

# What Makes a Good Workplace?

IN 2001, the University of Sydney received support from the Business Council of Australia to undertake research to identify “excellent workplaces” across Australia. The research report describes excellent workplaces as those that are: “So extraordinary in their performance as to cause us to stop and remark on them. They are the leading workplaces, the exemplars of productivity.” (Hull & Read, Working paper 88: University of Sydney, 2003, pg 2)

What is most interesting in the research findings is that many of the factors normally considered to be important in determining productivity, such as ‘the level of unionisation, adherence to the traditional forms of industrial relations, hours of work, equity policies, technology and location’ (Hull & Read, pg 7), were found NOT to be important in determining whether a workplace demonstrated excellence.

There were 15 “drivers of excellence” identified in the study, the most significant of which was: the quality of working relationships. Although pay and conditions rated in the 15, all the other factors were about people, relationships and wellbeing.

## healthy workplaces: drivers of excellence

### The quality of working relationships:

People relating to each other as friends, colleagues, and co-workers. Supporting each other, and helping to get the job done.

### Workplace leadership:

How the immediate supervisor, team leader, manager or coordinator presented himself or herself. Their focus on leadership and energy, not management and administration.

**Having a say:** Participating in decisions that affect the day-to-day business of the workplace.

**Clear values:** The extent to which people could see and understand the overall purpose and individual behaviours expected in the place of work.

**Being safe:** High levels of personal safety, both physical and psychological, emotional stability and a feeling of being protected by the system.

**The built environment:** A high standard of accommodation and fit out, with regard to the particular industry type.

**Recruitment:** Getting the right people to work in the location, employees sharing the same values and approach to work as the rest of the group.

**Pay and conditions:** A place in which the level of income and the basic physical working conditions (hours, access, travel and the like) are met to a reasonable standard - at least to a level that the people who work there see as reasonable.

**Getting Feedback:** Always knowing what people think of each other, their contribution to the success of the place, and their individual performance over time.

### Autonomy and uniqueness:

The capacity of the organisation to tolerate and encourage the sense of difference that excellent workplaces develop. A sense of being the best at what they do.

### A sense of ownership and identity:

Being seen to be different and special through pride in the place of work, knowing the business and controlling the technology.

**Learning:** Being able to learn on the job, acquire skills and knowledge from everywhere, and develop a greater understanding of the whole workplace.

**Passion:** Energy and commitment to the workplace, high levels of volunteering, excitement and a sense of wellbeing, actually wanting to come to work.

**Having fun:** A psychologically secure workplace in which people can relax with each other and enjoy social interaction.

**Community connections:** Being part of the local community, feeling as though the workplace is a valuable element of local affairs.

(Adapted from Hull & Read, Working paper 88: Uni of Sydney, 2003, pg 3-4)

Weighting the 15 drivers of excellence (see figure below), the researchers concluded, on the basis of evidence from those interviewed and the workplaces themselves, that ‘Good working relationships’ was the paramount driver. ✕

(Excerpt from *Community MindEd, a Mental Health Promotion and Suicide Prevention Resource for VET Teachers of Community Services*)

