

# Social Firms Australia

creating accessible employment for people of all abilities

Finding work can be tough for those living with disadvantaged circumstances, but can you imagine trying to get a job if you've got a serious mental illness as well? People with a psychiatric disability are one of the most disadvantaged groups in Australia today in terms of work, with a 75 per cent unemployment rate. They face workforce challenges that can be insurmountable unless they're helped along. This is where Social Firms Australia (SoFA) can make a difference.

SoFA is a non-profit organisation set up in Melbourne in 2004 to create employment opportunities for people with a psychiatric disability or other severe disadvantage through the development and support of social firms. A social firm is a real business with social and economic objectives that provides good-quality jobs to people with a mental illness or other disadvantage in a supportive, integrated working environment.

Based on the Social Firms UK model, SoFA is committed to improving the quality of life as well as the social and economic integration of Australians living with a psychiatric disability or other disadvantage. To that end, it is working to create a social firm sector in Australia.

Originating in Italy in the 1960s, the social firm model is used widely across Europe today operating commercially viable businesses. It allows the necessary modifications to be built into the design of a workplace, and it stipulates that, as an integrated workforce, a firm should employ at least 25 per cent of staff who have a disability or other disadvantage. Every worker is paid the award rate and receives the same work opportunities regardless of their circumstances. And they all share the same rights and obligations at work.

To date, several Victorian enterprises have received SoFA's support. SoFA will continue to work in Victoria and is also searching interstate for businesses to transition, acquire or convert into social firms. It's also looking for opportunities via SVA's Social Enterprise Hubs, three-way partnerships between SVA, local government and business that provide services, networks and business opportunities to firms employing marginalised people.

The existing social firms in Victoria include:

- *Cleanable*: a start-up commercial cleaning services business.
- *Bonsai - The Imagination Tree (Bonsai)*: a wholesale nursery business. The acquisition of this existing business to form a social firm pioneered a partnership funding approach that included private, philanthropic and government funding and commercial debt.
- *Project 174*: an emerging social firm with a commercial offering of architectural tile and mosaic designs.
- *Outlook Environmental*: leaders in waste management and resource recovery solutions.

### **WHY SVA BACKS SOFA**

SVA supports this partnership because the social firm model is proven internationally to not only provide meaningful employment opportunities for those marginalised from the workforce but also generate robust commercial businesses. The partnership is committed to the vision of establishing a supported network of social firms in Australia. It demonstrates how the commercial and social sectors can come together to create an innovative solution for those furthest from employment.

### **GROWTH**

SoFA and SVA have worked together as a joint venture since 2004. Together we have provided information, support and resources to organisations that wish to set up social firms. The partnership brings together a unique blend of social, commercial and practical expertise with the common aim of establishing an integrated sector of social firms in Australia.

SVA contributes commercial advice, business consulting, funding, training and education, mentoring and access to pro-bono services.

### **PERFORMANCE HIGHLIGHTS**

SoFA has seen growing demand for support from its organisation, primarily from the disability employment network and community sector organisations. In the 2006/07 financial year, 23 new positions were created for people with a mental illness in three social firms. SoFA also organised four Open Days at the Bonsai social firm to demonstrate real-life modifications in the workplace and provided support and training to staff in the social firms.

### **WHAT'S AHEAD**

SoFA has experienced steady and measured growth since its inception in late 2004 through three-year infrastructure grants from philanthropic trusts. With the expansion of its funding base and continued strong interest from Government, SoFA forecasts significant growth for the next couple of years as the social firm network rolls out nationally.