

CASE STUDY

## City of Kingston – the top performing council

*City of Kingston has embarked on a journey of continuous improvement to become Insync Surveys' number one performing council in Australia. What does Kingston do differently to stand out from the pack?*

### About City of Kingston

The City of Kingston in the south-eastern suburbs of Melbourne covers an area of 91 km<sup>2</sup> and has an estimated population of around 150,000 people. City of Kingston has over 1400 employees and has used Insync Surveys' Employee Opinion Survey (EOS) since 2008 and Entry Exit Surveys since 2009. In the last four years Kingston has made great strides on their journey to be an employer of choice. In 2012, Kingston achieved the highest overall score compared to all other local government councils in Insync Surveys' benchmark database. Their greatest improvement areas included Leadership & Innovation, Strategy & Planning, and People.

### Why Kingston chose Insync Surveys

Kingston chose to partner with Insync Surveys because of their expertise in stakeholder surveys and their proven experience in the local government sector. Kingston was also seeking a provider that could offer entry and exit survey

measures to provide them with a comprehensive view of the employee life cycle. Program Leader of Learning & Culture John Butler said: "I have had experience with other surveys and I have worked for quite a few organisations over a number of years in this area. I had a favourable opinion immediately of Insync Surveys' tools."

### Survey essential for improving performance

The employee survey process is a key part of Kingston's employer of choice strategy and is a scheduled biennial event in the planning calendar and Council budget. Butler explained: "We know very clearly that we want to be an employer of choice organisation and recognise that people want to work for an organisation where they are happy to provide discretionary effort".

The survey process is closely aligned to The City of Kingston's business planning process. Kingston uses elements of the Business Excellence Framework (BEF) for their council planning process and have a number of reports

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Program Leader of  
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structured around the BEF. Insync Surveys' Employee Opinion Survey complements this structure by measuring employee satisfaction against seven best practice categories:

1. Leadership and innovation
2. Strategy and planning processes
3. Data, information and knowledge
4. People
5. Customer and market focus
6. Processes, products and services
7. Business results

The bi-variate methodology measures both **importance to the employee** and **performance of the organisation**. Belinda Ayres, Manager People & Culture said: "The survey is definitely complementary to the framework; the indicators and the categories of questions within the survey help us to not only understand our service delivery but also employees' perceptions of importance and performance on these key indicators."

Having completed the Employee Opinion Survey over three survey cycles City of Kingston has accrued ample data to analyse trends that in turn inform their business planning. There are specific indicators built in to the business planning and reporting framework that address specific opportunities for improvement, customised for each local work area. Each Manager receives

a report that compares their department's scores to the scores of the whole organisation, highlighting issues that may be specific to just one work group. Managers and General Managers can then work on these issues with their teams and report back on their progress towards achieving these improvements.

### From the outset

It was very important for the executive team to have a stake in the survey process. This executive level buy-in is necessary for effective employee engagement and reflects best practice. High performing organisations take the time to continually monitor organisational performance and areas of concern from their staff.

Furthermore, Kingston had a clear vision of how they were going to embed a culture of embracing employee engagement at all organisational levels. One initiative was to appoint survey champions from within the business. These champions were selected by Managers and spanned all areas and locations. The managers based their choices on who would best represent the organisation's interests, help with communication and encourage and motivate staff to complete the survey. Butler explained: "We didn't want them to be senior; we just wanted staff members who would see the value of the survey and commend the process to their colleagues." Visibility of the process was encouraged through the use of response rate scoreboards for each area and countdowns to the survey close date.

### Turning insights into action

Over the last 6 years of conducting a biennial Employee Opinion Survey, Kingston has improved by four to six percentage points in each of the seven categories, taking them to the top of Insync Surveys' local government benchmark database in 2012.

Regular surveys have allowed Kingston to monitor staff reactions to any improvement efforts and to highlight changing areas of concern. For example, Kingston has learned that ensuring a healthy and safe workplace is an important area for employees. Butler said: "That was pleasing, the survey confirmed to us that health and safety is as important to employees as it is to the organisation." Kingston developed a strategic plan: "Take Care, Take Control" and survey results suggest that performance on this metric has improved. Ayres said: "We already scored highly in terms of the importance and performance of safety but we managed to improve on both according to employee feedback."

It was also clear that there were other areas for improvement and investment. Ayres said: "We know that for us the most important areas for employees relate to workplace safety, work life balance and overall job satisfaction." Importantly, the survey revealed that some of these issues had to be dealt with at a team level. This insight allowed Kingston to encourage departments to consider their individual results and develop their own action plans to address the gaps.

