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Why more companies are considering flexible public holidays

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Would you rather take time off for Lunar New Year than Easter? Or work through the Melbourne Cup public holiday and celebrate Diwali instead?

The concept of flexible public holidays, while still in its infancy, is slowly gathering pace in Australia, as businesses try to become more inclusive – and reach a wider pool of potential employees.

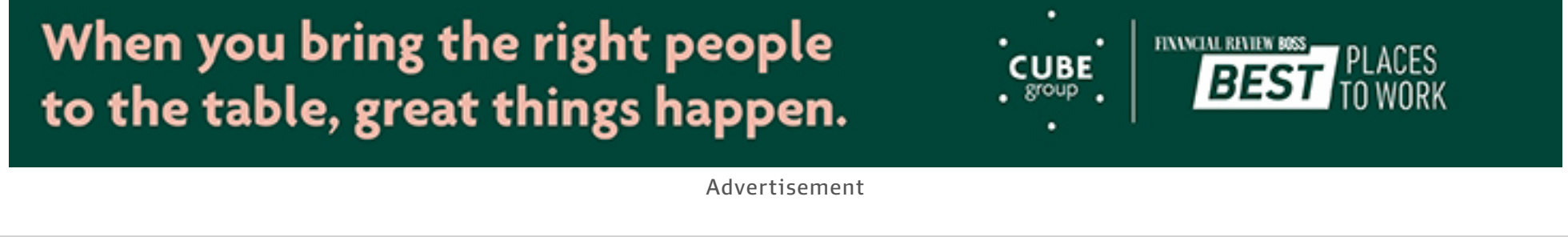


The concept of flexible public holidays is gaining momentum in Australia. iStock

“It’s becoming more and more popular for organisations to think about their workplace policies and to try and make some of them as inclusive and flexible as possible,” says Diversity Council Australia chief executive Lisa Annese.

“I wouldn’t say it’s massively widespread, but I think some organisations are realising that actually this can be a win-win for them and their employees, so they’re engaging with it.”

Martin Dineen, managing director at recruitment agency MJD Executive, agrees.

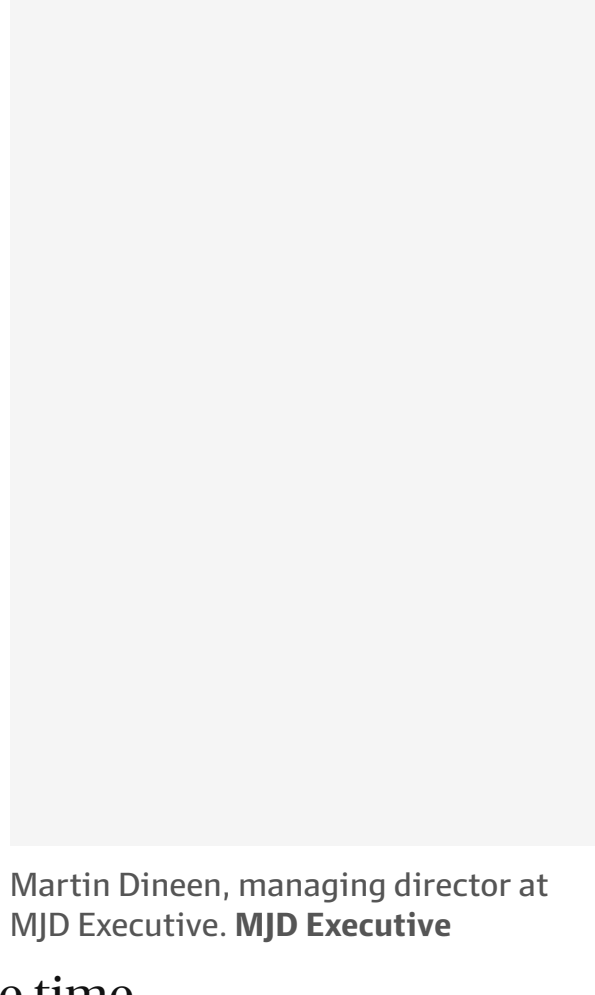


He says some small to medium businesses were first cabs off the rank, but in the past 12 to 18 months he’s seen more larger companies follow suit.

