

25 August 2008

The Secretary
Standing Committee on Employment and Workplace Relations
House of Representatives
PO Box 6021
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600
Email: ewr.reps@aph.gov.au

Dear Secretary,

I write in response to a request made to me regarding:

Pay equity and associated issues related to increasing female participation in the workforce.

I have taken the liberty to respond utilising current practices that we have operating within our organisation and thoughts or concepts that I feel are relevant to the topic.

Generally, throughout my experience, gender pay equity has not been seen as an issue, however the challenges that surround the concept of a work/ family balance and the ability to develop a sustainable career while also undertaking the traditional role of having a family seem to be of greatest concern to working mothers and a significant barrier to increasing female participation in the workforce.

To overcome some of these barriers employers should analyse the benefits of employing people on family friendly arrangements. This may include part time or casual employment for returning to work mothers, or providing flexibility in working hours to assist with school drop offs and pick ups, as well as child care operating hours.

We have a high percentage of casual and part time females employed within our operations. We also have full time employees who from time to time work flexible hours, or from home to undertake family responsibilities. This enables these employees to manage their work/ family life balance, and allows us to also maintain productivity.

Recently we have increased our obligations with regard to parental leave to provide for a total of 52 weeks unpaid leave that includes a period of 4 weeks paid leave.

We have taken this stance as we value the contribution made by women to society and to our organisation and feel that rewarding employees is a sure way to increase their motivation and the value that they contribute to the workplace.

It certainly has a negative impact on productivity and efficiencies when we lose an employee for that period of time, however the positives in terms of the satisfaction and the security that it provides for employees outweighs this in non-financial terms. Typically our employees who

utilise this type of leave will return to work. This normally will occur on a part time basis and has been known to be a return to full time.

Moving forward I would like to see a Federally- funded system of parental leave that would enable women to utilise 12 weeks of paid parental leave at the Federal Minimum Wage. Any additional wage that the employer wishes to contribute would be in addition to this and enables the family to have financial security through this time of early parenthood.

You have also asked for discussion on promotion and recruitment of women into the workforce, and the level of remuneration based on gender. Our workplace operates under the principle of merit-based selection and should a particular position be valued at a particular salary level, the incumbent, being male or female would receive this same level of remuneration.

We have a uniqueness within our operations in that we interpret the life and times of Ballarat, Victoria in the 1850s and 1860s gold rush period. As you would be aware , females played a different role in society to what they do today. We are very mindful of the importance of our organisation to apply authenticity principles in respect of our time period, however given our commitment to selection on merit and to not discriminate on the base of gender, we interpret this lifestyle in a progressive manner. For example, typically women in Ballarat 1850s would not be the sole employee in a small business in the township. At Sovereign Hill we would recreate this activity by role playing that our female employees may be the wife, daughter, niece or cousin of the male shopkeeper and they are looking after the business while the male shopkeeper is out of town, for example. This is often an engaging way to interact with our visitors and get them thinking about changes in society's values towards women.

We have taken a proactive approach to supporting the longevity of career progression for a number of our female middle/ senior managers. Through an Educational Assistance Framework we have actively supported these employees through tertiary education in their chosen field. This will not only allow a return for our business in terms of a highly educated and knowledgeable workforce, but also contributes to the increase of participation moving forward of women in management or senior management positions.

Given the recent amendments to the Victorian Equal Opportunity Act 1995 with regard to family responsibilities, this enables a fairer system for all and will not allow unprofessional organisations to unfairly treat those, particularly women, less favourably because of their status as a parent. Similarly to the introduction of our employer- funded parental leave, these changes do force an organisation to think outside the square and be flexible in their operations to cope with the society's changing views and expectations of the composition of the workforce.

I would be happy to discuss this topic further or assist in any other manner that is appropriate to assist you in your enquiries.

Kind Regards

Luke Cooper
Manager, Human Resources
The Sovereign Hill Museums Association