

GOULBURN VALLEY WATER'S FIELD STAFF TRAINING STRATEGY



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ABSTRACT

Goulburn Valley Water had traditionally provided training for field staff in their specific areas of responsibility. Determining training needs and setting budgets was left to individual Managers. A field staff training committee was formed to develop a field staff training strategy. This committee consisted of field staff from across the authority and management representatives. After being in operation for just over two years, the benefits of the implementation of the training strategy are now rippling through the organisation through better trained and more knowledgeable staff. The authority has also taken a lead role in developing new training material specifically targeted to meet the needs of its staff.

KEY WORDS

Field Staff, Training, Training Strategy, Goulburn Valley Water (GVW).

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Goulburn Valley Water covers 20,000 km² and services 54 towns with water and 31 towns with wastewater facilities. This is broken down into four distinct districts, Northern, Central, Southwest and South East. To cover this area GVW employs approximately 75 field staff in various roles including Water treatment, wastewater treatment and associated reuse activities, and in Operations and Maintenance.

2.0 DISCUSSION

2.1 History

In the past, access to training had been rather spasmodic and there was no clear development or career path for each individual employee. Training was provided through the relevant District Managers on an as needs basis, usually to meet the specific process needs in water treatment or wastewater treatment and with a set training budget for the whole district. These training budgets were set by the respective District Managers with no real objective to how it was spent other than to ensure that each staff member had the basic training to allow them to satisfactorily perform their role.

Due to staff turnover, each new employee required intensive training to be brought up to satisfactory OH&S and work standards. This training was provided out of the district training budget. Ongoing renewal training in the form of first aid, CPR and confined spaces would take a fair slice out of the budget. The remainder was then available for field staff to learn new skills required for their daily duties. Once a field operator had completed the required role based training and had developed a reasonable amount of experience it was hard for them to access further training to better themselves due to the new staff and renewal training taking up most of the budget.

Initially the issue of access to career development training was raised at an internal Goulburn Valley Water wastewater treatment operator's workshop. Operators were concerned that high rates of field staff turnover and ever changing Government policy, particularly related to Occupational Health and Safety (OHS), much of the training budget allocated each year was being spent on mandatory updates, particularly for new staff.

This left very little funding for technical or career development training courses and some staff were not being provided with training normally required to perform their set duties, let alone improving their job skills and knowledge.

A small team representing each of the core functions in the field was established. They represented staff from water treatment, wastewater treatment and water distribution and wastewater collection. Their purpose was to review the training requirements for each group.

2.2 Committee Development

A committee was developed and was provided direction by Allen Gale, Goulburn Valley Water's Technical Services Director. The committee consisted of George Wall with his knowledge of the new training package and interest in operator development, Yvonne Creece the Human Resources Officer along with representatives of all the work crews from across the Authority including Works Coordinators.

2.3 Aim of the Project

The aim of the project as determined by the committee was:

“To develop a competency based, structured, training regime for all Goulburn Valley Water field staff that ensured the development, within a reasonable time frame, of a professional and safe workforce that is :

- Multiskilled, but with emphasis on primary functions;
- Motivated to achieve higher skills and that has a formal career development path.”

From this aim the committee identified that;

- The current training records were inadequate.
- An assessment of the current levels of training for all field staff was required to see where the current levels of training actually were.
- It was also determined that a basic level of training was required of all field staff for them to successfully undertake their jobs. This was broken down into;
 - OH&S,
 - Legislative and
 - Competency levels
- A minimum level of training for all field staff of at least certificate 2 in Water Industry Operations and for Works Coordinators to achieve certificate 3 level. And if desired or required for field staff to also achieve certificate 3
- District or function specific training was still required (i.e. hazardous areas)
- To establish what was required to attain the basic and minimum levels of certificate 2 and certificate 3 for staff involved;
 - finding what courses were available,
 - finding what courses were a minimum for a water technician, wastewater operator and an operations and maintenance employee,

- determining the training providers
- determining the hours involved either in courses run in-house or away,
- whether we could run our own courses?

From this the committee was able to put together a training matrix for all field staff, but this on its own was far from the final field staff training strategy developed.

2.4 Training strategy

From the training matrix the committee was quickly able to see that a few key areas needed improvement for GVW and its field staff to benefit. Training delivery methods were ad hoc, the costs involved in sending staff away were high, the lost time involved for the work group covering an employee undertaking training was high and there were few established training providers offering courses for water distribution and wastewater collection employees.

