

WORKFORCE CHALLENGES IN THE AUSTRALIAN TOURISM SECTOR

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CURRENT AND FUTURE EMPLOYMENT TRENDS	2
<i>Work Force of 50+.....</i>	<i>2</i>
<i>Transient Work Force.....</i>	<i>2</i>
CURRENT AND EMERGING SKILL SHORTAGES AND APPROPRIATE RECRUITMENT, COORDINATED TRAINING AND RETENTION STRATEGIES	2
<i>Ageing workforce taking skills and knowledge with them</i>	<i>2</i>
<i>Younger people difficulties with bureaucracy.....</i>	<i>2</i>
<i>Coordinated Training.....</i>	<i>3</i>
<i>Short-staffed makes training difficult.....</i>	<i>3</i>
<i>Transient staff make training difficult.....</i>	<i>3</i>
RETENTION STRATEGIES	3
<i>Retention is an issue</i>	<i>3</i>
LABOUR SHORTAGES AND STRATEGIES TO MEET SEASONAL FLUCTUATIONS IN WORK FORCE DEMANDS.....	3
<i>The expedition of the time taken for the Drivers Authority to be processed</i>	<i>3</i>
<i>Possible solutions.....</i>	<i>4</i>
<i>Strategies to ensure employment in regional and remote areas</i>	<i>5</i>
<i>Summary of Major Causes.....</i>	<i>5</i>

CURRENT AND FUTURE EMPLOYMENT TRENDS

Work Force of 50+

The trend is toward an older stable work force of 50 + coupled with a younger extremely transient work force

In our industry of passenger transport we are finding that the average age of our staff is in the over 50 years of age bracket. This has both positive and negative aspects.

The positive is that they tend to be very reliable, level headed and in general, relate well to the clients. For most this is a relatively new industry for them, having qualified for their licences in conjunction with a former career. They tend to respond well to the seasonal ups and downs of the industry, ergo heavy hours in the peaks and less in the quiet.

The negative side is that as this is a twilight career for them they lack enthusiasm to do that bit extra which is the difference between good and excellent. Because of their age, health is often an issue, with drivers prone to muscle damage from handling luggage.

Current employment in the industry is difficult in the region due in a large part to the ease which people can live with government support at one end of the scale, against the high wage structure of the mining industry at the other end of the scale.

Transient Work Force

The future trends in the industry are of concern as our work force gets older and the tendency of the younger people in our area seems to be to drift up and down the coast, working as little as possible and when they do work, getting as many free trips (familis) as possible before moving onto the next town and repeating the process.

CURRENT AND EMERGING SKILL SHORTAGES AND APPROPRIATE RECRUITMENT, COORDINATED TRAINING AND RETENTION STRATEGIES

Ageing workforce taking skills and knowledge with them

In the coach touring sector, we have a serious shortage of trained tour and charter drivers. These drivers who encompass the very peak of professionalism in the industry are growing older and as they retire, are taking their skills, knowledge and enthusiasm for the industry with them. Several years of “dumbing down” the career, is turning full circle as there is a sense in the market place that being in control of a vehicle safely carrying 50 people is a *settle for* job role if they can't find something better.

We are beginning to see a serious shortage of self motivated trained people (they need to be self motivated as they work largely unsupervised). There is a serious lack of new blood into the operational side of the industry, both front of house, the drivers, and support crew, the mechanics etc.

Despite numerous advertising campaigns that have achieved reasonable results, we find that many of the applicants are of the older age group, with little desire to do more than just enough to get by till they retire.

Younger people difficulties with bureaucracy

On the other hand the younger people who may wish to join the industry for the first time find that they have an extended wait ahead of them to get their Driver's Authority to carry passengers, so we loose them to the trucking industry, or they have the experience but an interstate Authority not recognised in Queensland, so the same result occurs.

The age group that we are looking for would be between 25-50 years of age (insurance reasons) with a fluent grasp of English for commentary and good physical health to assist passengers with luggage.

Coordinated Training

If this continues, while the Federal, State and Regional tourism bodies are working extremely hard to promote Australia ie the states and regions as desirable destinations, repeat business and word of mouth will have a negative effect if we are unable to deliver the high quality of service and experience we promote as our tourism industry. From the first arrival into the country or region, we *must* have trained enthusiastic people driving our coaches to meet arriving visitors, both domestic and international, either as the welcoming airport transfer driver or the informative tour driver.

While we do not want to lose that which makes Australia and Queensland the destination that it is, the “*she’ll be right attitude*” is no longer acceptable. We must provide the standard of service to our market place in direct competition with other international destinations that have already achieved the level of professionalism we should be striving for in ALL levels of our industry.

Short-staffed makes training difficult

At present we are constantly short staffed so operational commitments require most of our training to be “on the job”, or taken in bites as the opportunity arises. We have a strong commitment to training so this situation is less than desirable.

Transient staff make training difficult

Couple this with the transient nature of the staff, either drifting on, or due to staff shortages, the older ones move on because they have concerns keeping up with the work load. We will not engage a training organisation as the training will be of little benefit to the organisation that funds it without assistance if the person moves on. So despite our best efforts with our staff, though trained better than most in the area, we are still well below that which we would wish to have representing our company and Queensland/Australian Tourism and the Whitsundays.

