

**New Solar Rebate For NSW**  
This \$3700 Federal Rebate Is Now Available to NSW Homeowners. Check to See If You Qualify.

NSW Rebate Guru

# Government, education, NFP: Checking staff pulse keeps ACER in front

**Beverly Head**

Apr 21, 2021 - 12:03am

Save Share

The AFR Boss Best Places to Work awards recognise organisations that are pioneering new ways of working and pushing the boundaries when it comes to workplace policies and practices. These prestigious awards are underpinned by rigorous scientifically proven methodology and the assessment methodology is outlined [here](#).

In 2021, the list has been split into 10 industry-specific categories. These are some of the Best Places to Work in the Government, Education and Not-For-Profit category.

## AFR BOSS Best places to work Government, education & not-for-profit

TOP 10 companies	Employees
1. Australian Council for Educational Research	449
2. Maths Pathway	51
3. Nillumbik Shire Council	475
4. Korowa Anglican Girls' School	155
5. Relationships Australia NSW	451
6. Royal Far West	230
7. GSI Australia	165
8. Melbourne Water	1200
9. SGCA	208
10. Achieve Australia	1362

SOURCE: FINANCIAL REVIEW

### 1. Australian Council for Educational Research – 449 employees

As the crow flies, it's 18,244 kilometres from Melbourne to St John in Canada. It is also the distance that the 449 staff at the Australian Council for Educational Research managed to walk during one of the wellbeing initiatives that the organisation launched in response to COVID-19.



**Shop Steelcase Gesture**  
Save \$100 on purchases above \$600. Use code "SAVEMORE". Shop now at [au.steelcase.com](#)

Steelcase Australia

ACER, named the best place to work among government, education and not for profit entities, is an independent non-government organisation with offices around the world.

Its staff focus on the development of evidence-based education policy, testing and products – so perhaps not surprisingly when the pandemic struck it went looking for evidence of how its staff were coping.

It introduced pulse check surveys to track the wellbeing of staff, and achieved increases in wellbeing, safety and communications scores through 2020 – cementing the approach for the future.

Jo Brown, ACER's human resources director, says that besides a quantitative element, the pulse surveys encouraged people to include additional comments in free-text responses.

One of the early pulse surveys revealed staff felt that they weren't active enough because they were cooped up in the house and unable to engage with colleagues as much as they would like.

"You don't get that from a metric," says Brown.

In response ACER launched its Step Challenge. There were no targets or limits, but ACER did launch an app, a leader board and prizes so that people could form teams and see who was moving and who wasn't – even the CEO was doing it, he was taking his calls while on his walks," says Brown who adds that by her calculation the staff walked the equivalent of Melbourne to St John during the challenge, which will be repeated shortly.

While it was free text that surfaced employees' desire to engage with one another, Brown says that the pulse surveys also checked on engagement, communications, staff commitment, turnover and tenure.

She says that staff at the organisation have always worked autonomously and have the trust of colleagues and management. When COVID-19 meant those people had to work remotely, that autonomy and trust was critical as it allowed people to continue their "meaningful and interesting work – making a difference in people's lives," Brown says.



She says meaningful and interesting work combined with flexible work arrangements and policies, a pleasant, well-resourced work environment and adequate remuneration are the strands needed to weave a good workplace. During COVID-19, being well-resourced meant having access to technology to allow "highly collegial interactions" regardless of where an employee was based and working from.

The experience has, Brown says, prompted increased communications through new channels with equity of access. "Where before we might have had in-person meetings that not everyone could attend because they are in a different office – now we have that consistent communication and equality so that everyone can dial in at the same time and participate in the same way." This, she says, will likely continue particularly for quarterly staff forums and information sessions.

There's also been a shift in the focus that management places on staff achieving work-life balance and managing different challenges such as child care and travelling times. In a post COVID-19 world, Brown says: "OH&S and employee wellbeing – both virtual and physical – is paramount, but now it looks slightly different."

A hybrid work model is emerging at ACER – with people sharing their time between office and home – and is widely accepted, she says, as "productivity has been fantastic over the last 12 months."

### 2: Maths Pathway – 31 employees

Melbourne-based Maths Pathway offers an online teaching and learning model designed to transform how maths is taught in schools. When staff had to switch to a work-from-home model during the pandemic, they were encouraged to use their sick leave to promote mental health, take an extra day's leave and enjoy catered morning teas, with 'R U OK' snack boxes sent to each staff member's home – prompting a spike in the measured "happiness" scores of staff.

Richard Wilson, co-founder and visionary, says COVID-19 has sparked permanent workplace changes.

**Teachers are required onsite only when they are physically teaching face-to-face. This is a disruptor to the working lives of teachers who have never had the trust and autonomy to act as professionals.**

"As working from the office has become once again possible, we decided not to revert to our pre-COVID arrangements. Instead, we asked all our teams: what actually worked in the last year, and what didn't?"

