

ride to work day 2009

Nine to five

*Forget cabs and expensive CBD car parks, bikes are a better choice for conducting business. **Helen Millicer** investigates how workplaces are adopting bikes from nine til five.*

Picture this: You are riding along a road, gentle wind in your hair, sun on your back and a gleeful grin on your face. No, it is not the weekend; you are coasting three kilometres to an appointment in your suit and you are whizzing past drivers seething with frustration because they are stuck in a traffic jam. This is life on a work bike. And it is a good one.

While business on bikes is not yet the norm, it is accelerating. Bike fleets are emerging as another transport option for staff doing their job, going to meetings and sometimes commuting between home and work.

But how does a bike fleet work? Like car fleets, bike fleets come in all shapes and sizes. A combination of these fleet systems might be just right for your workplace.

Bike squads

In these sorts of bike fleets riding is part of the job and a core activity for the organisation. Victoria Police, Ambulance Victoria and St John's Ambulance all started bike squads in the mid-1990s. They recognise that riders are uniquely able to get into congested areas or large crowds at major events more quickly and safely than personnel on foot or in cars or large vehicles. These bicycle fleets are now multiplying around Australia. As Wayne Deakes, Coordinator at St John Ambulance says, "our volunteer riders pair up to form teams, fish a bike out of the store, adjust seats and helmets then set off as required around the festival or major event. The 20 sturdy bikes are only used for St John's activities, and they form a core part of our program and service to the community."



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Equity bike pool fleets

Another type of bike fleet could be called the equity bike pool, because all staff have equal access to book and use the bike. These bikes are owned by the workplace, are generally only used during work hours, and no one person is designated custodian.

These bike pools are at the Cities of Maribyrnong in Melbourne (five bikes) and Brisbane (six bikes) and the Little Creatures bars in Fremantle, WA and Fitzroy, Victoria (10 at each site). The key to success is to ensure the bikes are accessible, well-maintained and that use is supervised. Otherwise, as one council staff person bemoaned, “pool bikes tend to be a bit sad with flat tyres and lost keys. It gets too hard and frustrating.”

Miles Hull and colleagues at the **Little Creatures Brewery** were so inspired by the bike culture in Paris and Copenhagen they decided to set up fleets of 10 branded bikes for their communities in Fitzroy and Fremantle. Miles’ marketing nous is evident when he says, “Customers, tourists, staff, anyone can come in and grab a bike for free for sightseeing, shopping, going to meetings, whatever ... We take care of the bikes; they are stored here inside the bar and are frequently serviced. Often all 10 bikes are out and then back by nightfall when their riders end their day with a drink at our bar.”

Priority bike fleets

The opposite sort of bike fleet could be called the priority fleet, where work bikes are designated to a custodian and are also available for booking by work colleagues. The custodian (postie, building inspector, health worker) generally has good usage levels, i.e. 20km per week during work hours, and sometimes the bike is purchased to their size and requirements. The custodian keeps track of bookings and condition, and liaises with the fleet manager on maintenance and replacement. Some workplaces also allow commuting between work and home.

Under this system there tends to be a strong cycling culture and camaraderie, and a larger number of both bikes and riders – as at City of Yarra, Melbourne (24 bikes), Australia Post Victoria (250) and Australian National University in ACT (70). As Kate Simnett, Sustainable Transport Officer at City of Yarra states, “our experience with this sort of bike fleet is that bike riding becomes contagious within teams and people follow the lead and inspiration of the custodian. We are meeting our objectives of efficient travel, healthy workforce and reduced carbon emissions.”

Even though only established in 2006, the **Australian National University** staff custodian bike fleet has grown from 20 bikes to 70 to meet demand. The ANU has met its primary goals – to reduce the environmental impact of intra-campus travel and provide diversity in transport across the 145ha site. As Adam Taylor, Environment Officer – Transport, ANUgreen, says “The popularity of the bikes and an average of 780km per year per bike certainly suggests people think it is cool to ride.” Applying this kilometres-per-year figure to the carbon emissions for standard Australian cars reveals

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the bike fleet was responsible for cutting greenhouse emissions by 10 tonnes per year (National Greenhouse Account Workbook, 2008).

The health benefits of cycling have been well recognised in numerous studies, and in 2008 were highlighted in a report launched by Federal Minister Peter Garrett. *Cycling: Getting Australia Moving* estimated that cycling currently saves the government over \$227m in health costs alone. Co-author Associate Professor Chris Rissel from Sydney University confidently states, "Building cycling into everyday transport is an easy way to be sufficiently physically active without having to restructure your whole life or find time to exercise."

