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Simply the best
Workplaces in Australia

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research, training & information services on the world of work

"How can Australian enterprises grasp and create new opportunities emerging from globalisation, technological change and the knowledge economy? How can we create leading, high performance workplaces that are characterised by their creativity, innovation, flexibility and competitiveness? Workplaces where people choose to work and give freely of their energies and feel and sense of personal achievement, satisfaction, individual purpose and security. Where there is synergy between personal missions and work challenges, and organizational achievement. And where the workplace sense of community contributes to overall social cohesion."

Business Council of Australia, "Managerial leadership in the workplace".

Summary

This study was undertaken in 2001 with support from the Business Council of Australia to identify a number of excellent workplaces in Australia, to visit those workplaces and analyse the basis for their outstanding performance, and then to draw some general conclusions concerning the nature of excellence at work across Australia.

We know that good workplaces are reasonably common in Australia. There are many workplaces around the country where people and processes combine to give a reasonable business result, satisfactory productivity and a high quality product or service.

In contrast though there are only a few workplaces in this country 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.

These excellent workplaces are often seen as very unusual, sometimes unique and perhaps the result of local or "one-off" situations. They are not usually seen as something that can be reproduced in other locations - they are viewed as being the outcome of a once-in-lifetime set of circumstances.

It is our contention, however, that excellence can be achieved by many more organisations in Australia. The first step towards creating an excellent workplace is to better understand what makes such a place special in the lives of those who work in it. Then we may apply this knowledge to our own situation.

The 15 Key Drivers for Excellence

Our research located 15 significant factors that differentiated excellent workplaces from the generally good workplaces around the country. These factors, or "drivers", were present in varying mixes in all the excellent workplaces we surveyed.

After assessing the results of our field research and interviews we concluded that **quality working relationships** represent the central pivot on which excellent workplaces are founded, underpinned by key variables such as good workplace leadership, clear values, having a say and being safe.

Our study suggests that many more Australian organisations can create excellent workplaces. We found that the characteristics that underpin an excellent workplace are identifiable, quantifiable and manageable. There is no magic in this process. How much weight should be given to each of the 15 performance drivers is a matter for further research. We have dealt with the drivers in this study in a very approximate fashion, according to the responses we have received from our field research.

The 15 key drivers are:

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 of 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 is important, and they need to share 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. Their 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 – the energy and commitment to the workplaces, high levels of volunteering, excitement and a sense of well-being. 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.

The Study

Why Excellence?

It is critical that more workplaces in Australia become world class in terms of people productivity, overall performance and business processes. In an increasingly globalised and competitive economy, being "good" at what we do is not enough. Thinking that we are not being able to become "excellent" is no longer acceptable. But to take this qualitative step upwards requires us to develop a deeper understanding of what makes the difference between a merely good workplace and one that leads the field, and then to act on that knowledge.

Our research has revealed that the difference between a good workplace and one that is seen to be excellent involves a range of dimensions to do with people, work and processes. These dimensions appear to be related primarily to what those who work there feel and believe about their workplaces, rather than the technology they utilise, their geographic location, industry type, whether they are located in the public or private sector, the particular industrial relations framework, or the size or location of the parent organisation.

Our list of factors that influence workplace performance emerged from the study that in itself was open ended. Thus while they may have the appearance of being "merely commonsense", they are obviously not, otherwise there would be many more excellent workplaces in Australia.

We also accept that it is a challenge to move from knowing what should be done to doing something about it.

Measuring the Difference Between Good and Excellent

Based on the detailed results from site visits to 8 excellent and 8 very good workplaces, our survey has revealed the 15 key performance drivers for excellence listed above: the things that must be the foundation of each workplace in order to achieve excellence. These were the factors that differentiated good workplaces from excellent workplaces. The factors are present in both types of workplaces, but in one they are integrated and aligned to produce high performance and superb business outcomes.

We interviewed and surveyed hundreds of people at all levels of work in these workplaces and over and over again we were told the same story – these are the things that make the difference.

But before we take a closer look at them, we will briefly explain how we approached this study.

Choice of Sites

Getting access to targeted work sites was not a simple matter particularly as being an excellent workplace is often seen as a source of competitive advantage by many companies – in short, these companies often do not want to give away their trade secrets.

However, we were finally able to locate enough workplaces of both types to give us a degree of certainty that we could distinguish differences between good and excellent workplaces.

The study is based on 16 workplaces from 10 companies. They are from a diverse range of industries (mining, hospitality, services, manufacturing, telecommunications, finance), across a variety of locations (regional Queensland, Sydney, Melbourne and Perth) and varied sizes (large multinational corporations, small business and multi site companies).

Open Questions

The field researchers followed an open-ended checklist that allowed for the people on site to offer their views, in their own words, about the factors that in their opinion made their workplace either good or excellent.

The issues addressed in the checklist covered the following:

- **Organisation arrangements** eg. workplace practices, reforms

- **Social factors** eg. management style, atmosphere, group dynamics

- **Physical setting** eg. space allocation, equipment layout, geography

- **Technology** eg. computing and communications systems, capital items and production processes

- **Leadership** eg. the management dimension, the extent and influence of managerial input at the workplace

- **Values** eg. the sense of purpose or otherwise, the alignment of staff and management agendas, and

- **The wider environment** eg. the overall position of the workplace in the company, the industry and/or the region.

In addition the field research team spent a considerable amount of time gathering a sense of the history and culture of each selected workplace through media reports, historical materials, books and articles about or by the company, and from corporate and internal reports. The team also interviewed key personnel, both past and present.

The range of interviews offered a large amount of information, which formed the basis of the subsequent analysis. We paired up the excellent workplaces and the good workplaces and identified the differences between them. Once we found the differences we were able to draw some general conclusions.

Identifying the Differences

It would have been a mistake if we had focussed our attention solely on the excellent workplaces, grouping together all the similarities in those workplaces. It is easy to find common elements between workplaces e.g. they all have buildings, employees, machinery, tools – the list is endless - but this does not explain the key differences between them. Asking what is common between excellent workplaces is misleading and too inward looking.

We had to find out what was **different** between good and excellent workplaces as it is reasonable to assume that most excellent workplaces at some stage were good workplaces trying to take a step up to high performance. By the time we had finished looking at the differences between the paired excellent and good workplaces, those differences stood out in sharp relief.

It would be difficult not to consider the concept of excellence in the workplace without having preconceptions about the contributing factors. Possibly what will surprise readers most about the results of the study are the list of workplace factors that made no difference to the concept of excellence. Many of these factors are normally considered to be major industrial if not social issues and are the subject of considerable public debate and even political division. These include such workplace factors as the level of unionisation, adherence to the traditional forms of industrial relations, hours of work, equity policies, technology and location. The authors expect that many readers will start reading this report believing that these factors are extremely important in achieving an excellent workplace. Our research suggests quite the opposite.

The findings in this report will raise the issue of whether the social and political division engendered by the public debate around these issues is at all necessary. It is quite possible that the current industrial relations debate is a game being played off the ball well behind play and possibly off the field.

These neutral factors we have referred to as the points of indifference - identifying them allows us to concentrate on understanding the factors that **do** contribute to an excellent workplace.

The Points of Indifference

Three categories of factors emerged in the study, which were not common to either good or excellent workplaces. These factors did not contribute directly to being excellent or otherwise, that is, being excellent does not require the presence – or absence of any of these factors.

Working arrangements and representation

This, for some, will be the most contentious of our findings.

