Flexible work a driver of business performance

Telstra

Organisation
37,500 (approx.)
Telecommunications & information services
Australia wide
EST. 1975

Telstra is well known for publically declaring ‘All Roles Flex’ in September 2013. This was a pioneering commitment at the time, which has since been replicated in other organisations such as PwC and ANZ. We wanted to understand what Telstra did to bring ‘All Roles Flex’ to life.

THE CATALYST FOR CHANGE

Telstra was already a leader in diversity and inclusion before ‘All Roles Flex’ was announced in 2013. In 2010 Telstra updated its flexible work policies to encourage flexible work availability for all roles. However, despite good policy, flexibility was inconsistently experienced by employees and was not seen as an option for everyone. Many of the internal barriers to flexibility were grounded in a prevailing attitude that it would result in less productivity.

As Australia’s leading telecommunications and information services company, Telstra’s core business is to connect people and organisations through mobility and flexibility technology. In delivering this, Telstra helps other organisations implement technology to enable their employees to work more flexibly. This has led to a powerful realisation that the benefits and opportunities of mobility and flexibility were not being fully utilised to enable its own workforce to be as flexible as possible.

Telstra believed that incremental steps would not bring about change quickly enough. Similarly, Telstra would fail to see the positive impacts of flexibility on talent attraction, retention and engagement in acceptable timeframes. The opportunity to take a bold step became available in 2013 when the organisation announced a major initiative designed to significantly and radically improve the business. In September 2013, as part of the symbolic actions to support the launch of Telstra’s new Purpose and Values, then-CEO David Thodey, announced that they would adopt ‘All Roles Flex’ in all Business Units by the end of March 2014.

The unequivocal declaration that all roles would become flex from that point on was a significant catalyst for change.

Since 2013, ‘All Roles Flex’ has made a huge impact on ways of working at Telstra. Before 2013 workplace flexibility was experienced predominantly as pre-agreed formal arrangements. Today, day-to-day flexibility is the norm. It means different things to different people. Individuals are trusted to manage their own time, deliverables and presence. Leaders are challenged to be innovative and creative in figuring out how to bring more flexibility to life in their teams, to set the tone, tell stories, and keep creating the momentum.

WHAT MAKES IT WORK

Access to cutting edge mobility and flexibility technology is a part of business for a telecommunications company, but this can often be a significant cost hurdle for other organisations. However, what really brings flexibility to life in Telstra is the way in which flexibility is lived and communicated in everyday activities, specifically:

› Symbolic actions that send a clear message
› Relatable everyday actions, and
› A mindset shift to trusting people

Symbolic actions that send a clear message

Following on from the CEO’s impactful announcement, the symbolic actions of leaders who ‘walk the talk’ have continued to reinforce the desired culture. For example, senior leaders will regularly dial into meetings from the school gate or the train. They are open and honest about where they are and what they are doing. Other leaders make it known they relax with pursuits such as painting, which sends a message to others that is ok to stop and have downtime, and not to pretend they can or want to work 24/7.

www.workplaceleadership.com.au
Everyday relatable actions

Social interactions and connections remain critical for maintaining relationships in a mobile workplace. One HR Manager for Telstra Business, works part-time and from a blend of office and home. She has introduced ‘virtual coffees’ with colleagues in order to maintain social connections with her key stakeholders, some of whom are based overseas. “It’s important to build genuine relationships and connections with people, but they don’t have to be face to face. You can have authentic virtual connections. In my experience, as businesses become multi-site and global, connections are essential for work effectiveness”.

Mindset shift

One of the stand-out lessons from Telstra is the power of a change in mindset. ‘Trust each other to deliver’ is one of the five new Values also announced in 2013. Leaders were asked to take a leap of faith that a flexible workforce would be better for the business and to trust that in an outcomes-focused environment people will make the right decisions for the business and their individual needs. The result was a mindset shift from a constrained reliance on rules and policies to the open possibilities that come with faith and trust.

OUTCOMES

Telstra has a workforce of approximately 37,500 people, a global footprint spanning 15 countries and operating a 24/7 business. In an organisation of this size and complexity, accommodating workplace flexibility is no small feat. The benefits of the culture shift achieved over the last two years are already being realised:

› Increased engagement of employees working flexibly (formal flexibility i.e. working outside the office) to Global High Performance Norm (84 points); and
› Increased representation of female recruits, women in management and number of male managers taking primary parental leave (WGEA report, 2014 Vs 2015).

ENCOURAGEMENT FOR OTHERS

Many companies fear jumping in and adopting flexibility as a way of working. Telstra’s experience encourages others to “just do it”—take the plunge and implement flexible work fully and properly. In Telstra’s experience, incremental changes will not deliver a significant impact on talent attraction, employee engagement or business performance. However, it’s important to be realistic and accept that there will be teething issues and lessons along the way. Most of the common myths and fears won’t eventuate, and the benefits will accrue over time.

“We didn't start with trying to change mindset and then the rules. We changed the rules and opened up new possibilities, and that has changed the mindset. We moved the organisation from setting parameters around flexible work to asking people to consider what is best and possible.”

- Telstra employee

A project by the Centre for Workplace Leadership

A case study by AHA on behalf of Centre for Workplace Leadership