



Frank Weits and Mary Patetsos

We want brand ambassadors

In the competition for workforce, ACH Group is looking to become the 'employer of choice' – led by a CEO from outside the sector.

BY LAUREN BROOMHAM

In a rapidly changing sector, employers will need to take a more commercial approach to their workforce challenges across the organisation to ensure their business stays viable, says ACH Group Chair Mary Patetsos.

Led by its CEO Frank Weits, the South Australian provider is one of the largest in the state with 1800 staff across residential care, home care, retirement living and NDIS.

But like all providers, it is facing a shortage of staff across the board from frontline staff to IT, business transformation, people and culture, and procurement.

Mary recruited Frank, who previously worked in various client service and leadership roles for 12 years at PwC

Australia, in December 2018 to [lead the Not For Profit](#) – and he is now pursuing an ambitious strategy for the business to address these shortages and scale up the business for future growth.

“We have embedded a clear workplace culture. We recognise we need to look after our staff and we have taken that to a level that we’ve never done before,” said Mary.

ACH Group has been working to decasualise its workforce by moving staff to permanent positions and matching hours for staff who were employed with other providers or businesses.

Offering student placements in home care

Every year ACH Group offers around 1,000 student placements, and with its home care business rapidly growing, an integrated placement model allowing students to work across both residential and home and community care was implemented in 2019 – making it one of the first operators to offer placements in the home.

While student placement programs have become less prominent for many providers, ACH Group sees it as an investment in its business – and the future quality workforce.

“In my mind, the journey of the customer starts often in a home care environment but could mature into residential. I have a vision that the one workforce is able to follow that customer throughout the whole journey and it starts with the student awareness,” said Frank.

Mary – who is also a Governing Board Member of the Northern Area Local Health Network, SA Health, a Council Member of the University of South Australia and the Chair of the Federation of Ethnic Communities Councils Australia (FECCA) – says changing the education system to attract young people and offer students placements early on will be vital in the low migration environment.

“There is some work done by Flinders University that shows that if you offer



Frank Weits

placements, people's prejudice against or thoughts, negative thoughts about the sector tend to go away," she said. "I think they realise there's a lot of opportunity."

This is backed up by a survey that showed a change in student perception where prior to placement 40% of students strongly agreed that they were interested in working with older people. Following their placements with ACH Group, more than 68% of students strongly agreed they would consider a career in aged care.

"We shouldn't sell aged care and then create the wrong expectation because you might attract people but they are running out the door as fast you can," he said. "You want to have the people that are genuinely interested in the sector."

ViTA precinct training students and providing jobs

A progressive partnership between ACH Group, SA Health and Flinders University at ViTA located in Adelaide's southern suburbs combines best practice approaches to health and aged care with a focus on teaching and research.

A new partnership model is also being created in Adelaide's northern suburbs, which will see ACH Group and University of South Australia come together to offer student training, direct placement experience and student-led health clinics, alongside residential care in a small-scale built environment.

"This will result in better care for older people and from a public policy perspective, it will connect the dots to form a workforce solution in an area that has historically had high unemployment and low socioeconomic opportunities," said Mary.

Let staff work in public health – with an open door policy

ACH Group has pathways for staff looking to move to another role. For example, cleaners and carers are supported to upskill to grow their careers through a range of different traineeships.

Last year the Group co-developed a six-month online course with University of South Australia, aimed at those who lost their jobs due to COVID-19, to study a



Mary Patetos

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Frank Weits

Professional Certificate in Aged Care at half the cost of regular study. Participants are also encouraged to continue their studies for a Diploma of Aged Care.

ACH Group is also working collaboratively across universities and the acute care sector to potentially allow staff to take extended leave and work for SA Health or in the public health system and vice versa.

"Your workplace is best if people are happy in it," she said simply. "We need to be flexible with workforce and support people with opportunities to feel fulfilled."

ACH Group is also targeting people who have left the sector and want to re-enter and workers looking for a career change as well as migrant organisations.