Some of our excellent workplaces are strongly unionised, with a history of industrial conflict. Yet such workplaces have changed significantly and are now considered excellent, from both the business and work environment perspective.

It is our contention that the objectives of high performing workplaces are being achieved within the current industrial relations framework.

Other points of indifference in this category were:

- **Contracts of employment** - the workplaces had a variety of arrangements both collective and individual. One organisation was intending to move back to a collective arrangement after a period of using Australian Workplace Agreements.

- **Both union and non-union** workplaces are excellent and there were wide variations in the level of external union involvement. Some workplaces simply followed award provisions and therefore had little day-to-day involvement with unions in setting local terms and conditions of employment; others undertook extensive negotiations for enterprise agreements.

- The **hours of work** arrangements varied widely from casual to 12 hour rotating shifts. The employment of casual employees does not inhibit excellence nor contribute to it. It simply is not an issue.

Characteristics of the Business

There were both Greenfield and Brownfield workplaces in our study.

What became evident from the research was that this status did not tip the scales one way or the other in terms of being excellent or not.

- **The technology** varied significantly in complexity and sophistication, and work roles therefore demanded varying levels of skill and capability to deliver quality products and services.

  It is not the technology that makes the difference. Not only can workplaces that would be categorised as belonging to a traditional industrial base be viewed as excellent, workplaces can deliver significantly different results when essentially using the same technology.

- **A particular geography**, or **location**, did not play a role in determining excellence.

We included excellent workplaces in metropolitan, regional and remote areas and across all states in the study. For some, geography was part of the strategy. In one instance an organisation deliberately chose to establish workplaces in satellite areas of major population centres based on the belief that offering good jobs where employment options were limited would increase the pool of employees to recruit from. Others, such as mining, construction and quarrying companies had their geographical locations pre-determined.

- **Size of the workplace, size of the parent company, country of origin of the parent organisation,** and whether the workplace operated within a **public or private sector** environment were also not fundamental to excellence, although they played a role in strategy.

The research team were particularly interested to discover that the commonly held view of private sector organisations always being 'better' and 'more effective' than those in the pubic sector is now well open to challenge.

The composition of the workforce

The final group of points of indifference relate to the composition of the workforce, in terms of age, ethnicity or gender. Whilst some employers may have some human resources preferences that relate to concepts of equity or the satisfaction of statutory requirements, these factors had no direct bearing on the level of excellence.

The Excellent Australian Workplace

What Defines an Excellent Workplace?

In studies such as this one, preparing definitions is something of a chicken and egg exercise. This study to a large extent is an attempt to provide a definition of an excellent workplace. But before we can get started it is necessary for us to have a broad definition so that we can select excellent workplaces for the field study.

We know that we can pinpoint an excellent workplace, we can define it, but what we do not know is the answer to the question "why?"

Below we have listed some of the definitions we used to identify excellent workplaces.

When we use the term 'workplace' we mean the physical place of work, not the whole organisation. This definition may cover a few people in an isolated team, a branch office, a whole site or a section of a larger group. The intention was to study the performance of people at work in clearly defined places and spaces. This allowed us to concentrate on the factors that influenced the workplace directly, rather than the wider context of the whole organisation.

This study did not focus on workplaces where there were obvious people problems and poor performance. It was determined from the beginning that the intention of the Business Council of Australia was to identify the characteristics of excellent workplaces. There is more than enough written in Australia about problem workplaces.

The difference between good and excellent is defined as the difference seen in particular situations, as perceived by the senior management of the organisation. Their overall view of the performance of the workplace is determined by a range of business factors, people factors and contributions to the overall performance of the organisation. While these factors vary from organisation to organisation, they often reduce to notions of financial contribution to the business, efficiency of production or service, the usual quality indicators, staff satisfaction and the industrial relations climate.

Here we trusted the good judgment of the organisations we visited. We considered the usual list of financial, value added, people, business systems and other performance criteria in attempting to differentiate between the good and the excellent. We rejected that approach, because we wanted to test a broad range of workplaces, across many different industries and we knew that one set of performance criteria would not fit all workplaces.

We took the general set of criteria developed by the Business Council of Australia in their research work *Leading Workplaces* (1999), and we asked each of the selected companies to nominate two workplaces against these general criteria – one good workplace and one excellent workplace.

General Criteria for Excellence

World Class - this meant a workplace that could be seen to be at the top of its class in terms of like workplaces around the world. We asked the organisation to select two workplaces - one that was clearly outstanding and one that was reasonable in performance. The difference between the two workplaces was determined by performance measures normally used by the organisation.

High performance - meant outstanding business performance in terms of business outputs and business outcomes as defined by the company. We were looking for two workplaces that were close to the top in the measures, but with one being ahead of the other.

Competitive - meant cost and other measures of competition as described by the company. Also meant sustainable competitive advantage. We were looking for two workplaces that were very competitive, but one was ahead of the other.

Innovative - meant the extent to which the workplace used new ideas and processes to achieve business outputs and business outcomes. These could be technology or people focused. We were looking for two workplaces that were seen to be innovative, but one was viewed as more innovative that the other.

Flexible/Adaptable - meant able to easily change work organisation, people and technology to meet changing business needs. We were looking for two workplaces that were clearly able to move resources around but one was more flexible than the other.

Fair - meant the extent to which the workplace was seen to be based on equitable and open behaviours by managers and staff. We were looking for two workplaces that were seen as fair, but one was seen to be more open and equitable than the other.

Personal achievement - meant the extent to which the workplace supported personal development and personal ambitions within the business. We were looking for two workplaces that had a track record of support of individual development, but one had a better record than the other.

Ethical - meant the extent to which behaviour in the workplace was seen to be in accord with community standards and wider moral imperatives. This was to be recognised through systems and practices as well as individual behaviours. We were looking for two workplaces that were ethical, but one was more systemic in its approach than the other.

Knowledge Based - meant the extent to which the workplaces relied on the explicit and implicit experiences of the members of the workplace and was able to create a sense of corporate memory about systems and processes. We were looking for two workplaces that were good at this, but one which had a more developed culture of knowledge creation, capture and management than the other; and

Individual, Team and Organisational Learning - meant the extent to which the workplace supported and created learning at every level. The measures of this would be incorporated in obvious areas such as training and development and competency-based programs, but also in informal and systemic approaches to on-the-job learning. We were looking for two workplaces that were excellent at supporting learning, but one was ahead of the other in implementation of such programs.

Quality Relationships Are the Key

In all our excellent workplaces the atmosphere of mutual trust and respect was overwhelming. We became convinced that central to every excellent workplace is an understanding that to produce quality work in Australia, one must have quality working relationships. This applies particularly to workplaces with high levels of uncertainty, demanding skills requirements and turbulent markets.

The research revealed that building and maintaining good working relationships requires constant renewal and reaffirmation by all parties. It requires a permanent connection between the manager and the team and between the team members.

We also discovered that strong workplace relations often result in an "us and them" attitude towards the wider organisation. Properly managed, this division can be bridged, but in some excellent workplaces the high quality of the working relationships came in part from a disconnection from the corporate entity.

It is very important to understand that when talking about relationships at work we are not talking about friendships alone. What mattered most was the quality of the working relationships, particularly with respect to key dimensions such as trust, respect, self-worth and recognition. The fundamental relationships built on that magic word – trust – couldn't be over-estimated.

