

Scheme backs workers to unite in song

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AS THE festive season approaches, there will be no shortage of people who find themselves singing with their work colleagues. In celebration or sorrow, many will find their voice but few will realise the extent to which they are engaging a largely neglected part of their brain.

But one person who does see the benefits of such artistic endeavours is soprano Tania de Jong, who today will launch Creativity Australia, a not-for-profit organisation that seeks to bring the arts into workplaces.

"The right side of our brains has really been ignored for a long time," she says. "I've always believed that creativity is at least as important as numeracy and literacy, and essentially as human beings we're all innately creative. We're born creative."

One of Creativity Australia's first major projects is to establish workplace choirs, with the ultimate goal of staging a "battle of the corporate choirs" each year. Employers offer a room and an hour a week while Creativity Australia provides training and discounted musical resources — and the prospect of regular performances.

The psychological power of singing in number has come to the fore through the heartwarming Choir of Hard Knocks helping Melbourne's downtrodden find a sense of meaning and camaraderie. The latest Creativity Australia program follows on from de Jong's The Song Room initiative, which has helped 150,000 disadvantaged children discover the joy of music.

De Jong says the benefits for employers are many. She cites evidence showing that each year in Australia, 30 million work days are lost due to absenteeism, with its cost reaching more than \$10 billion.

Initiatives such as a corporate choir can help shrink this cost, as well as reduce turnover. De Jong says it is ideal in companies that have recently undergone a merger, helping workers to bond in a different context.

Creativity Australia is keen to provide a tangible gauge of the benefits provided, and has committed to measuring wellbeing, employee retention and productivity in organisations that sign up for the program.

Already de Jong has won over several high-profile patrons for the organisation, including Dame Elisabeth Murdoch, Hugh Morgan and Allan Fels.

Her agenda is not just to get employees singing, but to activate the creative part of their brain which gets neglected in many white-collar jobs.

"There's an enormous amount of research which suggests creativity in the workplace — that is, creative thinking and creative leadership — really can transform a workplace so that employees really are engaged; they are happy and healthy.

"We sort of think creativity is for artists, but in actual fact it's for everybody. And if we want to be an innovative nation coming up with inspiring new ideas and solving problems effectively, then we need to learn to harness and develop creative ideas, and we can only do that through actually being creative, not only talking about innovation and creativity, but actually doing it."

One business to sign up has been the Sofitel hotel, where the program has been given a twist: the choir there will include not just hotel staff, but new migrants from housing estates in Collingwood and Fitzroy.

<http://www.creativityaustralia.org.au>