

WISE HEADS AT BRISBANE CITY COUNCIL - City Works Construction Team

Brisbane City Council has developed a program to value and retain its older workers while capturing their knowledge and experience.

Senior HR Consultant with Brisbane City Council Margaret Harley said council piloted the Wise Heads program in 2006 in divisions with high proportions of mature-age staff.

“The program continued in 2007 as we took an even broader approach to Council’s ageing workforce - looking at issues like superannuation, flexible work arrangements, transferable skills and preparation for retirement through seminars and workshops,” said Margaret.

“The branches which took part in the pilot have both white collar and blue collar workers so they have different issues affecting their older employees.

“Through the Wise Heads program they each developed strategies and approaches that have improved the retention rates of their older workers and the documentation of corporate knowledge.”

City Works Construction Team



Brisbane City Council Wise Heads Team Leader Mark Thompson left with City Works Construction team members Mick Viti, Frank Janmieling, Danny Harrison, Martin Gough and Joe Urry

Brisbane City Council’s City Works Construction Branch is responsible for Brisbane’s infrastructure works including building roads, bridges, water mains, drains and parks.

Nearly half of the branch’s 400 employees are aged over 45 years and nearly a third aged over 50 years.

Construction Manager Kenn Hall said job roles range from trades to professional.

“The big issue facing the branch is the collection and transfer of knowledge which is potentially going to be lost once people retire or leave,” said Kenn.

“There are many mature-age people still operational in the field so another issue was finding ways to minimise the physical impact of their work and improve safety.”

Through the Wise Heads pilot Kenn selected several mature-age team leaders from different groups who he would meet with once a week to discuss issues and take the outcomes back to the various teams.

Kenn said he aimed to increase connections between the blue collar workforce in the branch and management.

“There was a ‘top down’ hierarchy mentality where ‘information is power’.

“We aimed to ensure everyone is informed so tried to engage everyone and improve communication – it was a cultural change.”

The meetings with the team leaders, who referred to themselves as 'Wizards', were an opportunity to get issues on the table and seek their opinions which had not happened before.

"They had to think outside the box and were asked for ideas," said Kenn. "It took a few weeks but they eventually got used to that and became comfortable with the program."

"Mark Thompson, a team leader in Water and Waste Management, was initially not sure the Wise Heads program was for him but after a while he was running meetings and was very proactive with the ideas to come out of meetings - he is a completely different person"

As part of the program Mark and the other team leaders also attended basic computer courses to update their skills with the latest technology.

Kenn said team leaders were not comfortable with technology because of the era they had worked in, not because they were unable to learn it.

"So we have given them the opportunity to become familiar with computers."

Through the regular Wise Heads meetings the group identified which procedures were causing the most injuries and began to review procedures.

"They would agree on a standard or find other ideas and suggestions," said Kenn.

"The benefits were not just those addressing the physical impact and safety issues – the Wizards are much more engaged now and word-of-mouth is a great marketing exercise – they have told others about Wise Heads"

Each team leader coaches around 70-80 older workers and while traditionally team leaders don't visit other teams, these Wise Heads team leaders are widely accepted.

"They have become an extra set of eyes checking on each team's health and highlighting issues like new equipment and new technology."

Team leaders also attended information sessions on prostate cancer, being sun-smart and a series of sessions regarding superannuation which could lead to one-on-one consultations if they chose.

Kenn said he also aimed to value mature-age employees for their contributions by rolling out a Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) process which recognises previous skills, for instance gaining a Certificate III or IV in Construction which is equivalent to an apprenticeship.

"These guys don't have formal qualifications but have skills," said Kenn.

"Some were reluctant to try RPL but we have convinced them it is not a written exam, it is based on competencies - and we give them support offering them the opportunity to do a Language Literacy and Numeracy course too if they want – a couple have already taken that up."

Kenn said the success of the Wise Heads program so far comes not only from the changes implemented in workplaces and work practices - all team leaders who have gone through the program support it and most have so far moved on to different roles.

“The lost time from injury frequency has improved, safety performance has improved and performance of business has financially improved.

“People are the key to this success though – if you don’t get that right the financial success won’t happen - this program is proof of that – it’s about breaking down the barriers.”

Brisbane City Council is continuing the Wise Heads program in 2008 to retain mature-age employees as valuable contributors to the council’s workforce and is encouraging managers to support and assist older staff by offering a range of career and retirement options.