A supervisor who can return to work after an early lunch break and discover that her employees have successfully dealt with a quality inspector from head office in her absence is a sign of tremendous trust and the result of a quality working relationship. Similarly, when a visiting senior executive from the overseas parent company is shown over the site by front line employees rather than the site manager, that is symbolic of a quality trust between the worker and the manager that is essential in an excellent workplace. In addition to these two examples, our field team discovered a myriad of such instances of trust, of a permanent connection between the managers and the team.

So, what does constitute a good working relationship? The Australian Quality Council observed that:

> "Good Quality for Australians is a relationship in which a person has a sense of secure identity and self-worth. Without appropriate recognition and identity the situation is not good Quality.

> "A good Quality relationship helps to establish or sustain a secure identity – an important element in a person's development. Your identity, as perceived by yourself and by others, establishes you as an individual and helps to maintain or enhance your self-esteem ......

> "Building on our identity as we move through life is desirable, rewarding, and a source of security."

Early last decade the Australian Quality Council, Cultural Imprints and the then Telecom Australia commissioned research on Australian leadership styles. The researchers concluded that the Australian workplace culture was a unique and different culture from its counterparts in North America, Asia and Europe. They were studying the notion of "quality" and they determined that:

> "One of the key observations from the Telecom material was that Quality is perceived by Australians primarily in terms of the relationships they have with those around them and the organisation with which they are involved. This is a very different perception to that observed in studies of the U.S., Japanese and other cultures..."

In essence, their research focused on the differences between Australian workplace values and those overseas. The outcome of their work uncovered a deep seated and often unconscious set of cultural assumptions that influenced and directed peoples' behaviour at work.

For example, they found that certain concepts have a totally different meaning to Australians:

"In Germany, the dominant element of Quality is an obsession with Standards;

"In Japan, Quality is the pursuit of Perfection

"In France, Quality is viewed as Luxury

"In the United States, Quality means 'It Works'

"While in Australia, Quality implies – Quality of Relationship – First".

It is this special **Australian** perspective that struck us most forcefully in our visits to excellent workplaces. It did not matter about external factors, market conditions, regional differences or industry type. These were all present without exception in our excellent workplaces.

In a more recent research project undertaken in the Australian public sector the researchers made the connection between task cohesion and inter-personal cohesion. In a study of 120 employees in an Australian public sector organisation, they discovered that successful relationships between the individuals appear to determine the extent to which a team will stay together and perform well.

As we considered our field research team's findings, we began to see a pattern of connections between Quality Working Relationships and the other factors. The pattern was not clear-cut or simple.

Quality Working Relationships are underpinned by key variables such as Good Workplace Leadership, Clear Values, Having a Say and Being Safe.

These main connections are further supported by other variables such as Pay and Conditions, Getting Feedback, the Built Environment and Recruitment.

From these factors flow others such as Having Fun, Passion, Community Connections, Learning, a Sense of Identity and Ownership, and Uniqueness and Autonomy.

This is a particularly Australian perspective of excellence at work. It implies that to achieve excellence, the workplaces our researchers visited were able to draw together all 15 primary elements in a pattern of connections that reinforced each other. The balance between the factors, the exact cause-and-effect linkages we do not know. That would require a great deal more research well beyond the scope of this study.

Our sense is that each workplace had a different formula for excellence, a slightly different mix of chemistry and energy. Yet all the elements were present in each excellent workplace, and in considerably greater quantities than in workplaces that are merely good.

Workplace Leadership

Workplace leadership is a key factor in the underpinning of quality workplace relationships. In the excellent workplaces our team visited, leaders of all kinds and at all levels were aware of the impact that their behaviour has on the way people feel about the workplace and their job. They also know that their behaviour is critical in setting the example. There are a range of formal and informal processes and mechanisms where workplace leaders and other staff, in groups and individually, discussed matters and addressed challenges in ways that were supportive and encouraged learning.

In our workplaces, the staff valued highly those leaders who behaved as a captain/coach, which meant being available and providing support when needed but 'not getting in the way' when they were not. The expectations were that the leaders would choose their approach to suit the different needs of their staff, helping out when there was a crisis and allowing trial and learning when there was not. The research revealed that physical accessibility is a major factor, that supervisors in excellent workplaces often choose not to display the trappings of their position – an open plan office or even a desk on the factory floor often being preferred to the cosy suite upstairs.

The issue of trust was constantly raised with us. People in excellent workplaces used it as an indicator of how things had changed "We now trust the information we get from management", or "They now trust us to do our jobs well without constant supervision". When asked to explore what made the difference, most people tracked it back to a change in attitude to sharing information and communicating regularly.

It is the authors' view that *Leaders in Australia* a 1996 study undertaken by Cultural Imprints, provides the best foundation for understanding what Australian workers want from their workplace leaders. This study was an extension of an earlier study undertaken for Telecom, and mentioned earlier, that sought to identify the cultural imprint for quality in Australia.

The fundamental finding of the first study was that Australians' perception of high 'quality' is closely linked to the nature of the relationship they have with the provider of the product or service.

Perhaps the most significant observation from the study is that leaders care for their followers, a good leader being " ... someone who is followed without coercion, and without favours being offered".

The critical role of building bridges to the future was dependent on the leader's capacity to be seen to identify with, and respond, to the emotional needs of the followers.

The other characteristics of being a good leader in Australia that were identified also related to our concerns for quality working relationships:

- They support their followers
- They are consistent and stick to principles
- They think of others

More recently, Leadership Management Australia commissioned the *Leadership Employment and Direction Survey*. The results of this work are in tune with the Cultural Imprints study – and what our field research team recorded in our workplace interviews and surveys.

This study highlights the emergence of a new model of workplace relationships and employment, requiring a similarly new model of leadership. The top five factors that will positively influence improvements in performance among employees were located in the study as:

- Being entrusted with responsibility/independence
- Interesting and challenging work
- A good relationship
- Receiving feedback and good communication
- Good relationships with other staff.

However, in the *Leadership Employment and Direction Survey* a large minority of surveyed employees still reported that their workplace leaders do not understand the issues they face, do not listen and are not interested in their views. Enormous opportunities exist for those leaders who take the time to build relationships, to listen, and to ensure that employees' increased responsibilities are matched by appropriate skill development and learning.

This experience in an excellent workplace is typical of what we found.

When we walked into the workplace it was impossible to identify the workplace leader. The area was open, with no differentiation between desks, space, resources and facilities.

During our interview with the workplace leader (once we had located him), other members of staff wandered by, asked questions and engaged the leader in a range of issues.

The interactions were informal, but focussed, and covered the spectrum of seeking advice, needing a decision and providing updates. The level of respect that the staff had for their leader was obvious, as was the capacity of the workplace leader to modify his approach to suite the type of question and the experience of the staff member.

In our subsequent conversations with staff members, we asked how this style of leadership differed from other places they had worked. Without exception, the comments related to the access, openness and the availability of the leader.

Communicating Clear Values

Quality leadership of the kind our research team located is directly related and dependent on the effective communication of clear and concise values.

In the best workplaces we visited, the values of the organisation were part of every aspect of the way business was done. These values also influenced the way people related to each other thereby in turn helping to generate the quality working relationships that we found to be the key to the entire equation. They also assisted in creating excellent relationships between staff and supervisors. It is quite impossible to isolate one of the factors – they cannot stand alone.

Inevitably, there are dilemmas, conflicts and competing priorities that need to be resolved in any workplace including the best. But we found that the difference between an excellent workplace and the rest is that any apparent inconsistency was immediately and openly discussed. This openness, possibly the natural human response to clear values, we have also identified in the research as being a key aspect of many other drivers for excellence such as learning, feedback, and having a say.

