

Work Life Balance Award Entrant: Southern Cross Health Society



Video link: <https://vimeo.com/album/4446506/video/229803199>

Research shows Southern Cross Health Society's Switch2well programme is improving the organisation's bottom line by reducing absenteeism and improving productivity and staff retention.

New Zealand's largest private healthcare insurer, Southern Cross has more than 830,000 members, who account for 71 per cent of the country's private health insurance claims, and more than 600 staff.

It began running a workplace wellness initiative more than a decade ago, starting with a three-pronged programme focused on nutrition, exercise and smoking cessation. Today, Switch2well is a more holistic offering, recognising that wellbeing – physical, social, mental and emotional – means different things to different people.

Southern Cross staff can select from a wellbeing smorgasbord including activity tracking using wearable devices, a one-off consultation with a financial personal trainer, advice from a dietician, flu vaccinations, workshops to build resilience, seminars and a Health Kiosk where they can get a snapshot of key health indicators such as blood pressure and Body Mass Index.

“Literature suggests the most effective wellness programmes are multi-faceted and combine individualised risk reduction and behaviour counselling with a variety of programmed activities,” says Diversity and Inclusion Committee Chair Mathew Nuttall.

Last year the organisation introduced one paid volunteer day per year for each staff member, recognition that for many people, it’s philanthropic contributions that make them feel well. It’s also trialling an app which provides users with a health score based on their steps, health habits, activities and learning. As well, some staff are test driving a ‘smart’ drink bottle that link to their fitness tracker and phone, and use the weather conditions, their activity levels and physiological make-up to work out how much water they should be drinking.

Participation in Switch2well is voluntary and staff can choose which activities they engage with.

Southern Cross has two staff dedicated to delivering the Switch2Well programme; this team publishes an annual calendar of events and communicates upcoming activities via a variety of channels including day-to-day conversations, email, video and the Yammer internal social networking site. Annual focus groups and feedback from staff shape the programme and keep Switch2well fresh and relevant.

Physical workspaces are also designed with health in mind; plants are positioned throughout the office, priority is given to natural light and health tips are displayed throughout. The central stairs are more accessible than the elevators, and staff are encouraged to have walking meetings. There is also a move towards activity-based working.

Head of People, Strategy and Performance Vicki Caisley has been at the forefront of Switch2well since 2013. Southern Cross Health Society’s CEO Nick Astwick and Leadership Team members are also strong and enthusiastic supporters of, and participants in, the Switch2well programme.

Leaders within the business post their wellbeing activities on internal social networks, leading from the front and encouraging others, says Mathew Nuttall.

In 2015 Southern Cross had a 19 per cent reduction in turnover. In 2016 that figure was 8.5 per cent and the business has enjoyed a 25 per cent reduction in absenteeism during the past five years. Massey University recently analysed data from the Switch2well programme and found that Southern Cross saves an estimated \$1072 per year per employee through reduced absenteeism and, conservatively, \$268 per employee per year in productivity savings.

“It’s also thought the monetary value of improvements in retention are enormous and could run into the millions. Overall, the study concluded that the Switch2well programme benefits outweigh its costs,” says Mathew Nuttall.

“Switch2well has demonstrated its value many times over – in measurable results as well as in the workplace buzz that comes from a happy, healthy, vibrant team.”

A recent seminar on posture and movement attracted 275 people (41 per cent of staff), while 312 people (47 per cent) engaged in a 12-week ‘On the Move’ challenge.

On any given day, 75 to 80 per cent of staff are wearing fitness trackers and earning points they can redeem for rewards such as a wellbeing day off each year to use as they please.

Senior Product Manager Amanda Brien is a registered nutritionist who worked in the public health sector before joining Southern Cross.

"I work in corporate wellbeing and think it's important to lead by example so I participate in all of it. I've got so much out of the Optimise Your Potential seminars. I've always had an interest in mental wellbeing, but the seminars gave me practical tips I now apply every day, like being more mindful of technology and turning the notifications off on my phone."

Auckland-based Customer Services Team Leader Pili Apulu has participated in Switch2well since he joined Southern Cross in 2010.

"I have no doubt Switch2well makes a difference. I don't just see it in myself, I see it in my team as well. We've set up our own challenges around wellness now. Last month we tried to average 11,000 steps a day and this month our goal is to be active three days out of five. It has spurred a whole other level of wellness."

And Pili says he's proud to work for an organisation that cares for its staff.

"My boss and I do recruitment interviews together and she always lets me talk about Switch2well because I just light up. Ever since I started I've bragged to friends and families and they're jealous! They're jealous of how our employer rewards us for looking after ourselves."