"The result has been an entirely new structure to our office and working arrangements, and has been a great opportunity to discover surprising ways to promote both productivity and passion, which we see as having equal importance."

### Rank 3: Nillumbik Shire Council – 475 employees

Nillumbik Shire Council, in Melbourne's North East, has implemented a HR business partner model with a business/solutions focus intended to create a better employee experience.

Vince Lombardi, acting CEO, says staff now report high levels of satisfaction, wellbeing – and say they feel supported in the workplace.

"We saw the benefit of this approach during the COVID pandemic. It was integral to helping us pivot to a very different way of working, without missing a beat.

"It enabled us to move quickly to put in place initiatives such as having a group of staff trained as mental health first aiders – at last count we had 42 – and a range of other supports to assist staff in their jobs and in their all-round wellbeing."

### 4: Korowa Anglican Girls' School – 155 employees

Based in Melbourne's Glen Iris, Korowa Anglican Girls' School has implemented flexible working hours for its teachers in a sector not known for flexible work practices.

Korowa has been able to provide a flexible, staggered structure to the day. Teachers are required onsite only when they are physically teaching face-to-face. This is a disruptor to the working lives of teachers who have never had the trust and autonomy to act as professionals.

Korowa has seen onsite attendance of teachers range from 70-90 per cent, all deadlines continue to be met, and students report favourably on the support and access they have from teachers.

### 5: Relationships Australia – 451 employees

Relationships Australia NSW's COVID-19 response balanced staff safety with client safety and need.

RANSW implemented a new model of service support called Time 2 Talk, which provided a free service to the community, offering support, connection, information and referral during the pandemic and addressing the issues experienced through social isolation and relationship challenges arising from lockdown.

This initiative provided RANSW's clients with a valuable service but also provided meaningful work to employees.

### 6: Royal Far West - 230 employees

Children's charity Royal Far West modernised its workplace, ensuring that when COVID-19 struck, 80 per cent of its services were up and operating within two weeks.

### 7: GSI Australia - 165 employees

Barcode specialist GSI adapted to COVID-19 by embracing a "work the hours that work for you, as long as you get the job done" mentality. This led to 95 per cent of employees reporting they were as productive or more so when working from home.

### 8: Melbourne Water - 1200 employees

Melbourne Water's wellbeing program supported employees' emotional, physical and psychological wellbeing throughout the pandemic and during lockdowns.

### 9: SGCA - 208 employees

St George Community Housing's Leadership Journey initiative helps to develop self-awareness, a coaching approach and a customer-centric culture.

### 10: Achieve Australia - 1362 employees

Disability services provider Achieve Australia redesigned its culture, with leaders making commitments both individually and as a group. Working groups also have stirred to improve recognition and wellbeing initiatives.

**Expert advice for getting ahead in the new world of work left by COVID-19**  
Sign up to our weekly newsletter.

Sign Up Now

Save Share

Like this article

#### READ MORE AND FOLLOW TOPICS

- Best places to work
- Workplace
- AFR special

#### LATEST IN WORKPLACE

- Service ethos shapes an ideal workplace**  
May 3, 2021
- Why companies need to become more like soccer teams**  
May 2, 2021 - Sally Patten
- Atlassian says staff can limit days in the office to only four a year**  
Apr 30, 2021 - Bianca Hesky
- What Zoom told Atlassian about the future of video meetings**  
Apr 29, 2021 - Sally Patten
- Pandemic triggers mid-career crises**  
Apr 29, 2021 - Patricia Durkin

#### MOST VIEWED IN WORK AND CAREERS

- How to start thinking like a CEO**
- Strategy to get more women in STEM jobs falls flat**
- Strategy to get more women in STEM jobs falls flat**
- Service ethos shapes an ideal workplace**
- Why companies need to become more like soccer teams**
- Service ethos shapes an ideal workplace**

#### Financial Review Magazine

- BOSS**
- LIFE & LEISURE**
- RICH LIST**

#### BOSS

- How to start thinking like a CEO**  
Sally Patten
- Young gun directors shake up the boardroom**  
Jill Dupliss
- Six start-ups you should know about**

#### Life & Leisure

- How to make Mother's Day count**  
1.9k ago - Fiona Carstairs
- Stop pinning for Italy and head to the Adelaide Hills**  
Miranda Ward
- Melbourne's newest hotel is a time machine to the '70s**

#### RICH LIST

- Young Rich Lister opens digital agency to take on global behemoths**  
Miranda Ward
- COVID-19 trends help property billionaire's \$88b pitch**
- How Rich Listers buy and sell property (and try to keep it secret)**