For an example we can revisit an earlier experience we witnessed. Sometimes the work leader or supervisor is not available and staff need to make their own decisions - a shared understanding of the core values of the business provides the basis for making those decisions, and having confidence that they will be supported once the leader returns. Consider again the supervisor who returned from her lunch break to discover that a quality inspector had been and gone in her absence.

It was not a problem for her as her staff understood and shared the company's values and policies and knew what had to be done. They did not believe that they would be overstepping some imaginary boss/employee boundary by dealing with the inspector themselves. The result was a gain for the company.

In our discussions with employees at another excellent workplace, our team asked about the various formal and informal meetings, communication and information sharing sessions, mechanisms for feedback on performance, documents, workshops and discussions groups with their managers. Without exception, they were told that the major difference between this particular workplace and other companies they had worked for was that " ... they really do practise what they preach".

In digging deeper to uncover what was the "difference that made the difference", it was discovered that the intensive induction program included skill development in reading and interpreting performance data and providing all employees with the confidence and capability to engage with management on all aspects of business.

The Confidence to Have a Say

Taking the initiative is not always appreciated in Australian workplaces, in fact many managers over the years have been heard to tell employees: "I don't pay you to think." The corollary is the employee who virtually refuses to work unless there is a supervisor telling him or her what do from bundy on to bundy off.

Excellent workplaces have a very different response to initiative, something that we feel connects directly back to the communication of clear values and the quality of the working relationships.

Excellent workplaces must be competent workplaces. Individuals seek out skills and they learn more about work processes. This means that they are confident to have a say about those processes. They did not want to have a say simply to exercise power, but rather to add value to the work. "Having a say" allows for individuals to have some autonomy in their own work processes.

One feature that stood out in our visits was the sense of people having a common goal. This then allowed them to act in ways that supported each other. Mutual regard and respect operated in these workplaces. Each team member would insist on feeling some responsibility for the success or failure of the group as a whole.

Our research team were told of an interesting experience in a distribution centre. A rail deliveries day-shift team had noted that the train schedules would create a 48-hour period over the long weekend with no deliveries. The team decided instead to work back overnight to unload the last train so they could take the next two days off even though they would forego holiday penalties. They made some technical changes and called in an extra staff member. At 2AM they closed the gates, locked the system and spent the holidays with their families.

This team had no supervisor, no fixed work routine and no hierarchical work relationships. But they had common goals, clear values, excellent working relationships and extensive knowledge about their work.

During another interview a worker said to us: "In this place you don't hang your brain and your heart on a hook at the gate and pick them up on the way home, like other places I worked. You bring them to work with you and you use them – all the time."

Giving employees such a degree of independence does not always sit comfortably with managers. But the following experience is indicative of how successful such work teams can be in the face of indifference, even hostility.

Team A had, some years earlier, been set up as a self-directed workplace production group within a larger production site. As senior managers came and went though, so did support for the team concept.

New managers tried to dismantle Team A's employee participation in decision-making, but over time it became clear that the "self-directed team" was the best model for production in this environment.

Team A remains an oasis of self-management in the larger site. People are put through the team in order to improve their skills and experience; supervisors informally use the team as a model for other places.

Safety is Built from Quality Relationships

Looking back at our list you will see that the primary driver - Good Working Relationships - is underpinned by key variables such as Good Workplace Leadership, Clear Values, Having a Say and Being Safe.

Initially safety may appear to be the "odd man out" in these three variables, as it seems more grounded in the "hardware" of a workplace – the machinery and bricks and mortar - than in the "software" – the people and the complexity of their relationships.

However, we discovered that in excellent workplaces "being safe" takes on a new dimension and is a key driver underpinning quality working relationships.

Safety at work – and we mean real safety, not formal policies in a manual or days lost chalkboards – is based on mutual respect between people in a workplace. Feeling safe and secure comes from confidence, knowledge, training and particularly the experience of knowing that other people care for your well being. In the excellent workplace there is a strong practical belief in all for one and one for all.

We will take the example of a very isolated mine we visited. Mines are dangerous places. This mine though had an excellent safety record with a long history of good production and few accidents. Safety was so good that it was just part of the job.

Talking to the operators we were told that new starters on site were given no chance to 'screw up', because everyone took it upon themselves to watch the newcomer, and 'pulled him into line' if he tried something outside the rules. They did this because they knew that if he learned shortcuts from the first day, he would continue this practice until someone was injured or killed.

As an interesting corollary to this attitude the site manager was unpopular with head office because all visiting VIPs, including the company's directors, were required to undergo rigorous safety training/briefings before being allowed into work areas.

The workers were prepared to back their Manager in his dispute over these rules with a visiting Director, another indicator of the nature of relationships in the excellent workplace where 'us and them' can refer more to the workplace and the company at large than to traditional divisions between supervisor and worker or company and competitor.

It was notable in the excellent workplaces we visited that there were no obvious, highlighted safety programmes but there were checks and reviews, with a constant review of best practice. Safety was a part of every action on the job, every meeting and every procedure. Also, people had a responsibility to keep themselves safe - they understood they were part of an organisation that placed a priority on health and safety. Again, clear values play an important role.

A recent study by the National Occupational Health and Safety Commission (1999) concluded that workplaces where safety systems needed to be improved (and are therefore less than excellent) were:

- Small firms
- Large firms with tall hierarchical organisation structures
- Those that provide employees with little role in decision-making processes
- Firms that have a culture that assigns little significance to safety
- Companies facing highly competitive markets
- Relatively long established firms
- Workplaces with little or no union presence

These conclusions generally align with our findings, with the exception that we did not find that the presence or absence of a union made any difference. Our selected sites remained safe places to work whether or not there was a union presence.

Considering workplaces generally, most observers would agree that common work factors such as the value placed on safety by management, stressful work arrangements, new technology, role conflict and relationships at work directly impact on health and safety.

It is our view that excellence in workplaces in terms of being safe on the job can be related to a combination of managerial and these more general factors, including front line managerial leadership, a sense of working together, common objectives, working relationships, values and more.

It is not possible to separate excellence in safety systems and the creation of a safety culture from the wider sense of excellence in the workplace. An unsafe workplace cannot be an excellent workplace. Excellence and safety are intertwined and connected at the roots. As one employee told our research team: "Our site is great. We aren't always looking over our shoulder for bits of gear to crash into us. You feel good about that. You can get on with the job."

All the Drivers Must Be Present

Our study located 15 drivers that come together to identify the excellent workplace. These drivers clearly distinguish the excellent from the merely good because they are not all present in the second best workplaces – in some workplaces they are hardly present at all.

Yet, exactly how these 15 drivers combine in each workplace remains part of the uniqueness of each excellent workplace – this is the mystery about excellence, not the identity of the drivers themselves. What our study has revealed is that **all** the factors are important. We need to understand though, that there are levels of influence whereby some drivers take the front seat whereas others underpin or assist.

The challenge in the research was first to identify the factors and now we have done that there is a need to answer two very broad questions about practice:

1. If these are the significant factors in determining an excellent workplace in Australia, what strategies and actions can organisations undertake to move their workplaces from good workplaces to excellent workplaces?

2. Once a workplace has become an excellent workplace, what actions and strategies are required to sustain and maintain that level of excellence?

Our research has located the core driver as Good Working Relationships, which in turn is underpinned by key factors such as Good Workplace Leadership, Clear Values, Having a Say and Being Safe. We have considered these in some depth.

