

Case study: Staying Connected at BT

When BT began to look into the issues that affect the separated fathers it employs, it found that there was little support on offer. BT approached the Fatherhood Institute for guidance, and this led to the telecommunications firm embarking on a pilot for Staying Connected, which has been run by forward-thinking Australian organisations to address the myriad issues faced by separated dads. BT, whose 95,000-strong workforce is around 75 per cent male, had a potentially obvious need for such support.

Caroline Waters, BT's director of people and policy said: "In Australia – where Staying Connected originated – it has delivered dramatic results in improved health, confidence and work performance for men struggling after separation from their families. We are the first British company to pilot this with our people."

The half-day workplace programme, run by Fatherhood Institute facilitators, aims to help fathers deal with separation and provides them with useful information on where to go for help, how to communicate more effectively with the mother of their child/ren, and offers practical tips on how to stay connected with their offspring.

To communicate Staying Connected to as many of its employees as possible, BT advertised the pilot on its intranet, BT Today, and invited interested fathers to make contact.

Two sessions were held in Birmingham and London, to give employees from across the UK reasonable access to a venue. Sixteen fathers in total, from senior managers to engineers of all ages, attended. Each of the men had the permission and support of their line manager to be there during a working day.

Jeff Rose, senior business manager, BT, who worked with the Fatherhood Institute to organise the pilot scheme, said: "The attendees were able to talk about issues in front of their peers, which in conjunction with the course content, helped them to open up. Most male psyches are like closed books so it was great for them to see that there is light at the end of the tunnel.

"The toolkit was great and the facilitators from the Fatherhood Institute were great. The course taught the fathers how to manage a traumatic experience – it's a big burden, as separation can be quite acrimonious. Now, the group members support each other, regardless of rank, role or responsibility. And they look forward to coming to work."

Feedback from participants has included:

- "Very worthwhile and beneficial for me."
- "Very helpful to meet other fathers who are at different stages and varying length of time of being separated, and to hear how they have coped with and dealt with separation."
- "To meet other fathers in a similar situation was a great boost to my confidence."

- “The programme had a therapeutic effect – being able to talk openly to other fathers who know what I have experienced and are still dealing with separation.”
- “The programme has given me different tools and ways of thinking about staying connected with my children.”
- “The ‘Staying Connected’ course was excellent and very worthwhile.”
- “If I had been on this course 12 months ago I wouldn’t have had a breakdown and would have been a lot better prepared for separation.”
- “An invaluable experience.”

Feedback from BT:

BT is currently working with the Fatherhood Institute to make the programme available to a wider BT audience. This will form part of BT’s portfolio of ‘family friendly policies and practices, which was already reaping ‘manifold’ rewards, says Waters, who gave the Staying Connected pilot the go-ahead during summer 2010.

Enhanced staff loyalty and motivation, savings on recruitment costs, reduced staff turnover and absenteeism, and attracting and retaining a talented workforce are among the portfolio’s outcomes to date and it is hoped that Staying Connected will eventually bear similar fruit.

“Undoubtedly”, observes Waters, “increased goodwill and a more flexible attitude from staff means better customer service as well as translating into bottom line benefits”.