The survey has provided insights into what attracts and retains staff in local government. These results have helped the City of Kingston understand their employer brand and reputation, and identify areas to increase the retention of top talent. Kingston realised they needed to invest in development opportunities and not focus solely on linear progression in order to market to a wider range of potential employees. By addressing this issue, they aimed to reduce overall turnover rates. The number of people with less than two years' service who subsequently stay on has increased, heralding another successful improvement initiative reflected by the survey results.

Kingston has also responded to feedback on the importance of work life balance and job flexibility and in the 2009 enterprise agreement, introduced a 19 day four week cycle. Staff who work an additional two hours per week are entitled to a day off during that four week cycle. Kingston has also introduced a "purchase leave" initiative which allows people to purchase

additional weeks of annual leave. Kingston has also introduced many job share and part time work arrangements so there is access to multiple work modes, encouraging a positive work life balance.

Another area of focus for improving retention and organisational performance was to create better career growth opportunities for employees. The survey insights helped the People and Culture team to integrate career growth opportunities into the Council's annual and four year plans. This took various forms, including conducting regular team meetings to track performance, providing staff with opportunities to act in higher positions and sending a number of staff on internal and external training and development programmes.

### Integrating actions into wider business planning

Integrating the dissemination of results and subsequent action planning into the existing business processes is another key determinant of success. Kingston's executive team gave clear directions to Managers and held them accountable for improvement initiatives based on the survey results. Managers went through a detailed understanding and planning process by looking at the feedback at organisational level and then at departmental level to uncover what it really meant for their team. Rather than viewing the survey as a one-off event, Kingston integrated the results into their business planning cycle and made reporting on initiatives and their success an integral component of Managers' KPIs. Butler said: "I think integrating survey results with business planning was key. If it wasn't integrated, it would be just another set of actions you only



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Manager People & Culture  
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did when you had some time because the organisation didn't think it was important enough to actually be a part of the business."

## Committed to best practice

Kingston is now committed to regularly gaining and acting on staff feedback to improve organisational performance. They measure a number of people metrics across a variety of areas, including retention and employee satisfaction. Kingston's success in improving employee satisfaction and reaching the top of Insync Surveys' benchmark database has created a buzz amongst other councils.

Taking action using the survey results and reporting back to employees demonstrates that Kingston is committed to sustainable high performance and genuinely listening and caring about their staff. It also ensures goodwill towards the survey process and can pay off in higher interest and participation rates, as employees understand that survey results will drive real change. Kingston recorded an 18% improvement on participation rates from the 2010 to 2012

survey. This sends a clear message that employees appreciate and value the survey process and believe that it is important for continuous improvement.

The surveys continue to help Kingston with recruitment, induction and orientation to the organisation because they're able to communicate that they have a range of supportive policies and a culture that people enjoy working in. External comparisons show that they are leaders in benchmarked performance and a great place to work amongst local government organisations.

Butler said: "We think the results of our work with Insync Surveys is contributing to our ongoing culture and our ability to recruit the best people."

Ayres said: "It's a journey, not a quick fix. By the time we do our next survey we'll be around the eight year mark which is a significant commitment for the organisation. There may be change in personnel along the way, but it's about maintaining that focus to be a high performing local government organisation."

## About Insync Surveys

For over 15 years Insync Surveys has supported local government and now works with over 65 councils across Australia to identify trends in employee and community satisfaction and engagement.

Councils choose us because of our local government benchmarks, sector credibility and business excellence framework.

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## Kingston's tips for getting the best out of your employee survey

- 1** Involve all staff before, during and after and appoint survey champions. We had a staff consultative committee and we made sure we went to that committee to tell them what we were doing and why, seek their advice and to keep them up to date throughout the months of the survey process. Staff involvement is more than just telling people and giving solutions, it's getting them to own the process.
- 2** Having a proper communication strategy is vital. We used posters, updates on our intranet, regular emails, Yammer (our enterprise social network) and regular briefings at team meetings and various internal forums.
- 3** Give feedback quickly and openly: After the survey, we ensured results were communicated from organisational to team level and then facilitated discussions at all levels to ensure that results were properly understood.
- 4** Prioritise action planning and implementation after the survey. Integrating action planning into the organisation's strategic plans and encouraging ownership by individual departments is essential for improving performance. Don't just leave the results with them; make it a formal process so actions have a place in business reporting and KPIs.