They are in turn are supported by other drivers such as Pay and Conditions, Getting Feedback, Built Environment and Recruitment.

From these flow others such as Having Fun, Passion, Community Connections, Learning, a Sense of Identity and Ownership, and Uniqueness and Autonomy.

We will now consider these underpinning factors, whilst still remembering that even though there is a lowly last driver, it needs to be present as much as the first one for a workplace to qualify as excellent. In this sense the core driver of quality working relationships is a first among equals.

Underpinning quality work relationships

Pay and Conditions – Taken As Read

In the excellent workplace money and conditions are seldom mentioned, principally because such matters are taken as read. When our field team asked about the reward for effort, people simply said 'well, there is the money, but we wouldn't be working here if the money was poor'. They then went on to point out that job satisfaction and working in a great workplace were equally important. The corollary to that statement is that if the money is poor, then the workplace is not excellent. Similarly, if there is continuing conflict over money and conditions the workplace will fail to qualify as well.

In all our workplaces there was a general sense that a good employer and an excellent workplace ensure that wages and salaries are at least at industry standard.

People felt that they were paid for competence and experience, not necessarily just ? for achieving production targets and exceeding financial performance.

There was an underlying sense that people felt that they were all rewarded when it came to pay and conditions. There was little sense of individual competition and ranking of people.

Such views are quite radical and to a large extent fly in the face of both academic and industry beliefs about pay and performance. The tendency for many years now has been to link the two together. This attitude manifests itself most stridently in pay-for-performance schemes that reward the person but not the job.

Yet there are companies that have dropped their individual pay-for-performance schemes and have seen productivity tripled. Not substantiated in this or other studies

One thing is agreed between the mainstream research and our study – that money is not the only motivator in excellent workplaces. Recognition of peoples' effort, links to career development and access to training are all factors that enhance performance.

The non-monetary rewards, once a reasonable level of pay has been set, can make the difference between a good workplace and an excellent workplace. Good pay and conditions are often a symbol of respect and confidence not just for the individual employee but also for the relationship that develops between the employee and the company as a whole. Poor wages and sub-standard working conditions – along with a poor working environment – can never be the basis for building an excellent workplace.

Customising the Built Environment

Interestingly our survey revealed that the built environment was a factor in excellence on a par with pay and conditions. Whilst being at the hard end of the "hardware and software" comparison amongst our 15 excellence drivers, the working environment played a very important role in developing the quality working relationships that form the core of the excellent workplace.

Consider the experiences recounted to our researchers by a production manager. He had originally arrived in the facility to discover that his office was located on the first floor, so he immediately moved downstairs onto the factory floor. The people needed to see him and they needed to know that they could get to him day or night. They wanted and needed to alter their working relationship with him.

Later the employees recounted how the move downstairs had resulted, for the first time, in the production manager actually 'living' on the same level as them. They thought it was great. In a short time a failing facility was well on the way to making it No.1 in the group – and the move downstairs was one part of that success.

It is interesting to observe that in our excellent workplaces, the layout and fittings tend to reflect the way people go about their work. In the merely good workplaces, people tend to make do with what they have around them. In excellent workplaces, the spaces are redesigned around the people, their work and reflect their workplace aspirations.

In excellent workplaces, the built environment has been carefully structured to support the business processes. Computers are common and current management information is accessible something that interlinks directly with other key drivers such as learning and having a say. Yet people can reshape and customise their workstation and immediate environment. In every workplace our field team visited there was a sense that this space is 'ours'. The most obvious changes would usually revolve around the opening up of closed spaces and the bringing together of people into teams. Again, building relationships.

It has been our view since we started surveying people that whilst employees may not have a concise view about what makes an excellent workplace, people have gone about developing them by the introduction of various characteristics that when brought together make the excellent workplace. A key factor in this is recruitment. Square pegs in round holes may sound simplistic but it has an ring of truth about it.

Employing for Passion

The right to hire and fire has traditionally been a core element of managerial prerogative but not necessarily in the excellent workplace.

Once the initial recruitment screening was completed, in most of the workplaces we visited the final choice was left to fellow workers. Sometimes this was a formal panel interview, sometimes an informal meeting off site, and often a practical work situation in which other group members worked alongside the candidate in a problem solving exercise. We asked one group of workers if they had ever voted down a candidate. "Yes" was the reply. For what reasons we asked. "Because the bastards thought they had to convince the big boss and not us – we have to work with them, not the boss". Failure to connect with the real recruiters was a fatal mistake.

As you would expect from such workplaces, recruitment was dealt with very seriously with very considerable emphasis placed on the potential recruit's ability to get along with other people. Apart from the usual psych and literacy tests, excellent workplaces closely look at the candidate's past work history, personal circumstances and attitudes towards general subjects e.g. sport and the industry. A 'rounded' view of the candidate is essential.

While it seems a soft dimension to employment, employing people who have a passion for the job is becoming a more important criterion in Australia. Our research team discovered that even in workplaces where the term was not articulated loudly, it was implicit in the recruitment process.

Passion, in fact is one of the factors that flows from the key drivers such as recruitment and feedback. Some workers we spoke to told us quite unashamedly that they loved working in their workplace. One production employee told us: "I cannot imagine a better working life, being paid for doing what used to be my hobby - and always was my passion - with a group of people who are great to spend time with." A worker in a different plant said: "The reason I stay here too long is not that I don't want to be with my family. I just get so absorbed with what I am doing, time loses its meaning."

When people are passionate, getting volunteers is not the dilemma – it is choosing between those willing to be involved. Motivation leads to staying late, not fear of being sacked. Increasingly, employees are seeking to work for companies that express and activate a commitment to the broader community and society. Their work has wider meaning.

Learning, learning, learning.

Passion is a necessity in knowledge-based workplaces where sharing learning and knowledge is fundamental to long-term success.

Knowledge though, is multifaceted and complex, full of many nooks and even dark recesses. In the excellent workplace knowledge is a lot more than understanding the work processes. When our field team visited work centres the broad knowledge of the workforce stood out like a giant billboard saying, "We are here!" It would almost be a truism to say that an excellent workplace has excellent staff at all levels. The people that an excellent workplace either creates or draws together would never be satisfied with simply learning their job processes by rote.

One of the areas of knowledge that they thirst for is knowledge about themselves – how am I going? But they also want to know how the company is going, how the production is going, how the rest of the team is going.

We mentioned earlier the necessity of trust in building quality working relationships. We know that knowledge is power and what we have observed on the job is that management in excellent workplaces have clearly demonstrated their trust in their workforce by providing them with information and feedback that is rare in corporate Australia.

What kind of knowledge do people want?

In all of our best workplaces, staff had ready access to up to date information on their own progress as well as the performance of their work unit and the workplace.

We discovered that workplaces that really understood the importance of feedback for learning and improvement had changed their perspective on 'complaints' – and often the term was no longer used. This was staff feedback; this was one of the transmission belts for both the creation and maintenance of an excellent workplace.

Excellent workplaces make sure every individual receives continuous feedback on their performance and areas for improvement, both positive and negative. They in turn must be able to send their feedback to supervisors and management

The benefits for the excellent workplace when knowledge is readily available are very considerable, particularly in terms of promoting a sense of ownership and identity.

At the individual's work process level, we noticed that in the excellent workplaces that we visited, employees were in charge of the technology they were operating, including having the ability to change settings based on information being provided directly to them, and they were able to describe the role and function of the various pieces of equipment. Appropriate skill development and ongoing learning had matched the increased responsibility and accountability.

