CALLING ALL OPERATORS

WATER FOCUS

With over 70 service providers managing an asset base of almost $40 billion and employing almost 6,000 workers, the Queensland water industry plays a significant role in providing safe, secure and sustainable urban water services to 4.9 million customers across Queensland. However, those services may be under threat in a number of regions through emerging critical shortages of water and wastewater treatment operators.

According to qldwater CEO Dave Cameron, this issue has been building for some years with enough evidence now emerging to suggest that the industry is potentially on the brink of a crisis.

"When qldwater first started seriously looking into industry workforce planning around the start of this decade, the idea of an ageing workforce and skills crisis were relatively new, and there was a sense that the Global Financial Crisis had probably worked in our favour by helping keep people in these critical job roles longer than they had otherwise planned."

"We talked collectively about building careers and structures for improving the uptake of new starters, and these are core to our philosophy behind programs like Operator Certification. However, some of the vacancy rates and turnover we are starting to see in both published data and anecdotally are cause for concern. If you happen to be in a region with strong competition for skills, for example from the resources..."
sector, you are likely starting to feel the pinch, but even regions which have historically had no issues with attraction and retention are making noise,” Mr Cameron said.

1.1 Case study: Banana Shire Council

Banana Shire Council stands out as an example of a Council which is challenged by the regional employment market, in spite of a range of different and innovative approaches attempting to address the problem.

According to Mr Anthony Lipsys, Manager Water Supply & Sewerage, their focus has been on promoting the lifestyle advantages of their workplace and targeting particular workforce segments including people with young families and grey nomads seeking short term relief operations roles while travelling in Queensland.

“We have also been open and welcoming to staff from culturally diverse backgrounds to fill operational vacancies and encouraged employment of more women who now comprise 37% of our treatment workforce. This combined with other innovative workforce strategies have helped to improve employee retention rates in the short term,” Mr Lipsys said.

Other initiatives trialled have included:

- Establishing a partnership with a local engineering consulting firm which provided a junior engineer to undertake a specific network modelling project at Council. Upon conclusion of the project, the consulting firm got an employee back who had the advantage of Council experience and the Council was able to take advantage of a lull period to access a cost-effective resource.
- Implementing greater flexibility in managing annual leave so migrant employees could meet family commitments in their country of origin.
- Offering a nine-day working fortnight to ensure the workplace was more family-friendly in an attempt to keep staff from leaving to the resource sector where working hours are significantly longer and require more time away from family.
- Creating a checklist for managers to conduct an ‘honest dialogue’ with applicants for positions about what it’s like to work in the region and in their organisation to create a better ‘fit’. This included, for example, flying preferred applicants to the region and driving them around for a day to show them the distances between schemes and the local towns, and clearly explaining the social and cultural aspects of the region.
- Offering a rent assistance program to attract applicants to the region.
- Engaging pre-retirees to help mentor staff to develop their technical writing skills. This is particularly important for those staff for which English is their second language.

“In spite of all of this we continue to experience a number of long term vacancies and it typically takes us up to 90 days to recruit new employees into vacant treatment roles. Our record is 173 days to recruit two trainee assistant treatment plant operators, but we have a number of current active vacancies, and even our efforts to go to the market for relief operators have been problematic.”

1.1.1 Other regional Queensland drivers

Attracting and retaining appropriately skilled staff in remote areas remains a significant challenge, with applicant pools

---

typically reducing in number with distance from the south-east corner and away from major coastal centres. Further, in many small and remote locations, Councils have an obligation to act as an employer to support economic development for communities, which can arguably contribute to inefficiencies in service delivery and broader sustainability. However, the tyranny of distance is not the only thing driving regional skills shortages.

Council water and sewerage employees, including those employed in the southern part of SEQ, are not as clearly identified as part of the water industry as they are in discrete water utilities.
instead participating in enterprise arrangements along with other Council service staff. This can act to limit the potential for incentive structures making Councils less competitive compared with other industries within a region.

The ageing employee profile of the water industry workforce has also been repeatedly identified by employers as one of the most critical workforce issues. The qldwater 2016 Snapshot Report prepared for the Queensland Water Skills Partnership showed that approximately one third of water employees were over the age of 51.

Anecdotal feedback confirms a high rate of turnover amongst younger operators, suggesting that the industry does well in retaining older workers but are struggling to recruit, train and retain younger workers to help improve longer term workforce planning and meet current capacity requirements. In general, the water and sewerage industry is not often marketed as a strong career prospect and more can be done to attract and retain a diverse workforce.

“The initiatives trialed by Banana Council are a good start,” said Mr Cameron, “but more can be done at regional and whole-of-sector scales to improve attraction to the industry”.

1.2 Solutions?
Whether you believe that there is an emerging crisis or not, there are clear limitations in traditional local government recruitment and retention techniques for water industry operations, and there is no “one size fits all” solution.

“The industry is currently an exciting and rapidly changing work area,” said Mr Cameron, “but understanding particular workforce segments and what motivates employees at different stages of their careers is fundamental”.

As a minimum, we likely need to deal with the apparent decline in young people entering operational roles, as well as take a sector-wide approach to attracting experienced employees to Queensland. This will be a focus for Water Skills Partnership research in the coming period, and we are keen to hear your ideas. Contact csargent@qldwater.com.au or on 07 3632 6853.

(Sarah Elmes water treatment operator)

(And if you have anyone with water or wastewater treatment experience and a burning desire to work in Moura in a key role on either a permanent or temporary basis, we’ll put you in touch with Anthony).