



Addressing the Ageing Workforce for Key Operational Roles in the Queensland Water and Sewerage Services Industry



What is a healthy workforce profile for a publicly owned water and sewerage services utility? Should we acknowledge that people staying in a career for four decades is no longer a reality and focus on how we better recruit and manage mobility among industries? Has COVID created an opportunity – will a depressed employment market mean sourcing skills is easier?

These are examples of many questions around future workforce planning facing utilities and the right answers are not only complex but significantly influenced by regional and other factors, and what those utilities, many of which are councils, see as their broader role with respect to the broader industry and their communities.

In many small remote and regional locations, the council can be the largest employer in a community and as such, the contribution those organisations make extends well beyond service delivery to fundamentally supporting local economies.

Traditionally, councils have been referred to as “training grounds” for other industries, taking on apprentices and cadets with the hope that it might lead to someone spending a long time within the organisation, but equally happy to give people a start in their chosen field.

This fact sheet is not attempting to prescribe a future approach, it simply collates information from a number of sources to demonstrate that workforce composition is something that all utilities should be thinking about, as it is getting difficult to maintain “traditional” recruitment and retention approaches. It focuses on key operational roles, the fundamental “doers” critical to service delivery.

There is a shortage of skilled water and wastewater treatment operators

The 2018 Local Government Workforce and Future Skills Report showed Queensland councils identified wastewater and drinking water treatment operators as their top two skills shortages with:

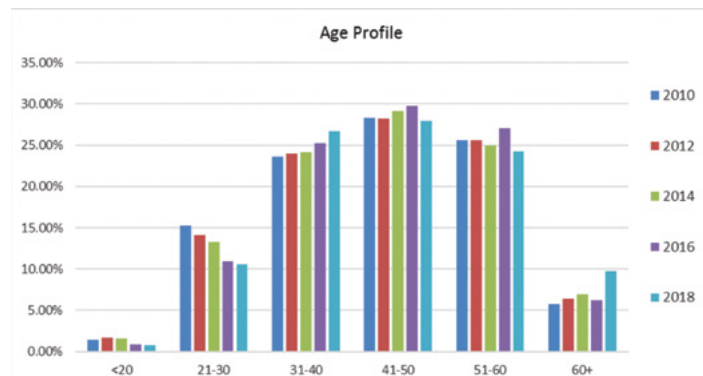
- **28.3%** of councils reporting a shortage of wastewater treatment operators and **22.6%** reporting a shortage of drinking water operators;
- **13.2%** and **9.4%** respectively reporting that as a result of the shortage, they had been forced to recruit less skilled applicants; and
- **35.8%** and **30.2%** respectively flagging the job role as a future shortage.

The 2019 Water Industry Skills Forecast published by Australian Industry Standards reported drinking water and wastewater treatment operators at the top of the list of skills shortages for the water industry nationally, ahead of Maintenance, Engineers and Water Quality Managers (Australian Industry Standards, 2019). Reasons identified for the shortage include:

- Low salaries/wages
- Competition from other organisations
- Geographic location of vacancies
- Ageing workforce
- Poor image of the industry and roles.



The water industry workforce is ageing and not attracting young people



Source: *qldwater 2018 snapshot report*

qldwater's Workforce Composition Snapshot Report survey is conducted every two years and as a result, a disclaimer is necessary around the potential for error in achieving consistent responses. Nonetheless, the data represents over a third of the industry workforce in each sample. If a typical working life of 17 – 65 years of age is assumed (so a mid-career point of 41):

- In 2018, 60% of the industry was aged 41 or over.
- A trend of ageing is observable in older age groups – e.g. where the 51-60 numbers have declined, the 60+ numbers have grown.
- The proportions of people aged <20 and 21-30 are low, and visibly declining.

The ageing workforce is real and organisations need to consider the impact of that on their capacity to maintain services to their communities.

Some providers are using 'Transition to Retirement' plans to capture knowledge from experienced operators before they retire and there appear to be opportunities within the transition phase of these agreements to bring on new recruits to be coached and mentored by the experienced operator as they scale back their working commitments.

It takes between 12 months to 2 years for a trainee with no prior water industry experience to become proficient in operating a water or wastewater treatment plant, depending on the level of complexity of the plant.

More needs to be done to encourage young people to take up water industry roles with a particular emphasis on recruitment and retention of trainees to 'future-proof' the operational workforce.

Despite generous employer incentives for traineeships (more with COVID), organisations struggle to find positions for trainees at the end, a huge missed opportunity

In a recent survey of water service providers, 100% of respondents indicated that they are unable to guarantee permanent roles on completion of traineeships, unless a vacancy happens to exist at that time within their FTE count. Whilst we don't have statistics on the number of trainees who receive training and are then 'let go', we are aware that where a traineeship has been successful, organisations have made every effort to retain trainees. However, under current post-COVID economic conditions, providers have advised that there are freezes on new recruitment and strict caps on FTE counts.

In some organisations, there have been opportunities to access alternative budget sources to engage trainees via a Group Training Organisation.

Conclusion

Austerity measures are necessary from time to time, reflecting political and community expectations, economic downturns and so on. However, the data suggests that there are larger market forces clearly impacting the water and sewerage services industry's capacity to source these skills.

There are many possible strategies to address these risks, from regional partnerships to more structured workforce planning and targeted recruitment, to much broader service delivery considerations including outsourcing delivery. **qldwater** members report advantages to even short-term outsourcing – there are many skilled operators who can add significant value. However, doing nothing and relying on these fall-back options typically comes at a significant cost.

Councils can often struggle with elevating the status of one job requiring apparently similar skills over another, and equity is crucial for maintaining a positive culture. This fact sheet simply aims to raise awareness of a significant market issue and encourage utilities to plan appropriately to address and participate in broader industry efforts to this end.

The **qldwater** website through the work of the Water Skills Partnership contains [a number of resources](#) to support training and development of the operational workforce.

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