In the best workplaces, every employee was seen to have something to contribute. There was no distinction between managers or specialists as "gatekeepers" of information. Everyone was keen to understand the details of the work processes that impacted on their life.

People knew that standards relating to customers, the community and the environment had to be met and exceeded wherever possible.

We discovered that the managers valued the knowledge held by employees in excellent workplaces - that this knowledge formed part of the working capital of the business.

The bulk of learning took place on the job - it was startling to see the level of ad hoc and detailed learning that occurred at every site. The best sites were engaged in formal action learning programmes, whilst every site seemed to have informal groups talking and working together. There was no sense of a demarcation between learning and doing.

And it was not just their own job that people learned. We recorded many instances where people had crossed barriers to connect with other employees' work. In one typical case a young graduate engineer spent some months undertaking various tasks on the production line – initially against his will - so that he would understand what really happened in the production process. When ultimately the time came for him to return to being an engineer he said he wanted to remain on the production line a little longer as the knowledge he was accumulating was priceless!

Beyond the individual, in excellent workplaces there is ready access to all business information, including customers, products and financial arrangements.

In this context our field team were not surprised when they came across the following nugget. The hospitality industry relies on casual and part time employees, often students. In a workplace that did not pay over the award, significant numbers of employees sought to return following overseas travel. There was even gatherings in London of ex-employees to maintain the relationships and connections.

And it did not stop there. Family open days, flexibility in taking time off, social and sporting events all had a role in providing people with a feeling of control over their life, not just their job.

Employee commitment and ownership - the emotional and psychological attachment to an organisation - is seen to be the vein of gold that delivers high performance as employees are prepared to exert considerable effort on its behalf, to 'go the extra mile'.

Alternatively, it is the disconnection from a sense of ownership that actually drives most average workplaces. 'As long as this is not my place, not my job, not my business I can walk away.'

This 'membership organisation' has the characteristics of

- Being inclusive, integrative and flexible
- Setting goals that attract the input of staff
- Encouraging collaborative partnerships
- Communicating and sharing information
- Instilling pride – by commitment to economic, environmental and social outcomes
- Being steadfast in difficult situations.

The way in which work is designed remains a critical component of how people feel about work. An AWIRS study of 1995 revealed that high levels of control over work is positively associated with:

- Satisfaction with the workplace
- Satisfaction with the job
- Satisfaction with management

We noted that one of our excellent workplaces had implemented the philosophy and approach of John Case and his work on open book management. This approach assumes that everybody on the payroll has a stake in the businesses success.

Case emphasises, and this is also our experience, that quarterly or monthly reports and updates are not sufficient - people need to be able to access whatever information they want to know about the business – when they want it. No question is 'off limits' and staff are trusted to have information that is, by some organisations, restricted due to the need for commercial confidentiality.

Looking inwards and looking outwards.

Having identified this level of commitment and identification it was not a surprise to our field research team when they discovered in our excellent workplaces that people also have other commitments or identities, even commitments that may appear at first glance to be contradictory. Looking inward, our survey discovered that staff in excellent workplaces do not necessarily extend their workplace or team identification into corporate identification – in fact at times they may view the corporation and particularly Head Office in competitive or even combative terms.

Interestingly though we did find that employees in excellent workplaces have very strong ethical views on community connection and the role of their employer and hence themselves within the broad community. This is especially evident in regional Australia where everybody knows the company name and employees tend to live in the local community rather than a distant suburb.

We found that work teams and workplaces have developed their own identity, while acknowledging that they are part of a larger system.

The results of our study have clearly demonstrated that diversity, uniqueness and autonomy can exist without placing the organisation at risk in any way. The values, purpose and outcomes of an organisation provide the glue and connection for building identification and cohesion, rather than prescriptive rules and regulations.

These workplaces are different, they are exceptional and it was not surprising to our field team that the employees should develop a conscious view of themselves as unique.

A good example was a quite small work group we visited which is wholly owned by and operating within a much larger organisation. The group has its own name, premises, marketing and brand thereby enabling a unique level of autonomy to develop.

They have the best of both worlds. They draw on the expertise and advantages of the larger system in areas such as distribution, infrastructure, financial management and human resources, but retain their own identity in the areas that matter – the culture, the brand and the positioning of the product

That such islands of excellence can exist within larger company structures is a comparatively recent experience.

Until the late 1980s uniqueness in the terms and conditions of employment in Australian workplaces was rare. Standardisation was equated with equity.

At all levels of an organisation, the emphasis was on setting down rules and ways of operating which were intended to produce a common purpose. Huge policy and procedure manuals dominated management practices and policies and the fear of 'setting a precedent' resulted in little innovation.

Today, organisations are being designed differently. Combined with the possibilities created by IT advancement, all previous notions of standardisation are now being treated with suspicion.

There is now increasing evidence from empirical studies that the relationship between high performance and autonomy is based on an employee's need for independence, individualism, innovation, information and incentives before they can perform to their potential.

High performers tend to:

- Place great value on freedom
- Are self directed,
- Could be classified as nerds or weirdos but are happy to stay that way; and
- Have a strong need for flexibility.

Establishing the right mix with such individuals, particularly within the work team, may test the patience and skills of supervisors and managers. The individual's autonomy may well conflict with the team and negatively influence the cohesion and overall effectiveness. Everyone involved in such teams requires the skills and training to discuss and negotiate working arrangements that allow the individual to produce his or her best for the team as a whole.

That such people can rise above their individual concerns is demonstrated not just by the fact that these teams are excellent teams, but also by their broad sense of community identity. As one Queensland miner told our field team: "We live in the local area. What we do on site affects our families and us all. It would be crazy to pretend that we go to the moon when we go to work"

The management and the staff of our excellent workplaces believed that they were part of the wider community particularly in regional areas. This expressed itself with involvement in community affairs and support for volunteer groups.

Impact on neighbours was important elements in excellent workplaces. Where possible, sites were visually screened, noise abatement procedures exceeded legal minimum limits, and dust was eliminated.

There is much research to indicate that the connection between the local community and an excellent workplace is one that creates business benefits. The result of our study complements that research, revealing that people in excellent workplaces want to engage with their local community because it is the 'right' thing to do. Business benefits are OK, but being a good neighbour comes first.

For example, we visited a retail shop in a suburban shopping centre where the manager was leading a tenants' group to try and keep down a rent increase.

She had mobilised the local shopping community to support the tenants. The theme was 'keep the rents and the prices down'. The connection between the well being of the tenants and the retail prices to customers was well understood by everyone.

And Finally - Relax and Have Some Fun

There are very few excellent workplaces in Australia. We made this point in the opening paragraphs but it is worth reminding ourselves just how rare they are. Visiting our good and excellent workplaces, conducting surveys and interviewing the people who work in them at all the various levels, produced 15 elements that were present in all the excellent workplaces that clearly differentiated them from the merely good workplaces. The good workplaces simply didn't have these elements to this extent.

Predominantly, these elements or drivers are broadly about people rather than about machines, policies, and corporations. In particular they are about relationships between those people. We came to the conclusion that the touchstone of an excellent workplace is the quality of the working relationships.

In all we located 15 of these compulsory elements that shape, or better still drive, the excellent workplace. So far we have discussed 14 of them. The final driver is having fun.