2.5 Strategy framework principles

The principles for the development of the training strategy were workshopped by the team. Generally, the principles follow the progression of an employee from commencement to a Works Coordinator level. The outcomes achieved through undertaking training at each level within the water industry training package from Certificate II to Diploma also reflects the increasing responsibilities, expertise and competencies expected of staff as they progress and take on more senior roles in the workplace.

The principles developed can then be applied when reviewing training courses required for groups and individuals.

2.6 Training Principles

Induction/safety management training on start up for new employees

Induction training is provided via a checklist system and is compulsory for all new employees. It is the District Manager's role to ensure this initial training is fully explained to the new employee and that they understand all the requirements. This training is vital in ensuring new employees can perform their duties in a safe manner in the period between commencing employment and undertaking specific training. In addition to the induction process, new staff are required to complete the OHS training module developed by Luke Haines Goulburn Valley Water's OH&S officer, and are assisted in their early skills development through a "buddy" or "mentoring" process with experienced field staff.

Every staff member must have at least a minimum level of competency as required by Legislation relating to Occupational Health and Safety Issues.

This type of training is compulsory for all employees prior to undertaking any activities which by Legislation require training and appropriate certification. A ban on performing any of these duties is enforced across all work groups for any person who can not meet the required certification standard. Examples of the types of duties requiring certification are dogman, spotter, fluoride, asbestos pipe removal, boat, truck, crane operations.

In addition, there are numerous tasks routinely undertaken which by their nature provide a high degree of risk to employees and therefore the Authority. Although these tasks do not require any specific certification under OHS Legislation, the committee recommended that these tasks **must not** be undertaken by untrained staff. Examples requiring specific training prior to the task being undertaken are chlorine, hazardous chemical handling, confined space entry, manual handling, use of chainsaws or demolition saws and entry to hazardous areas.

Minimum level of Certificate II covering the primary work function is required for all GVW field staff.

The achievement of Certificate II is compulsory for all field staff and ensures that a minimum level of training and competence is demonstrable across all GVW Districts. The flexibility of the water training package allows the mixing of modules from different disciplines (water, wastewater and maintenance) which assists with the development of multifunction employees.

Where possible, the base skills required to safely perform a job are aligned with the water training package so that staff can make continual progress towards to the completion of Certificate II whilst undertaking their normal duties.

All staff to have “introductory” training in “non-primary” work functions

It is recognised that field staff in some Districts have specialised roles in relation to their work function but also must have enough general knowledge of other fields to allow them to undertake the role of standby officer in a safe, efficient and competent manner. In the specialised teams located in the Central District, some expertise in non-primary roles increases the value and flexibility to the Authority of these staff. The District Managers are responsible for developing systems to achieve this principle.

Competency level of Certificate III training in specific modules relating to work area is required for anyone who is a “lead operator”. Highly desirable for “lead operators” to obtain Certificate III.

A lead operator is defined for water and wastewater as “Anyone who makes adjustments to the operation of a plant and/or is responsible for a plant”

A lead operator in the maintenance field is “Anyone who is responsible for a small team and who plans and resources tasks on a day to day basis”.

The District Manager is responsible for determining which units should be undertaken, and by whom, depending on the needs of the District and the variety of process units to be operated. This philosophy allows the District Manager to train staff in a number of disciplines and ensures that a minimum number of staff are adequately trained to operate the various types of plants or process units. By their definition as a “lead operator”, individual staff are likely to complete a number of Certificate III units and should be encouraged to complete the remaining units to complete the Certificate III.

Certificate III level training/certification available for anyone who demonstrates a desire to do the training.

In larger work teams such as the Central District the classification of staff may not define them as a lead operator. If staff show a desire to proceed and aptitude to complete additional training, and by so doing provide more flexibility to the work team, they are encouraged to complete Certificate III. This decision will rest with the District Manager.

Essential for Works Co-ordinators to obtain Certificate III

The nature of the duties required to be undertaken by Works Co-ordinators requires a sound knowledge of both technical and management issues and the Certificate III is seen as the minimum qualification required to undertake these roles. Existing Works Co-ordinators were fast tracked to complete this qualification. This minimum qualification gives a clear message to any staff aspiring to these roles of the level of training required.

Certificate IV level management or technical training courses to be offered on a selection basis. This may be identified either through training needs analysis or the Authority Business plan.

At this level, training offered is highly specialised and generally designed to provide additional opportunities for staff identified as having the potential for future leadership roles or who possess demonstrated technical skills.

