



## William Ross

### Architects of staff engagement and cultural celebration

In a fabulous renovated warehouse in the heart of Fitzroy, Melbourne, are the open-plan studio offices of **William Ross Architects**. And within this firm, where dogs are welcome as part of the team, there is an overwhelming sense of positive staff culture, not least of all because the team is made up of both Australian-born and internationally-born staff, and every culture is celebrated equally. One of the ways this is achieved is through the firm's yearly participation in A Taste of Harmony.

We spoke with Office Manager, Leanne Reed, who happily organises the event and advocates for other small businesses to join in!

### How did you hear about A Taste of Harmony?

One of our directors heard about it from a client and came back from a meeting and said to me, "We need to do this!" and that was it. I really liked the idea so I was very happy to take on the responsibility and it has been a huge success ever since we started back in 2013.

### Tell us about your first year

In the first year, we went all out for our A Taste of Harmony experience and even though everyone absolutely loved it, looking back it was too much to sustain! We ran it over two weeks and each staff member had to bring a dish to feed the whole office every day over this period. It was a great way to start.

### How do you celebrate now?

We've settled into just one lunch now, but we try and do it a little bit differently each year. We use the resources on the website, which has lots of great ideas and games for us to mix it up. One particularly memorable year we had a staff member who was very into Eurovision (he was Lithuanian) and convinced us to play Eurovision music throughout our lunch.

### What resources do you use from the website?

We loved the quiz. We already had a daily tradition of doing The Age quiz with our team at lunchtime so the ATOH quiz is a very welcome addition. Also, a benefit of being an architectural firm is that we have big printers and can print a massive world map where our people can plot where they are from.

### How do you get the people who don't have a diverse cultural background involved?

I fall into this category [Australian-born for multi-generations] and this year I brought paella. I told our team that I was embracing my inner Spanish because I really love the culture. But more importantly, the message is that it actually doesn't matter what you bring and why you bring it, it's just about celebrating all cultures.

## What's your advice for people who don't like to cook?

You absolutely don't have to cook and not everyone in our office likes to cook. We had one year where an employee who doesn't cook brought in some bought Asian desserts instead. It didn't cost a lot of money, but it was a wonderful representation of her culture. We loved it.

## You are a busy small business how do you fit it in?

Like all our staff events, it is just a priority for us. To ensure everyone can make it we give plenty of notice and ensure that staff have it in their diaries and that it doesn't clash with meetings or major deadlines. Everyone knows we do it and every single person attends. We set aside a good two hours and even though we lose work time that day, the benefits are enormous as we bond and grow as a team.

## With a small kitchen how do you prepare for all the food?

I do a fridge clean-out the day before so we have as much space as possible. We have a microwave and a sandwich press and, if needed, one of our partners brings in a slow cooker to help warm things up. And the prep is actually part of the fun.

## How do you incorporate the sharing stories aspect?

This all just happens very naturally. Usually it starts in the kitchen with people prepping their food and once the dishes are on the table the conversations naturally flow.

## What are your most memorable dishes?

Rolled fish and potatoes - it looked really unusual and the person who made it thought that no-one would like it. It was unlike anything else I have ever eaten but, like everyone else, I loved it! We also had a Norwegian brown cheese that someone brought in. It stands out as the most unusual thing I have ever eaten because it had such a sweet flavour. It was great to try it.

## What are the memorable conversations?

The one debate that always comes up every year is between the New Zealanders and Australians over the origin of the pavlova!

## Why is A Taste of Harmony so popular?

It has become our most anticipated social event and provides a great sense of belonging. And it is just really good fun! We have a lot of long term staff, including people who have been with the business for over 20 years, and I really believe that it is these types of events that make the difference to our high retention rate.

## What are the other business benefits?

The types of clients that we service are from a diverse range of backgrounds so it is really important for our company to promote that not only are our staff from diverse backgrounds, but that this is something we actively embrace and celebrate. I actually talk about our participation in A Taste of Harmony in our marketing brochure. People respond really well to hearing that we are involved.

