Cross provides equipment and time during work to encourage people to participate
- Vouchers for sessions with a personal trainer
- Monthly GP visits to the workplace with free consultations during work time
- On-site subsidised smoking cessation programme during working hours
- Annual on-site wellbeing expos

“The programme includes a number of innovations that I haven’t seen in other workplaces,” says Rachael Regan Paterson. “For a start, we developed it with a high level of input from staff right from the initial pilot through to implementation. It is scheduled so that participants take paid time out during their working day to improve their wellbeing. It also incorporates a reward and recognition aspect to encourage participation. One of the rewards is wellness leave to encourage people to take time out and spend time on wellness activities.

“Wellness rewards” are offered as an incentive to staff to participate in the programme. Points are accrued towards rewards including vouchers for wellbeing or health practitioners, cash deposited into “health management accounts” for health related activities, and wellness leave. About 50 staff had earned half a day’s wellness leave six months after

JUDGES' COMMENTS

"This is a very good initiative and it's just amazing the difference it's making to people."

GARY SAUNDERS, HR MANAGER, IBM

"Switch2well was extremely well researched, there's great buy-in at all levels of the organisation. There's a real buzz about the place."

DR PHILIPPA REED, CE, EEO TRUST

the programme's introduction and staff who have earned points have had deposits made into their health management accounts.

The effects of Switch2well will be measured every six months to assess its success and enable fine tuning. Measurement tools include an independent annual staff survey with specific wellness questions, continuous formal feedback from staff on every aspect of the programme and collection of data recording participation levels and the like.

In the first six months, 94% of staff had participated in some aspect of the programme, 27 employees had given up smoking and 71 had lost a total of 355kg in weight.

Sales Leader Ben Jameson describes how the Switch2well expo impacted on him. "It wasn't all about learning at the expo. It was more important to me to see how much Southern Cross cared and how much effort had gone into this for staff."

And IT staff member Kaye Maclean describes her response to one of the wellbeing seminars on stress. "Very motivating. The presentation made me reflect and feel more positive about my approach to dealing with stress."

Statistics also paint a convincing picture. Six months after Switch2well started, staff satisfaction and motivation had both improved and absenteeism was down by 2.8%. This equates to a significant saving for Southern Cross and three times its investment in the programme. The organisation is optimistic that staff retention will also improve as the results are tracked over the longer term.

As Chief Operating Officer of Insurance Operations Lisa Gunnery says, "It's a wellness thing but it's also a monetary thing. You've got to have employees who are engaged, who are feeling good and who want to come to work. The alternative is to have highly stressed, underproductive people.

"It makes business sense and it also makes employee sense."