RETENTION STRATEGIES

Retention is an issue

As already detailed, we try for a variety of work but again the issue of staff shortages raises its head. You cannot take on more work unless you have the staff to cover it. If you get the staff, the existing work needs to be spread over the existing staff, till the new work develops. Drivers become discontent, resign, new work then starts to develop with no drivers to cover it. So you tend to stay in the same work, drivers get bored, and resign. We seem to have a revolving door, so you do enough training to get them by till they leave. Because of the transient nature or the sunset employment situation of the staff, they are not of a sufficient standard to move them through a career path. We tried regular company sponsored meals and social activities to team build for what is largely a group of individuals who work on their own for the same company. Success in retention in other team building strategies seem to have little effect.

LABOUR SHORTAGES AND STRATEGIES TO MEET SEASONAL FLUCTUATIONS IN WORK FORCE DEMANDS

Labour shortages are detailed prior.

Strategies to overcome these might be:

The expedition of the time taken for the Drivers Authority to be processed

One situation that is very much in the forefront of labour shortages for us is the extended time it takes to process the Drivers Authority. While we understand the need for, and fully support the

requirement for a Driver's Authority (DA) to be issued, the length of time that it takes however for an application to be processed is appalling and in fact restricts the growth of business in the tourism sector of Queensland.

The situation is this. We receive an application for a position with our company to work as a coach driver. The applicant interviews well and we offer them a job dependent on their obtaining their Queensland DA. One reason the person looks for work is to gain an income. With the extended wait for the DA to come through, and without income, these high quality tour coach drivers are forced to return to the state where they came from, and where they have a current DA from that state. So they are consequently lost to Queensland tourism, or they simply go and drive trucks and all the training and skill for the tourism industry goes wasted as they drive piles of dirt around.

Possible solutions

If the DA could in fact be a federal card, or the equivalent authority from other states could be recognised, this would be a boost to the passenger transport industry of Queensland, and surely reduce the duplication of time and effort by police and other relevant authorities in all states and territories as they check and re-check applicants who have already had the relevant checks done.

In the instance of new people to the industry, could a more streamlined process be created, with perhaps a restricted provisional DA that would not permit a driver to carry unaccompanied children until the full checks could be completed and a full DA issued.

We have seasonal difficulties with competition from the sugar cane industry. When the season is in full swing which requires haul out drivers, at the same time, the tourist season is at its peak. We carry our drivers through the quiet season (Feb–April) so that we have trained staff on hand for when the season gears up, however because we need to bring new staff in ready for the new season, the light work load does result in losing a percentage of the existing staff anyway.

One option would be to use this slower period to train existing or new staff. The challenge here is the employer is paying for staff that may, as soon as the sugar mill begins to operate, walk out, or if it continually rains, the transients move on to dryer climates. Employers get no assistance in training staff till the staff have been with them for 12 months after the completion of the course AND the student (staff) have actually completed the course. If this could be changed so that as a staff member completed a unit, the employer could be reimbursed for their outgoings, the employee could have a transportable course, that could be completed in several locations with several employers, all the while the employee is gaining better and better training and knowledge. That is, when they began employment with a new employer, they could present the certificates they had gained so far, then continue on with the new employer/trainer. This would result in the general professionalism of the staff being lifted in whatever is their chosen field; it would also be an incentive for employers to actually train staff; it would help in the retention of staff while not being a burden on the employer at a time when the revenue for the company would be at a low ebb; and would assist staff in the quiet time when their own incomes would also be at a low ebb. This would require **a standardisation of recognised training organizations** in the field they choose to train in which in turn would result in a standardisation of service in all aspects of the tourist industry with staff starting each season with new skills and better professionalism.

The quiet times could be used for training in conjunction with a revamp of the training programs that fit the nature of the industry as detailed below.

A further difficulty in the Whitsundays is the lack of reasonably priced accommodation either to rent or to buy.

Perhaps some form of rent assistance would be an option that would allow workers in the region to be able to find a place to live that did not require an excessive percentage of their income to be used.

Strategies to ensure employment in regional and remote areas

The cost of living in regional areas is inflated where ever the mining industry is near. The extremely high wages being paid in this industry are reflected in the general cost of rents and general living expenses. If a person is not able to work in the mines the cost of living often forces them out of the area, all be it unwillingly. This results in the transient nature of staff, outside of the mining industry.

A zone allowance that reduces the amount of PAYG tax could be applied to workers whose income was under a threshold average wage for the area. This should only be applied to workers who are employed say for 30+ hours a week as an incentive for people to be in employment, rather than on support. The tourism industry is a large income producer for Australia but is being starved of staff. Employers are not in a position to pay high wages to junior staff and at the same time remain competitive. Surely it would be better for the country, and the industry if funded programs were put in place to assist employers and staff alike to retain staff and improve the workforce in general.

Summary of Major Causes

The lack of trained, reliable long term staff is a serious issue that is choking the future development of industry. The major causes are:-

1. A lack of a training system that caters for the transient nature of many people in the tourism sector.
2. The length of time it takes to process state documentation to allow a person to perform their duties.
3. A lack of affordable accommodation.
4. An ageing working population.
5. A poor work ethic in the youth.
6. Wage structures in the regions, where the cost of living is abnormally high in comparison to other regions not involved in mining or tourism.
7. The payments and assistance received by people out of work compared to the amount that staff get for working.
8. In these days of rising fuel costs, public transport is once again becoming the most viable option for many people, as the road fleets are being upgraded throughout the state with more and more safety conscious legislations coming into play. Surely we need to look at not only the need to renew the vehicles but with the average age of drivers climbing and often coming into the industry in the twilight years as they are getting closer to retirement, we need now to be creating a smooth pathway for new blood into the industry - people who have an interest in being trained to the highest level of professionalism with a view to a long term career as an integral part of Queensland tourism.