Training options available include the Frontline Management training course, specific process units from the water package at Certificate III or IV level, personal development, equipment or instrumentation maintenance courses, Electrical “D” licence, specific computer applications, administration or courses such as those offered by AWA through the International Winter Environment School (IWES). The Operations Manager and/or Director of Technical Services would be required to approve this type of training.

2.7 Training delivery

There were a number of options available for the delivery of training to GVW field staff. These included;

- External Courses
- Internal Courses run by GVW staff
- Mixture of External and Internal Training

It was noted that training providers and options were limited in some areas, notably to the O&M staff, and finding acceptable courses for them was difficult. However some areas of training, especially at Certificate 2 level, can be provided in house by suitably trained and experienced GVW staff.

3.0 CONCLUSIONS

Goulburn Valley Water has now developed and implemented a structured training program for all field staff based on the following principles:

- Induction/safety management training is provided on start up for new employees
- Every staff member must have at least a minimum level of competency as required by Legislation relating to Occupational Health and Safety Issues.
- All field staff are required to complete Certificate II, as a minimum, covering the primary work function.
- All staff are provided “introductory” training in “non-primary” work functions.
- Competency level of Certificate III training in specific units relating to work area is required for anyone who is a “lead operator”. Highly desirable for “lead operators” to obtain Certificate III.

- Certificate III level training/certification available for anyone who demonstrates a desire to do the training.
- Essential for Works Co-ordinators to obtain Certificate III.
- Certificate IV level management or technical training courses are offered on a selection basis. Candidates for this training may be identified either through training needs analysis or the Authority Business plan. Highly desirable for Works Co-ordinators and District Managers to have completed Certificate IV.
- All training undertaken by field staff is competency based and linked wherever possible to Accredited National training program.
- Training is undertaken such that Certification can be achieved in the following time frames:
 - New Employees: Certificate II within 2 years.
Certificate III within 5-7 years.
 - Existing Employees: Certificate II within 2 years of strategy adoption
Certificate III within 5 years of strategy adoption

Accredited training is provided utilising a mixture of internal and external delivery methods.

But it doesn't end here!

4.0 IMPLEMENTING THE STRATEGY

Under the guidance of senior management, the field staff were able to develop their own training strategy, but to be successful the strategy had to be fully implemented. During the course of developing the strategy, District Managers were kept up to date and informed and were generally supportive of the outcomes. A report outlining the strategy, estimated costs, and the likely benefits of implementing the strategy was presented to the GVW Board by members of the strategy Committee. The GVW Board was very supportive of the concept and in approving the strategy, congratulated the Committee for being so proactive in their desire to further develop their roles within GVW through training.

In looking to the options for delivering the training, obviously there were a number of existing providers whose services would continue to be utilised. In addition, some key GVW staff were provided training to allow them to undertake the role of workplace trainers and assessors, particularly for a great deal of material at Certificate II level.

To bridge the gap for the O&M staff, an external training provider was selected to review the training options for these staff. From this review, it was determined that it would be more beneficial for GVW to develop a series of training workbooks specifically tailored to meet the needs of GVW and its O&M crews rather than sourcing external providers.

Although there was a relatively high cost in developing this material, it is considered this is a sound investment at Certificate II level.

5.0 WHERE ARE WE NOW ?

Before the implementation of this strategy very few of GVW's field staff had completed Certificate II and surprisingly, only 3 had completed all the requirements to receive a Certificate III.

Since inception of the strategy, 38 members of GVW field staff have completed the Certificate II and another 5 have completed Certificate III. These numbers will both continue to rise in coming years as more training is completed. Field staff now have a clear direction for their training and options for further career development are more reachable. Those that wish to, can now progress further.

The workbooks for the O&M crews are working well, with even the senior members of the team taking on the challenges of training and realising the benefits it provides in their day to day activities. This training is providing a good base level of knowledge for the staff and managers can have more confidence in their newer staff after completion of the workbooks.

The targets set out in the strategy are working well, with all Works Coordinators now at a minimum of Certificate III level as required. New staff are achieving Certificate II within the specified time frame and existing staff are progressing well towards all achieving Certificate II. We even have one member of the field staff who has been with GVW for quite some time, who is reasonably illiterate and with the help of his work group, management and training providers was able to finish Certificate II.

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Les Tonkin, Committee Member, Goulburn Valley Water.

7.0 REFERENCES

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