

What's It Like to Fly-In Fly-Out? The Pros and Cons of FIFO in the Mining Sector

With the continuing skills shortage in mining even more evident when mine sites are more remote, the option of fly-in fly-out (FIFO) has become ever more popular right across the industry.

However, in order to attract the best talent companies need to remain flexible and offer both FIFO and residential options for their workforce. Lucy Donald of WRS, a specialist in resourcing for the worldwide mining community, explains, "Of course, a lot of companies like to keep parity across the board and therefore offer only one option but WRS have found the companies that offer both are more likely to attract and more importantly retain the best. In the current candidate driven market this should be a real consideration in any strategy focused on recruiting new or retaining existing industry scarce skills."

Is FIFO suitable for everyone? Lucy summarises the key factors of this style of working, "There is no denying that FIFO workers can command significant salaries, but this comes at a cost on work/life balance in many cases. With most FIFO roles, they are based on a roster or rotation system. This can vary greatly from 9 days on/ 6 days off to 9 weeks on 2 weeks off. It really does depend on a combination of the company and geographic region. More remote mining sites may stipulate longer term rosters, for example in Africa we typically see an average of 6 weeks on and 3 weeks off. This is due to the increased time and costs of flying workers to and from remote areas. Sites closer to city areas and major airports often allow shorter rosters such as 5 days on/ 3 days off."

She goes on to explain, "FIFO workers are also expected to work long shifts. A 12-hour shift is common but you may be asked to work even more hours - 18-hour shifts are not unheard of. While on-site, shifts are scheduled 7 days a week. Month on, month off rosters may allow one day's rest every second weekend, while most require staff to work every day while on site. Needless to say, if it's important to spend regular time with your family, then FIFO is not necessarily going to work in the mid to long term and we are seeing some individuals who choose to take a pay cut to avoid having to live the FIFO lifestyle. "

Whatever rotation you may find yourself offered the reality is you are going to be away from family in a male dominated environment potentially for lengthy periods of time. The upside to that though is that you then do get plenty of quality time when you are at home. There is no denying this style of working does have an impact, especially on families, however the mining companies that offer this work style do generally try to offer enticing facilities for those workers living on site.

Lucy explains another incentive for workers considering FIFO, "This style of working can be a great option for Europeans and people based in Asia as, providing they are out of the country for a certain amount of time, this option can be very tax efficient. The same cannot be said for Australians though as their Government implemented a new law in 2008 which meant all expats who flew in and out of the country still had to pay their taxes in Australia. This was in order to encourage Australians to choose domestic assignments rather than international ones, especially at a time when Australia was witnessing its biggest skills shortage within the sector. Now, with recent commodity prices plummeting and mines closing down, this tax law has made working overseas much less attractive to Australians, unless it is residential work situation whereby they can declare themselves a non-resident in Australia and pay much lower taxes in other countries."

Pros of FIFO

FIFO can definitely benefit both mining companies and mine employees. For mining companies, FIFO facilitates employment of skilled individuals who would otherwise be unwilling to relocate to remote areas. For employees, the benefits can include:

- Financial rewards. Mining companies pay significant travel and living allowances on top of excellent base salaries. In addition, tax concessions may apply for workers in some regions.
- Live anywhere. Skills shortage means mining companies are willing to fly workers with rare skills from just about any location.
- Extended time off. Depending on the type of roster you work, long breaks inbetween shifts give people the chance to travel, pursue hobbies and spend quality time with friends and family.
- FIFO employees can change jobs with minimal disruption to their family and home life. A constant home base and flexible worksite makes it easy for people to change jobs, work assignments and employers to facilitate career growth and secure new income when a project ends.

Cons of FIFO

FIFO creates challenges for the workers themselves, but also for the friends and family they leave behind. These can include:

- Extended periods away from your family and friends
- Body clock adapting to change in roster from family time at home to work roster time and long shifts
- The highs of coming home versus lows of leaving for work
- Relationship strain from being out of the home
- Roster changes that make it hard to plan social events in your home base

Lucy summarises the FIFO life, “Whether the pros of FIFO outweigh the cons comes down to personal lifestyle choice. Many people do enjoy it and make it a long term career, whilst for others they choose to make it a short to mid-term option in the hope of making fast financial gains.”