A number of studies have identified benefits to workplaces encouraging cycling to work; a 1999 report, *Cycle South East: Integrated Cycle Strategy for South East Queensland* by Queensland Transport and Main Roads found "staff who cycle are more punctual and take less sick days due to improved health." In 1993, *Bikes Not Fumes: The emission and health benefits of a modal shift from motor vehicles to cycling*, by Cyclists Touring Club, Surrey, UK found that absenteeism can be reduced by up to 80% by encouraging cycling to work.

These benefits apply for bike riders in general, but what about the benefits of bike fleets to workplaces? Not only do employers share in the personal health, economic, social and environmental benefits of their bike riding employees, they also enjoy added benefits as employers. At Australia Post Victoria, where there is a 250-strong postie bike fleet, key benefits are speedy delivery of post in congested suburbs and lower costs. On costs, Fleet Manager Glen Shilling stated, "We have had bike fleets for longer than car fleets – since 1898 when we started with the Safety Bike – and bike costs are so small a proportion of our total fleet budget, they do not register a blip."

Other potential benefits to employers include:

- reduced stress levels in the workplace: employees clear their heads whilst riding between meetings;
- reduced absenteeism, higher productivity and improved morale;
- further cost savings: car parking costs; parking and speeding fines are no longer payable.

Reimbursement for bike use

If you haven't managed to start a bike fleet up in your workplace yet, you can still benefit from riding your own bike between work appointments. You would expect to be reimbursed if using your car for work, yet few cyclists do the same. It is satisfying to learn that there are standard rates in Employment Awards that you can draw upon.

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This is great if you are the only rider in your workplace or your employer will not create a bike fleet. Significantly the City of Yarra has both a bike fleet and a reimbursement policy per kilometre travelled. No wonder the City of Yarra scoops the pool with 15.2% of approx 700 staff and councillors riding bikes – that's over 100 people.

The Victorian Local Authorities Award, 2001, states the private bicycle reimbursement rate is 11.56 cents per kilometre. If you do not come under an award, then negotiate this rate as a cheaper alternative to your car.

But this singular example does fall short of international benchmarks and is hardly incentive for the whole Australian workforce. Indicatively our Australian Tax Commissioner, Ken Henry, has publicly stated that the current tax review (announced in May 2008) will ensure that our Australian Taxation System works for a lower carbon future in line with the Carbon Pollution Reduction Scheme. Certainly many public submissions to the Review call for incentives for work bike riding.

Hopefully Australia will follow international trends. Since 1999 all cyclists in the UK have been entitled to reimbursement tax-free from their employers for work-related travel. If their employer does not pay up, they can claim it as a tax deduction (Inland Revenue leaflet RI 176 Green Travel Agenda). The UK government also provides tax-free benefits to employers for equipment costs. And in January this year, the new US Federal Bike Commuter Act enabled employers to give a \$20 monthly tax-free credit to bike riders for bike-related bills.

How to start rolling?

The stories of these workplaces build a convincing argument for introducing bike fleets to more workplaces. But how would you start your own? The first step is to find colleagues keen to ride for work. Together you can find answers for the questions your boss is sure to ask: what is your motivation for starting a bike fleet? And what are the benefits for the company (particularly the cost-benefits)? Which bike fleet system will suit? Presenting a well thought-out case is important. If your boss seems overwhelmed by the prospect of designing a bike fleet in-house, see the box below for companies who offer every kind of assistance in starting your bike fleet. And remember, the key lesson when designing a successful bike fleet is this: it must be as easy for employees to jump on a bike that hums along, as it is to grab the keys and jump in a car.

In-house or outsource?

These specialist companies have sprung up to cater for organisations wanting to provide bikes for staff or work activities.

www.bikes4work.com.au

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www.onefreebike.com

[www.bikes@work.com.au](mailto:bikes@work.com.au)

For more information

www.bv.com.au (Search: employers) Dutch report: Bike riders take less sick leave

www.bv.com.au (Search: tax advantage) Tax advantage for bike riders

www.travelsmart.gov.au/toolkits/bikefleets a cost-benefit calculator

www.travelsmart.gov.au/toolkits/bikefleets/pubs/bikefleets.pdf a guide: "How to set up a successful bike fleet"

www.taxreview.treasury.gov.au the Australian government's current tax review

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