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2007, 2008, 2010

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+ CountryBIZ
Mining issue

Daniel Ricciardo

His Formula's sorted



BON APPETIT

Yarra Valley's many
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Ord Valley Mustering in
a great ancient land



Retaining remote workers

How high-tech villages and gourmet food are attracting and retaining employees in remote regions.

Money used to be the main driver to attract and retain staff. However in the mining and resources sector, which hires thousands of remote workers, other factors are now impacting on the decision to take or stay in a particular job. Accommodation, facilities, food, rosters, entertainment and communications are now major determinants in an employee's consideration process and something by which smart employers are now looking to differentiate themselves.

In the past, remote sites were more like camps than today's villages. Accommodation was usually fairly basic and consisted of shared living quarters including beds, bathrooms and laundry facilities. The recreation room would typically consist of table tennis and a pool table, while facilities included free-to-air-TV, videos, radio and if you were lucky, a swimming pool.

Today things have changed dramatically says Robert Nash, CEO and chairman of Golden Eagle Mining Limited. "The booming Australian mining and resource economy has resulted in an influx of experienced and savvy resource workers. However, there is now fierce competition to keep the best staff, and companies are doing what they can to keep them," says Nash. One way of doing this is to offer the best conditions and technologies available for workers on-site.

"I believe the biggest factor in attracting, and most importantly retaining, key staff is culture. It's important for people to feel like they're part of a team, to utilise

their skills and strengths to add value to the corporation as part of a collective group. As people are spending more time away from home on fly-in, fly-out (FIFO), it is important to have a creative and comfortable working environment designed to attract and retain people to allow them to operate at their optimum. I am a passionate advocate of family accommodation and where appropriate, building communities where families can live and work together," adds Nash.

House rental costs in mining regions are also surging, making it less accessible for workers to live there. This places greater importance on workers being provided with attractive and more comfortable on-site living conditions. House rentals are now approaching \$100,000 a year in some remote areas like the Pilbara and Karratha, resulting in more and more workers opting for FIFO arrangements.

COMFORTS OF HOME

Today's modern 'high-tech' villages in remote locations are a far cry from the 'camps' of yesterday. Employees are demanding high quality accommodation and facilities, with all the comforts of home. Some workers are even sacrificing pay for a healthier work-life balance, and managers are being forced to even consider the sex lives of their workers in a bid to keep couples and families satisfied. Such is the shift in remote worker dynamics that many employers are looking outside the box for any advantage to retain good staff. ☺



Left: NewSat satellite dishes provide communications in remote areas.

Technology is not only driving operational efficiencies in remote locations, but assisting with employee retention.

The greatest changes have occurred across communications, entertainment and food. Remote villages now provide family-focused rosters, better accommodation standards with en-suites and mini bars, as well as diverse facilities such as fully-equipped gyms and sporting facilities, movie rooms and pubs for socialising. Some sites even have nutritionists and lifestyle coordinators to help employees maintain a healthy lifestyle while away from home.

HIGH-TECH VILLAGES

Technology has driven the major changes to village entertainment and communications. In everyday life people stay connected via mobile phones and computers. Whether calling or texting a friend, or updating Facebook and LinkedIn, people's desire for communications, service speed and technology has exploded. Employees on remote mine, oil and gas sites now expect nothing less. When they have finished a hard day's work they want to connect with friends and loved ones in real-time, via internet-based applications such as VoIP, Skype, Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn. Whether they are reading newspapers and magazines from their iPad or watching sport, streaming music and downloading movies from their laptop, employees want comparable Internet speeds and the latest entertainment.

Adrian Ballintine, CEO of Australia's leading independent satellite communications company, NewSat Limited says, "we are seeing huge demand from mine sites for digital entertainment platforms that provide 5-star hotel-grade in-room entertainment".

"It used to be just phone calls and internet that miners wanted, but now we provide each worker with a secure entertainment platform, which gives them free-to-air TV, pay-per-view movies, Foxtel, radio, room-to-room communications, Internet and company specific announcements. And this is all enabled via satellite, rivalling many metropolitan solutions," says Ballintine.

GOURMET FOOD AND EXECUTIVE CHEFS

With society's push towards healthy eating, and Australians' broadening taste for world cuisines, villages are now serving a wide range of gourmet food. In addition, the rise in allergies and specific dietary requirements has seen hospitality services inside the villages improve their standards to cater for these conditions.

"An even newer trend is for 'executive chef menus' that are exciting and healthy, as employees want village food standards to match those of restaurants they are accustomed to in the city", says Phil Mears, WA state manager for Cater Care Services that provides catering, accommodation and facility management services for remote operations. "We are finding that meal time is becoming the cornerstone of the village community, as residents sit down and share their meal experience. A positive meal experience encourages social cohesion and a sense of community, which in turn promotes the best possible environment to live, work, play and relax."

THE FUTURE?

It may be surprising that resource companies are spending millions of dollars on modern comforts for employees, but it certainly makes a lot of sense. Not only does keeping employees connected and entertained via satellite ensure their general welfare, it also helps companies attract and retain the best workers in a highly competitive industry. Technology is not only driving operational efficiencies in remote locations, but assisting with employee retention. ●