

# CASE STUDY



## The American Institute for Foreign Study (AIFS)

*“The Health and Wellbeing programme we had in place as a result of working towards the Investors in People Health and Wellbeing Good Practice Award, helped to ensure that people felt valued and nurtured. This sense of being supported is what maintained high levels of staff engagement during times of changes for AIFS.”*

**Heather Barton, Head of Human Resources**

**BACKGROUND:** Health and Wellbeing Award

**Size:** 82

**Sector:** Education

**Location:** London

### THE ORGANISATION

Founded in 1964, the American Institute for Foreign Study is one of the oldest, largest and most respected cultural exchange organisations in the world. With global offices in 15 countries, it organises cultural exchange programmes for more than 50,000 participants each year. Its programmes include college study abroad, au pair placement, camp counsellors and staff, Camper Programme for 7-17 year olds, Summer Institute for the Gifted, US University Preparation, high school study/travel and insurance services. Since 1964, more than one million students and teachers have participated in AIFS programmes worldwide.

### THE STRATEGY

The American Institute for Foreign Study (AIFS) has worked with Investors in People for a number of years and always offered healthcare benefits to its staff. Therefore it was a natural step for AIFS to work towards the Investors in People Health and Wellbeing Good Practice Award in order to adopt a more strategic approach to health and wellbeing for its 82 UK employees.

AIFS had their initial consultation about health and wellbeing with Investors in People in 2006 and were able to work towards the award over the following three years. During this time they implemented a number of initiatives.

- 1. A formal health and wellbeing strategy.**  
First and foremost, they wrote their first health and wellbeing strategy allowing them to pull together all their health and wellbeing policies and practices which up until then had been relatively uncoordinated. Following the same principles of plan, do, review AIFS was familiar with through working towards the Investors in People Standard meant that they began to look at ways in which health and wellbeing could be measured in terms of return on investment through retention, sickness and absence rate figures as well as in terms of motivated and productive employees. They also began to seek feedback from employees so that they could tailor their health and wellbeing provision to staff needs as appropriate.
- 2. Health and wellbeing Week.** AIFS has run a health and wellbeing week for the last two years. This week helps to emphasise the importance of employee wellbeing and offers a range of health and wellbeing activities for employees to try out. From a health perspective this included lunch time walks to the park, fitness assessments and head and neck massages as well as hosting presentations on different health and wellbeing

on different health and wellbeing topics from their health providers. From an emotional and mental wellbeing perspective this included running psychometric testing for all employees to identify their different styles of working followed by team building exercises to enable more effective working between colleagues with different work styles. Both years the week ended with a party to celebrate employees' wellbeing.

- 3. Review of Health Care Providers.** AIFS reviewed their healthcare provision and decided to change their provider. The new healthcare provider operates an online scheme called 'Vitality' which enables employees to earn points for exercise, healthy eating and health education which they can exchange for perks such as subsidised spa visits, gym membership or reduced cinema or Eurostar tickets. Many employees are achieving 'platinum status' the highest level you can achieve based on the number of points you earn. AIFS has published articles on these employees on the staff intranet to raise awareness of the scheme and encourage further participation.
- 4. Increased Social Activities.** AIFS's social committee has organised an extensive programme of social activities from bowling to drumming workshops, sports days in Hyde Park to Easter treasure hunts. As well as improving employee morale, these events often involve participating in healthy activities.

## THE RESULTS

Working towards the Investors in People Health and Wellbeing Good Practice Award, has made sound business sense for AIFS. Staff turnover has gone down from 18% three years ago to 10% over the last two years. Heather explains,

"While arguably the economic climate may have played a part, the reduction in staff turnover figures in 2008 can definitely be attributed to the work we did towards the Investors in People Health and Wellbeing Good Practice Award. Employees feel that we really care about them and that is a huge incentive for them to stay."

Furthermore, sickness levels have remained low during this period with the employees taking on average just 2.5 days off per year. This compares

very favourably to the UK average of 7.4 days per year. As a result of employee take up of the Vitality healthcare scheme and an increasing number of employees achieving platinum status, private medical insurance claims have gone down. In 2009 the AIFS only claimed 80% of their expected level whereas the year before they claimed 91% of their expected level. According to the organisation's staff satisfaction survey, employee engagement levels have also improved by 2% over the last year.

## HEATHER BARTON ADDS

"The Investors in People Health and Wellbeing Award and the framework are very complementary. While the Health and Wellbeing award focuses on one particular area it reflects the Investors in People ethos of continuous improvement. Whether you work with the Award, The framework or both you are making sure that your organisation is constantly looking at ways to improve its performance through people management and as a result employees feel valued.

The whole thrust of the Health and Wellbeing Award and Investors in People in general is continuous improvement. There's no time for an organisation to rest on its laurels!"

Activities AIFS is implementing include:

- Promoting and monitoring take up of lunch time activities
- Extending the staff mentoring programme which has proved so important for employees' emotional wellbeing
- Increasing the variety of fruit on offer for staff (this is as a result of direct feedback from employees)

When asked what advice she would give to an organisation thinking about working with the Investors in People Health and Wellbeing Award, Heather comments, "I would say go for it! Not only will it encourage employees to be happier and healthier but they will feel more engaged and valued making the organisation more productive as a result."