“Post-COVID-19, clients are looking for ways other than financial benefits to attract candidates,” says Dineen.

“Anything around inclusivity where they can show that they have flexibility, where they can show that they’re willing to be open to working with candidates ... seems to be a big attraction point.”

Melbourne management consulting firm Cube Group, which has 30 staff, is just about to formally implement a flexible public holiday policy, after experimenting with the idea for some time.



Martin Dineen, managing director at MJD Executive. MJD Executive

“Because we do public value work and we want to make a positive difference in the world, we see diversity as an area where we can really be a force for good,” says Cube’s chief operating officer Jane Edgar.

She says staff who want to celebrate religious and cultural holidays outside the gazetted public holidays shouldn’t necessarily have to take additional annual leave to do so.

A more flexible policy, says Edgar, is “a way of saying ‘we see you and we respect the differences, the interests and commitments that you have outside of the workforce.’”

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—Jane Edgar, Cube Group chief operating officer

Being an agile firm has given Cube Group the chance to try out different leave concepts, including giving everyone half a day off on Fridays during January.

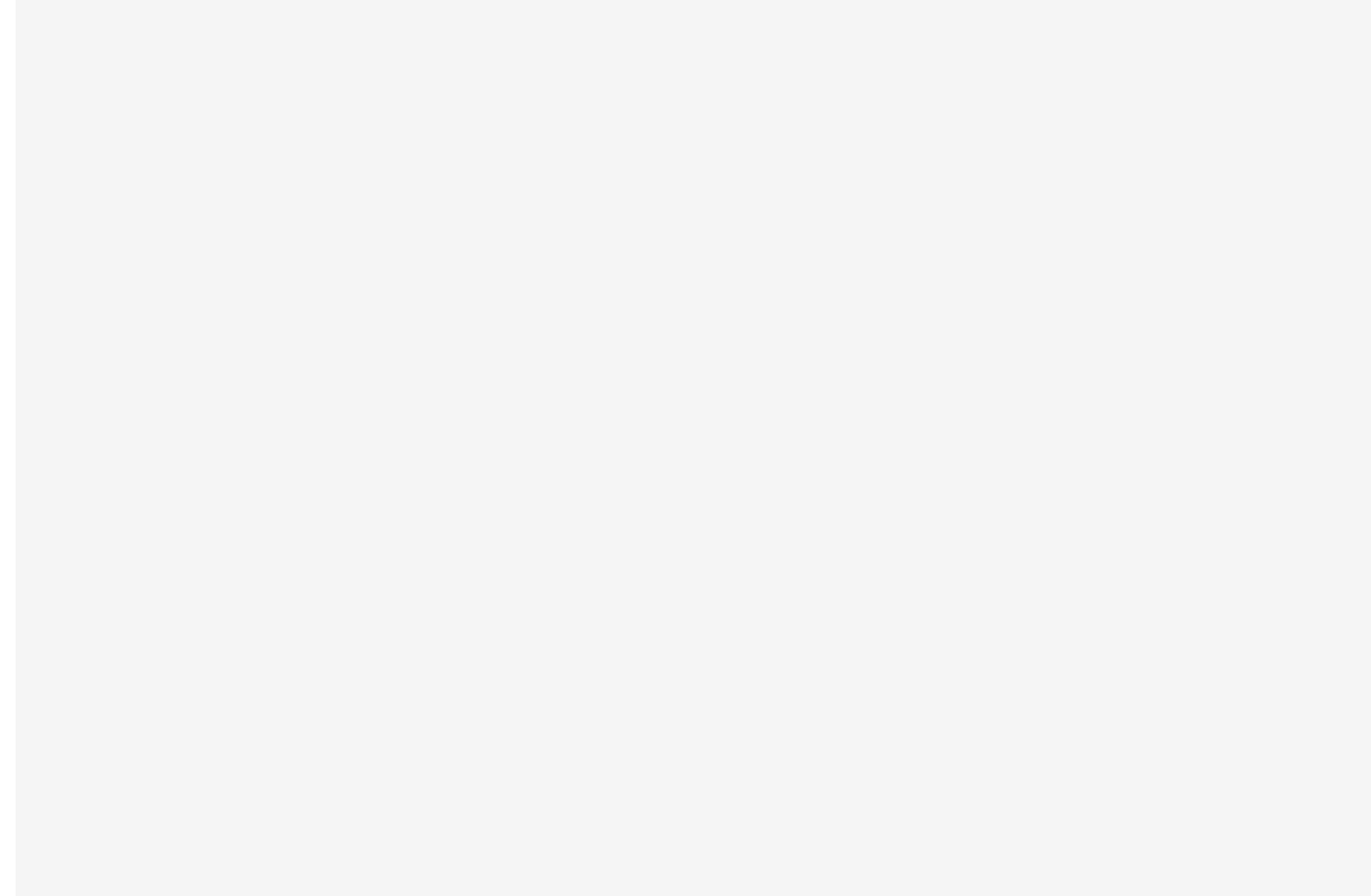
Edgar says the trigger for the public holiday discussion was Australia Day, which many people find contentious. Lunar New Year is another popular time for holiday swap requests.

