

# Employer Case Study

## Downtown Bellevue



## Symetra Financial Moves to Downtown Bellevue

In the summer of 2005, Symetra Financial made the decision to move its headquarters and approximately 1,000 employees from Redmond to Bellevue, becoming one of the largest private sector employers in the city. Their new location provides easy access to bus routes, HOV lanes, and a pedestrian corridor, and is within walking distance of the many amenities of Downtown Bellevue, including restaurants, shops and museums.



"We were really fortunate that our new offices were right across the street from the Bellevue Transit Center--so it was much easier to 'sell' the bus as a good option."

- Peg Randles, Asst. Director,  
Corporate Operations

### Getting Started

Before Symetra's move from Redmond, Assistant Director of Corporate Operations Peg Randles and Assistant Vice President Nancy Green developed a transition team to help prepare the staff. They organized a series of relocation fairs that started four months prior to the move. This allowed employees ample time to consider their commute options for the new location. Local transit agencies were invited to send representatives to the fairs to provide one-on-one assistance with planning commutes by bus and options for joining existing vanpools or forming new ones.

For the first event, more than 200 people lined up before the event doors opened, and employees came with many commute concerns. These ranged from the simple ("What route do I take?" and "Are there subsidies available?") to the true head-scratchers ("Can I bring my coffee on the bus?" and "What on earth is a vanpool?"). However, through personalized information provided at this and subsequent events, nearly everyone at Symetra had their transportation options chosen by the time they moved into the new office. Now all the team had to worry about was navigating the elevators, finding their workstations, remembering their new phone numbers, and deciding between the myriad options of where to eat for lunch.

### Program Elements

- Partially subsidized ORCA Business Passport program, supporting employees using non-drive alone commute options.
- One free parking day each month in the Symetra garage for employees who commute by bus, vanpool, biking or walking, providing flexibility for employees who have occasional need to drive.
- A Zipcar business account, providing employees with access to a car when needed for business purposes.

### Best Practices

#### Develop commute solutions before making the move

Before moving to Bellevue, Symetra's commute program managers worked with employees one-on-one to find a commute method, eliminating first day jitters.

#### Offer ORCA Business Passport

Symetra offers all of its employees ORCA Passport, which provides unlimited rides on all of the regional transportation agencies, as well as a vanpool subsidy and guaranteed rides home. This benefit makes commuting by non-drive-alone modes much more attractive to employees.

#### Engage your employees

Randles and her team are available on an ongoing basis to help employees find their best possible commute method.

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### Challenges

According to Randles, the biggest difficulty of the Symetra relocation was adjusting to parking in the high-rise garage. Employees reported that the parking spaces were very small and that there were columns to back into at every turn, rendering it a dicey experience. Parking was also very limited and expensive, particularly compared to the free parking that had been offered at Symetra's Redmond location. However, Randles and her team were able to parlay this ostensible challenge into a positive, by using it as an incentive for employees to try other modes of commuting.

### Program Evaluation

- Symetra Financial is highly satisfied with the outcome of their move to Downtown Bellevue, and with their commute trip reduction program in general. Currently, of the 759 Symetra employees who responded to a survey in 2011, 34% ride the bus, 17% are part of a carpool or vanpool, and around 3% walk or bike to work. Symetra's drive-alone rate continues to go down, from 44% in 2007 to 39% in 2011.
- Symetra has embraced its new role as one of the largest private sector employers in Bellevue, and has given back to the community that it now calls home. Symetra is the title sponsor for the Bellevue Family 4th, and the organizer of the annual Symetra Week of Service.
- Symetra continues the practice of asking new employees to think about their commute choices even before they begin their first day of work. The company includes a commute brochure in new-hire packets, and addresses commute options as part of employee orientations. Symetra encourages flexibility with regard to commute modes, and reports that employees often use several different commute modes over the course of the week or month, depending upon their particular need or situation.

### Commute Program Awards and Designations

**2009 Commuter Challenge Diamond Award**

**2011 Best Workplaces for Commuters**