



Work-Life Strategies for an Efficient & Engaged Workforce

“Work-Life strategy should be real and staff must really know that the organisation supports them. We firmly believe that once employees feel secure in knowing that the organisation means what is stated in the Work-Life strategy, they will play their part and be committed to the organisation too.”

Mr. Tim Oei, CEO, AWWA

Background

The Asian Women's Welfare Association (AWWA) was founded in 1970. This Voluntary Welfare Organisation aims to empower the disadvantaged members of society and enable them to lead independent lives. Over the years, their services have expanded to include programmes for the elderly, people with special needs, the economically disadvantaged and care giving communities.

The organisation has a workforce of 302 employees to manage these programmes, of whom half are teaching staff. AWWA is keenly aware that their employees have a direct impact on their service quality, and hence, recruitment and retention of quality talent is a key organisational priority. As a non-profit organisation operating on a lean budget, AWWA has had to devise alternative strategies to attract and retain the right staff - a comprehensive Work-Life strategy has proven to be effective.

AWWA's Work-Life Strategy

AWWA's Work-Life philosophy and strategy are aligned with its organisational mission and values. Even as the organisation seeks to help disadvantaged individuals in the community, the management also stresses a strong holistic 'family' culture for its employees.

Within the work environment, the management seeks to consistently foster a sense of community and mutual trust. A positive trust-based culture underpins the organisation's Work-Life initiatives and how they are implemented; employees are empowered to work independently and remotely with minimal monitoring. While flexible work arrangements (FWAs) such as telecommuting, work-from-home and staggered working hours are available, these are kept informal. The exception is part-time work which has been instituted as a formal FWA. There is a high take-up of the various flexibility options as these address and support various lifestyle needs; nearly all employees telecommute at various times, while about a third have utilised the staggered hours arrangement.

The management also emphasises family-friendly practices to ensure that staff have sufficient time for their own families and personal pursuits. AWWA's management seeks to ensure that all employees are provided with fair and equal access to Work-Life options, and this is reflected in its policies — the organisation offers caregivers leave which replaces the parental leave option; now all employees can uniformly utilise this leave to care for an immediate family member.

The Work-Life strategy at AWWA is needs-driven and employees are empowered and encouraged to share their Work-Life challenges with their supervisors and discuss potential

solutions. HR and management also play an active role in implementing and authorising the use of FWAs.

AWWA's Leadership Strategies

AWWA's positive Work-Life culture can be attributed to the strong buy-in from its leaders. The non-profit organisation has a Board of Management which is highly empathetic towards the employees' Work-Life needs. AWWA CEO Mr. Tim Oei keeps Board members regularly updated on the organisational challenges including Work-Life integration issues. The Board also acts swiftly and decisively in supporting decisions made on Work-Life solutions. One example is of a new employee who had been with the organisation for two weeks. When her spouse unexpectedly passed away, the Board supported the decision to provide her with paid leave for an extended period of time and asked the management to offer her further assistance as required.

Mr. Oei also communicates regularly with staff to understand their work-related challenges, get feedback and assess the overall Work-Life climate of the organisation. To achieve this, he holds monthly dialogue sessions with directors and supervisors as well as weekly one-to-one sessions with his direct reports.

Notably, the leadership's support and enthusiasm for Work-Life integration has had a spill-over effect in the Human Resource department, which takes a highly proactive role in understanding employees' Work-Life challenges and keeping abreast of industry standards and current Work-Life solutions, to ensure the most relevant and comprehensive Work-Life strategy for employees.

Information Management Strategies

Enabling Flexibility through Information Technology

Flexibility initiatives make up a significant portion of AWWA's Work-Life strategy. Equipping employees with the IT tools and infrastructure to work flexibly required substantial financial outlay and planning. Some of the key tools that have been adopted are:

- A customised Cloud-based case management system to access case reports and clients' schedules on mobile and computer devices. Previously, staff had to travel from schools, back to the office to generate reports for their managers. With the new technology, they can log into the report generating system from an external venue to prepare their reports.
- VPN access for specific executives and senior management employees who work remotely with office-issued laptops. These staff now have remote access to documents and information that are stored on the organisation's shared server.

Measuring the Efficacy of Flex Initiatives

The organisation recognises that the existing Work-Life strategy is one that "grows with its employees", evolving over time to meet the changing needs of its staff. Thus, several practices are in place to regularly gauge the effectiveness of current Work-Life initiatives and identify areas for improvement. AWWA conducts a bi-annual employee engagement survey to assess the Work-Life climate and gather quantitative feedback on the relevance and usefulness of existing talent engagement schemes; specific questions on Work-Life are integrated into this survey. The organisation also maintains an Open Door policy where employees are able to approach management and HR to address work-related challenges. With the positive trust culture that is embedded in the organisation, employees actively use this channel when looking for Work-Life solutions.

Performance Management & Workforce Planning

Implementing flexibility practices have created challenges for AWWA which the organisation views as an opportunity to streamline operational procedures and performance management practices.

The redistribution of workload is a key issue when employees convert from a full-time to a part-time working arrangement or when they go on extended leave (sabbatical, study leave etc), and the organisation has taken two significant steps to address this.

Firstly, AWWA has recruited a team of nearly 30 temporary staff to serve as a contingency workforce. These individuals include housewives and post-secondary/tertiary students that have been recruited at job fairs or by word-of-mouth referrals. HR taps on them as temporary replacements for staff that are away on leave or training for an extended period of time. They may also be employed as teacher assistants to help with general classroom management during lessons. Once HR has recruited these staff, they are offered open contracts with the organisation. Each temporary staff may be offered a contract of up to 6 months, and those that complete their contract term will also be given a retention bonus which is nearly 50% of their monthly pay. Temporary staff who are hired for a minimum of 3 months are also entitled to pro-rated benefits such as claims for outpatient medical and dental visits, annual and sick leave.

AWWA also carries out a workforce planning exercise at the start of each year. At this meeting, HR and senior management carefully examine the current staff strength and individual workloads as well as anticipate staffing needs that might occur due to maternity leave, training and programme expansion, amongst other possibilities. The team then decides how many additional staff will be needed at these periods, and plan their manpower allocation accordingly.

In order to accurately assess the efficiency and productivity of its employees, AWWA has instituted a comprehensive performance management system. The organisation believes that employees' contributions should be measured by the quality of the work produced. Thus, managers work with each employee to set clear measurable KPIs at the start of each year. This is then followed by a mid-year review of the goals achieved and a final appraisal at the end of the year. For employees who work shorter hours, supervisors will ensure that the workload is pro-rated to fit their reduced work hours.

In AWWA's flexible work environment where employees may work at varying times and locations, the management and HR consciously create opportunities for inter-department interactions. These may take the form of knowledge sharing sessions; one example is of a group that attended an overseas learning journey in Australia and on their return, conducted training for various departments in AWWA. Recreational activities and events such as the annual AWWA Appreciation Day also serve to promote staff unity.

Outcomes and Conclusion

AWWA's 2011 employee engagement survey revealed that the employees benefit greatly from the flexible work culture, and are motivated to perform well in their work roles and deliver the best to their clients; nearly half of AWWA's employees felt that they worked a reasonable number of hours and one quarter of them felt that the organisation offered good compensation and benefits.

Ultimately, as a non-profit organisation serving disadvantaged members of society, AWWA has to contend with a unique set of employee challenges — the jobs in this sector can be physically and emotionally strenuous, and the risk of burn-out is high. However, the organisation's creative solution of offering Work-Life options has proven to be an excellent strategy in finding and keeping the best talent – ensuring that they provide the best service for this segment of our community that truly needs it.