There is no doubt that developing excellent workplaces is a serious business. Yet we consistently found that in the excellent workplace there was a relaxed environment that allowed work to be more than just pleasant. More research in the area might show that rather than being a central driver, having fun is a key marker for establishing excellence. One thing is very clear to us though – if the employees are not relaxed and do not have the ability to have some fun, then many of the other drivers will not be present either.

It is very hard to imagine any workplace being an excellent workplace if the staff is miserable or surly. Similarly, industrial prisoners do not make excellent workers.

In our excellent workplaces, humour was sometimes part of the way stress was alleviated without detracting from the job at hand. 'Laughter is good medicine' was certainly a key element. Humour was also used in presentations and the personalising of workspaces. While some events were planned and part of a social programme, it also seemed that spontaneity was an important element – always within the bounds of safety.

Every excellent workplace we studied had something different to offer. We visited one workplace where it had recently been discovered that one of the team was a professional Elvis impersonator by night. His workmates and the management loved his stage act, which they asked him to bring to work for the morning teatime entertainment. In another workplace the management had a regular day when they reversed the standard roles and served the employees morning tea.

A considerable amount of research that has been undertaken before us also has noted the links between stress, productivity, and performance. The notion that 'fun workplaces also tend to enhance learning, productivity and creativity, and reduce the changes of employee burnout or high absenteeism' is a common theme.

Our workplaces supported the view that creating the environment that encourages employees to have fun is more beneficial than programmes designed and implemented by human resource departments. Spontaneity was important.

American authors tend to emphasise the need for systematic programmes and activities, regularly scheduled.

For our excellent Australian workplaces, being able to have fun seemed to be an expression of the quality of relationships and the extent to which they were relaxed and felt safe in doing so. Spontaneity seemed to be more of the norm than structured arrangements.

In Conclusion

Our field research located 15 themes, which we labelled as drivers for workplace excellence. We cannot emphasise enough that what distinguishes the excellent workplaces from the very good workplaces is that these 15 drivers are all present in the excellent workplaces, without exception.

When we analysed the information from our field team's site visits, we looked for a pattern of causal connections between the 15 drivers. At first we thought that Workplace Leadership was the key, since it was the element mentioned most by both managers and staff at the work centres we visited.

Then we considered what other people have been writing about excellence. In the various books, articles and reports we read it seemed that there was more importance placed on Shared Values as a touchstone for excellence.

However, as we discussed and analysed our findings further, it became clearer that the central focus for excellent workplaces was the quality of the working relationships between the people who worked in them. All the other dimensions were important, but somehow the issue of working relationships linked all of them together.

Hence we temporarily came up with this diagram to illustrate the way we understood the interaction of the 15 drivers.


This view, with working relationships at the core, was supported by the Australian Archetype Study, one of the few detailed studies of this type prepared in Australia. The team who undertook that research also discovered this elemental aspect of Australian workplaces, although their work did not focus on excellent workplaces, instead they were looking for the differences between Australian workplace values and those overseas. The outcome of their research uncovered a deep seated and often unconscious set of cultural assumptions that influenced and directed peoples' behaviour at work.

Some of the work developed from the Archetype study has led to interesting perspectives on what constitutes excellence (or not) in workplaces. One of the more challenging ideas is that because relationships are critical in Australian workplaces, we need to see the different ways people sort themselves, based on two key dimensions of relationships: trust and self-worth.

Trust in particular is a word that has appeared throughout this report and within many of the interviews that we conducted. It appears to us that without a high level of trust in the workplace there is very little chance of most if any of the key drivers developing.

Trust creation constitutes a massive managerial challenge. A worksite manager may quite seriously make a decision over his muesli to commit to purchasing the latest piece of technology that day and report his success to his wife when he gets home. But it is hardly likely that he can decide the following day that he will now introduce trust amongst the staff and similarly report home a successful day. Such complex and indeed quite mysterious social phenomena develop by tiny, incremental amounts via an intricate cycle or web of trust creation whereby the players in the process dance around the issues at stake for some time before they each decide that the other person can be trusted and also that that other person is trusting in return. During that extended process a break in the cycle will often spell the end of any hope of trust reaching a level where the 15 drivers for excellence are likely to develop.

John Evans, a Melbourne researcher, considers the development of trust in working relationships derives from the views that people have of themselves. In the diagram below we see that on the horizontal trust axis we have the two extremes of trust and on the vertical axis the two extremes of self-worth.

I'm OK

I trust you ———————————————————— I don't trust you

I'm not OK
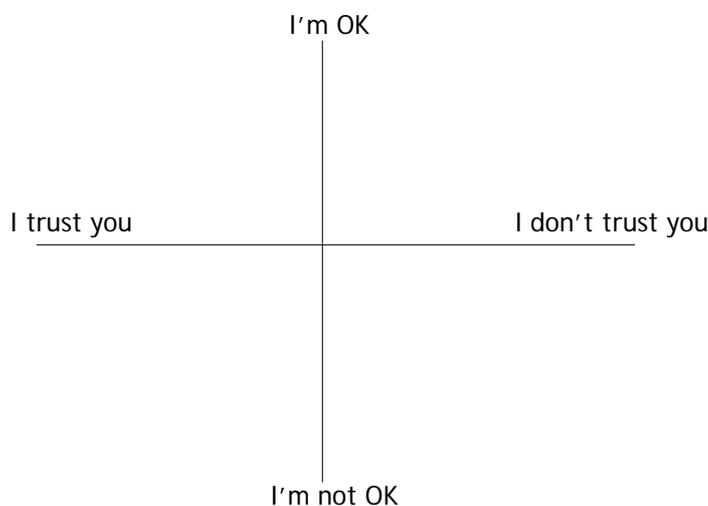
Added into this equation is the manner in which people interact with others. The adjacent axes, as contained in each of the four segments, define the broad inter-personal qualities of each type of person.
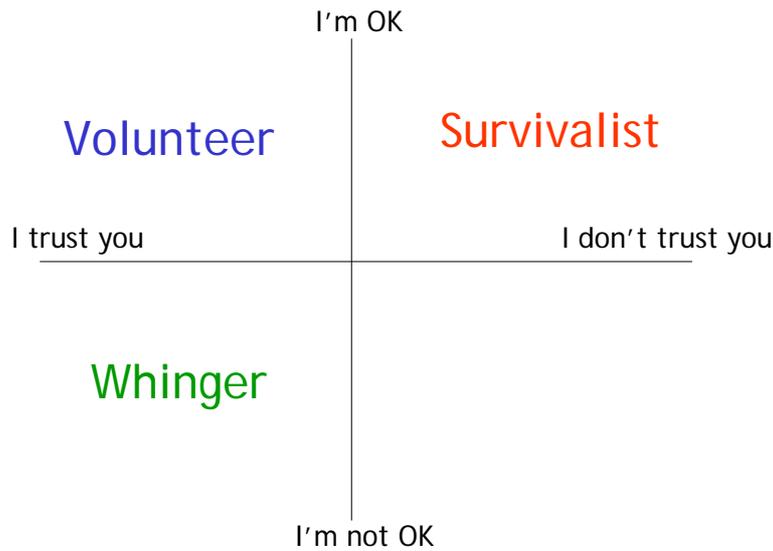
Evans argues that people at all levels in Australian workplaces can be characterised in part through their affiliations, based on the quality of their working relationships. There are four groups.

