



Interflow Senior HSE Business Partner Troy Dawson.

Positive change flowing through the water sector

The COVID-19 pandemic has abruptly changed the world and placed stress on the psychological wellbeing of many. In light of National Safe Work Month in October, Australia and New Zealand's water industry has banded together to spotlight this critical issue – with Interflow leading the way to positive change.

As Australian communities begin to control the spread of COVID-19, there has been a call to shift the focus from 'flattening the pandemic curve' to 'flattening the mental health curve', with this year's National Safe Work Month focusing on work health and safety through COVID-19.

Since the onset of the pandemic, workplaces have had to quickly adapt practices to protect against the infection risks associated with COVID-19. Apart from the issues related

to physical health, the virus has also had a profound psychological effect on many.

Throughout the month of October, employees and employers alike were encouraged to acknowledge and reflect on the wide-reaching impacts of COVID-19.

In a bid to highlight the pandemic's 'intangible' ramifications, this year's theme prompted the water sector to discuss workplace health and safety (WHS) through a psychological lens, focusing on how the

pandemic has affected the mental health of Australia's essential workforce. It also highlighted the critical role mental health programs play in keeping workers safe.

Navigating mental health through COVID-19

Prior to COVID-19, the topic of mental health was already a pressing issue for Australian communities, with mental illness affecting one in five Australians in any given year.

In addition to the social, emotional and financial challenges COVID-19 has presented, many frontline workers who provide essential services have experienced public scrutiny and abuse during the pandemic.

This difficulty emphasised the importance of developing a robust WHS and mental health framework to support these people in their line of work. With a workforce of almost 600 people distributed across Australia and New Zealand, leading water infrastructure company, Interflow, is aware of the role a mentally healthy workplace plays in supporting its people through this difficult time.

Interflow's key to addressing mental health within the workplace has been establishing open two-way communication with its people in the office and field. Interflow Senior HSE Business Partner Troy Dawson says the business has adapted its mental health strategy to account for the additional challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic.

"A key focus for Interflow throughout the COVID-19 period has been promoting our Employee Assistance Program (EAP), holding Stop and Reset Toolbox Talks, and providing resilience training as part of our Mentally Healthy Workplace Project," he says.

"Not only do these programs help our workforce feel recognised, engaged and supported – but they enable our people to identify the warning signs that someone may need assistance and then point them in the right direction."

Keeping WHS a priority

The unique size, composition and geographical distribution of Australia and New Zealand's water industry places significant challenges on its members when handling mental health issues. As second wave impacts of COVID-19 continue to emerge, the challenge for employers will be implementing

people-focused solutions to support the mental health of the essential workforce in the long-term.

The water sector has adopted a collaborative approach to solving this issue, promoting the importance of mental health on an industry-wide scale through a combination of working groups, creative initiatives and information sharing.

This camaraderie has not only sparked meaningful conversations about this critical topic, but has highlighted the fundamental desire for connection and community that humans all share.

"The company's approach has dug deep to the heart of the issue, which is that mental health issues can affect anyone at any time," says Mr Dawson.

"It's in everyone's best interests to hold ourselves accountable and prioritise the creation of a mentally healthy workplace for all." •

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Interflow's crew members discussing the importance of mental health on R U OK Day.