"We are purposely widening the net to make sure that we are attracting anyone who is interested in a meaningful career in aged care," said Frank.

Staff are the best people to interview new recruits

Another new initiative that is proving successful is an employee referral scheme.

"The best new recruits are those that are recommended by your own colleagues because they arguably are the best advocates," said Frank. "They know what the job is, and they are going to really tell you how it is."

The CEO says this gives potential staff a realistic expectation of what aged care is, noting that a high proportion of those that do leave are usually newer recruits.

Culture – and offering a clear vision for your organisation – is also key, he adds.

"There is a strong purpose in our business – we know what we want to achieve, and people want to be part of that journey. I think that that is the biggest job for CEOs and boards. How do you create a very clear narrative and vision for the future? That's what people want to join – they want to be on the bus to join that journey, and you need to be comfortable that not everyone wants to join that same bus and they will opt out."

ACH Group board sought out CEO from outside the sector

It's a different approach – one that Mary says could only have been achieved by someone from outside the sector.

"The only solution for me was to find a CEO that was not vested in current solutions," she recalls. "He brings a completely different approach."

Frank agrees his professional services background has given him a fresh view of the sector's workforce challenges.

Professional services attracts many people in their early 20s and 30s who then move onto other sectors, he notes.

"Those organisations have a culture where it's not your job as an employer to hold on to people – your job is to give them the best possible experience. If you do that well they will stay with you, but even if they move on, it will pay itself back into the future because people become brand ambassadors for your organisation," he explained.

"Whereas in aged care, I think we still have a task orientation model where I need workers to do a job, therefore hiring people to do a job makes sense. But I want to do more than simply hire people – I want to create brand ambassadors for the business and industry."

Boards need to take more commercial approach

Looking ahead, Mary agrees that all providers will need to be focused on becoming an employer of choice and taking a more corporate approach to their businesses.



Frank Weits

She underlines that the organisation now has not one, but six bottom lines that it must meet.

"The health and care sector is so heavily regulated, and we need to adjust to not only be financially viable and sustainable, but we have to meet consumer expectations that are changing. We have to meet our workforce expectations that are changing. We have to be a good green citizen. We have to have social purpose. We don't pay tax so we have to get the proof that there's a community benefit to what we do," she listed.

"I think it's easier to be on the board of Nike selling runners than it is to run an aged care organisation."

In line with this, the Chair has also refreshed the board with only two of the previous members remaining and three new commercially-minded directors.



Mary Patetsos

"All the traditional type of volunteer board members have gone so it is a completely skilled space," she said. "This board could run a public company with its eyes closed."

Good communication between Chair and CEO is key

Both agree that a professional working relationship and clear communication between the Chair and CEO is key to the successful execution of ACH Group's strategy.

"It's simple," said Mary. "We employ only one person which is the CEO. If we put the wrong person then we're in trouble. But if we don't have the capability, we can make too many mistakes and you can't evolve quickly enough because you're too busy fixing mistakes to move forward. There has never been a time when we have needed better governance more because we need all organisations to be able to adapt really quickly."

Frank notes that in his experience, some board and executive relationships in the sector appear to miss the right balance.

"I have seen boards, saying the CEO is amazing. It's almost like they drink

the Kool-Aid of the CEO, which I think is unhealthy. But I have also seen the opposite happening where the boards almost become management and they control everything, giving no room to play for the CEO. I think both of them are dangerous because it doesn't bring the organisation forward."

The time for all providers to shift their thinking is now, Mary adds.

"If people are panicked enough, they will try something new and this is the time. This is what I say to Frank – whatever you come up within reason, give it a go right now. This is the time to come up with different strategies and solutions."

Mary doesn't like to label this new thinking as innovation however.

"You can't be scared to do something differently than you have done before and if that's what we call it, we call it innovation. But perhaps we need to stop calling it innovation and just say we're just doing business differently."

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