Research by the Diversity Council shows the positive impact that creating an inclusive culture can have on a business’s operations.

Its 2021-2022 Inclusion@Work Index found workers in inclusive teams were four times less likely to leave their jobs in the next 12 months, and far more likely to be satisfied, highly effective and innovative than those working in non-inclusive teams.

However Annese says the concept of flexible public holidays should never be a one-sided conversation.

“I think sometimes this is discussed in terms of organisations either being completely rigid and not being adaptive at all, or organisations feeling like they can’t say no to requests because that would then mean that they weren’t supportive of diversity,” she says.



Ben Schramm and Jane Edgar, Cube Group. Cube Group

“Actually, what we recommend is that organisations try and aim for a win-win. In every request, you need to consider the needs of the individual and the needs of the business, and then try and find something that works.”

While businesses should not automatically deny a request, they also don’t have to agree to everything, says Annese.

“It would be impractical obviously if you’re the RSL, and you have someone who says I really don’t want to work on Anzac Day.”

Businesses ideally should set up a policy framework with set parameters to make things manageable, she says. For example, will the policy only apply to people who have important cultural or religious obligations, or will it apply to all staff?

Meanwhile Dineen says it’s an employee’s market, but at some point, salaries need to be capped. So it’s then about employers finding other ways to attract great talent, such as being more flexible and inclusive.

He says even three years ago it was a foreign concept for an executive not to have their own assistant sitting right outside their door, for example.

“Now they’ve got used to it and it’s OK, and it’s led the way for things like this to become something that businesses see as more palatable, and it’s not going to really impact their business.”

The prevalence of COVID-19, and isolation, has also led teams to become more multi-faceted and learn to cover for each other – at least for a short period, he says.

Back at Cube Group, Edgar says a flexible public holiday policy requires only a little extra work from management.

“It is no different from people working part-time or being on annual leave and having to plan around it,” she says. “You do it because it’s the right thing to do.”

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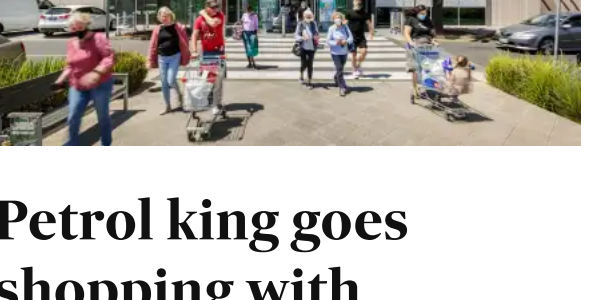


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