I'm OK

Volunteer

I trust you   I don't trust you

I'm not OK
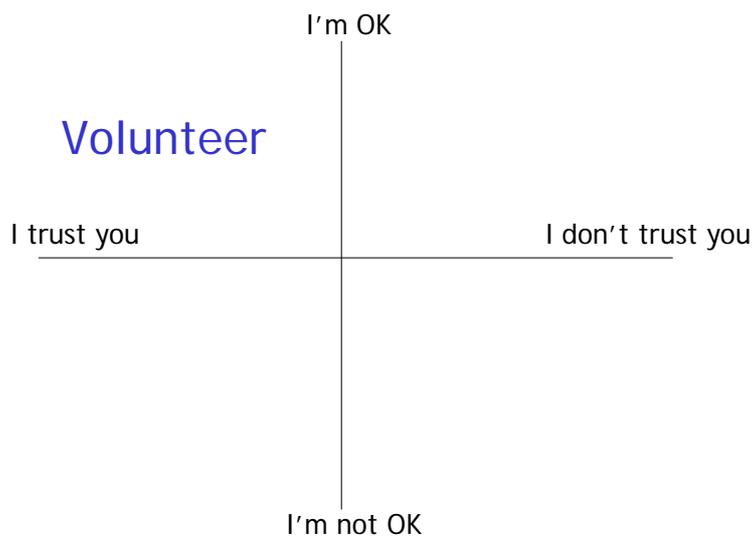
Volunteers have high levels of trust and self worth - they will give everything for their job, their workmates and the business. They both engender leadership, and energise people to follow them.

I'm OK

Volunteer   Survivalist

I trust you   I don't trust you

I'm not OK
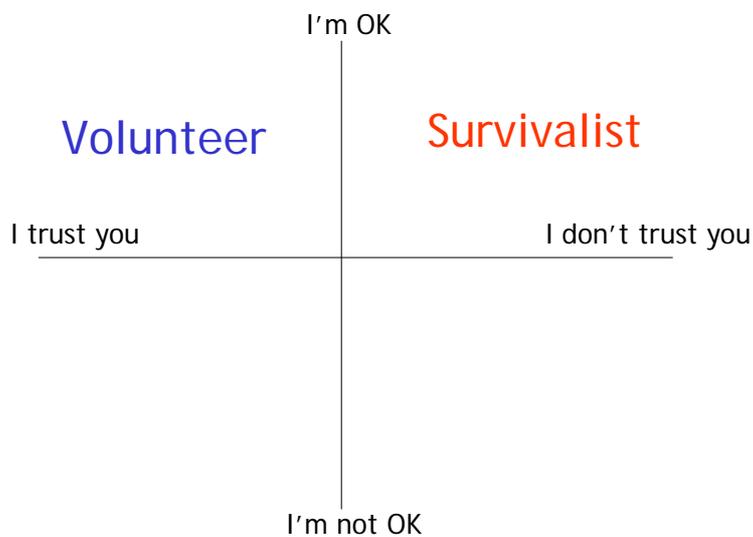
Survivalists are those people who have high levels of self worth, but for whatever reason do not have a high regard for those who work with them and/or their supervisors and/or the image of their organisation. They will follow all published rules, appear as Volunteers, but at the moment of Truth will fall away and look after their own interests before everything else.

```
                        I'm OK
                          |
                          |
        Volunteer         |    Survivalist
                          |
                          |
  I trust you _____|_____ I don't trust you
                          |
                          |
         Whinger          |
                          |
                          |
                       I'm not OK
```

Whingers are people with low levels of self worth, created from whatever reasons – personal, family, peers or environment. They have high levels of trust in those around them and thus become dependent on those people. In the case of the manager or supervisor, this often emerges as complaints, demands, cries for help and criticism of others to the boss.

```
                        I'm OK
                          |
                          |
        Volunteer         |    Survivalist
                          |
                          |
  I trust you _____|_____ I don't trust you
                          |
                          |
         Whinger          |    Prisoner
                          |
                          |
                       I'm not OK
```

At the darkest end of the Australian workplace lives the Prisoner. This person has low self worth and also hates the organisation, the supervisor and their workmates. They act as though they are in a jail, with all the appropriate language: "I have to get out of here", and "I can't wait to escape on Friday".

These simple archetypes resonated with us in our work. As we travelled around the selected workplaces, we found Volunteers at all levels - people who were proud of their work, and of their organisation (at least as far as the front gate). There were high levels of trust combined with self-esteem. The outcome of this was excellence in performance for the workplace.

After looking at all these factors and arguments we ended up considering the issue of weight. It seemed to us that there were workplace excellence drivers that took on greater weight than others although exactly in what proportion we cannot tell as so much more research needs to be undertaken. We believe though that there is not one magical, pre-determined mix of the factors, that each of the different workplaces has to find its own level, its own chemistry.

This led us to re-shape our original picture of an excellent workplace so that now it looks something like this, being the image we reproduced much earlier on.
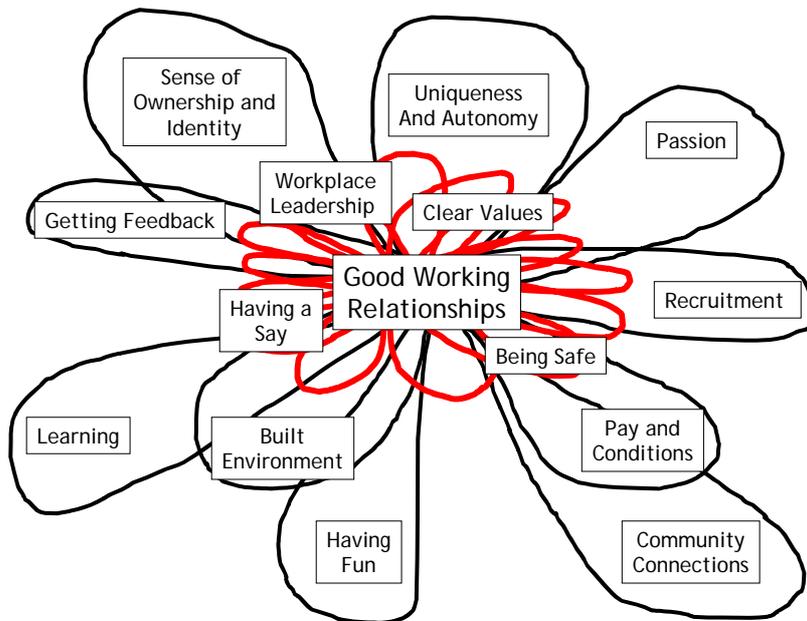
We will close by emphasising something we mentioned in the body of our report. We have here identified the 15 factors that together make up the excellent Australian workplace.

But where do we go from here? Clearly the intent of studying excellent workplaces is to try and develop many more of them in line with the sentiments that are contained in the quotation that appears at the head of this article. So, in addition to identifying the drivers we now need to establish the strategies that can facilitate the qualitative leaps that will shift good workplaces up the scale to the excellent level.

Our field research suggests that for the merely good workplaces this step upwards is not a matter of more of the same but rather the development of qualitatively different factors.

After scaling these great heights staying there is also important. We similarly need strategies for maintaining excellent workplaces at their exalted level.

These are huge challenges that will, in our view, require a great deal of research and support in the years ahead. Hopefully, identifying the nature of the excellent workplace is the first step in this process.

FURTHER READING

Readers who may like to follow up on some of the issues and experiences we have raised in this article will find this list helpful but not comprehensive – there's quite a lot more! We have grouped articles, books and reports by subject matter for easy reference.

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5. Trust: How to build it, Earn it - and re-establish it once its broken Harvard Management Update September 2000
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