

DEVELOPING TRAINING AND ASSESSMENT CAPABILITY IN THE NSW WATER INDUSTRY: A PILOT PROJECT



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ABSTRACT

This paper provides an outline of a pilot project to build the training and assessment capability of the water industry in NSW through the establishment of a Water Industry Training and Assessment Network, coordination of professional development activities, development of a register of trainers and assessors and a web portal for network members. The paper describes the work undertaken on the project to date, the issues that have arisen at network meetings and some of the challenges to be overcome for the long term viability of the network.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

The water industry in NSW has a workforce that is geographically dispersed, ageing, male-dominated and struggling to attract younger employees. It is also a workforce that requires increasing technical skills, along with underpinning computer, maths and science skills and more generic diagnostic and problem solving skills, leadership and management skills.

The education and training sector that services this workforce is also ageing and challenged by the rapid advances in technology and the thin geographic markets that make training costly to deliver. To develop and sustain the highly skilled workforce that is critical to all communities, the water industry needs to expand its capacity to train and assess new and existing employees in partnership with high quality training providers.

The establishment of a Water Training and Assessment Network (WTAN) is the first step towards building the training capability of the water industry in NSW.

2.0 ESTABLISHMENT OF THE WTAN NETWORK

This project was initiated by Sydney Water and is being managed by the NSW Public Sector ITAB which is a not-for-profit organisation recognised as the primary source of independent advice on vocational education and training for the government, public safety and water industries in NSW. Funding to establish the network has been provided by the NSW Department of Education and Training through its Skills Enhancement Program and industry is providing significant in-kind support.

The project commenced in June 2010 and is being guided by an Industry Steering Group made up of representatives from the key associations and stakeholder groups in NSW. These include the Australian Water Association, Water Services Association of Australia, Mid-Coast Water, the Australian Services Union, State Water Corporation, Hunter Water Corporation, Government Skills Australia, TAFE NSW, Shoalhaven City Council and NSW Department of Education and Training.

The project's major focus is to expand the capacity of industry and Registered Training Organisations (RTOs) to train and assess water industry employees for the purposes of increasing access to and uptake of accredited training in the industry.

The project aims to achieve this by:

- Establishing a register of trainers and assessors that can be readily accessed by industry and RTOs.
- Creating a NSW network of RTOs and industry. It is intended the network will provide formal and informal opportunities to share knowledge and practice, identify problems, issues and gaps to be addressed by industry and link experienced trainers and assessors with new practitioners so they can provide mentoring
- Co-ordinating professional development for new and potential trainers and assessors to increase training capacity in the water industry
- Establishing a website presence as a portal of information for the network. From this portal, members will be able to access network information, newsletters and professional development opportunities.

The funding received to establish the network covers the initial 12 months of operation and project management. After June 2011 the network will need to be self-funding and sustainable.

Over the longer term, the network aims to achieve:

- An increase in the capacity of NSW industry and RTOs to deliver on-the-job training and assessment of skills for the water industry
- An increase in the availability of training for skills which are essential for all workers in the water industry
- An increase in the number of skilled and qualified workers in the water industry.

3.0 PROGRESS TO DATE

Since the commencement of the project in June 2010, the following activities have been undertaken:

- The development of a logo or identity for the Water Training and Assessment Network
- Preliminary marketing of the network to prospective members from RTOs and industry via direct email to RTOs and councils and a presentation to the Executive Board of the NSW Water Directorate
- Conduct of an initial series of network meetings in five centres in NSW – Sydney, Coffs Harbour, Orange, Wagga and Moruya in November 2010. These meetings were attended by 64 members.
- Distribution of the first newsletter to members (WTANews)
- Organisation of the second series of network meetings in February and March 2011
- Establishment of a web page on the NSW Public Sector ITAB website from which newsletters can be downloaded and members can register their interest in offering their training and/or assessment services.

The network has now attracted over 100 registered members from the following targeted groups:

- Managers and team leaders responsible for developing the skills of new and existing staff in water utilities or local councils
- Trainers and assessors from public, private and enterprise-based RTOs who are training others in the water industry (particularly using the water industry training package)

- Employees of water utilities, councils and other related businesses who are interested in training or assessing staff
- People retiring from the water industry who are considering casual work as a trainer or assessor.

A variety of methods were used to reach prospective members, including direct email to water industry trainers within RTOs offering the water industry training package, emails to members of the NSW Water Directorate and HR Managers of local government, internal promotion to trainers within Sydney Water and insertion of new items in WICD E-news and newsletters of WIOA.

4.0 ISSUES ARISING FROM INITIAL NETWORK MEETINGS

The initial series of network meetings raised a mix of issues both within the scope of the project, and outside its parameters. Most of the peripheral issues related to attraction and retention of the workforce, including the need to attract younger people to the industry from school age and the need to clearly link job roles, training requirements and career paths for the benefit of employees and employers.

At all meetings there was full support for the establishment and continuation of a network. Some groups were more focused and committed than others, with smaller centres requiring a greater number of participants to determine a clear role and purpose for the network.

Throughout the meetings common themes emerged, highlighting areas in which improvements should be made for the training system to operate more effectively in the industry. These included:

- The need for much closer partnerships between RTOs and employers in the delivery and assessment of training, particularly:
 - better communication by RTOs about their training capacity (“offerings”) and how the training package units link to job functions
 - greater customisation of training to enterprise needs – equipment, policies and procedures, language, units of competency
 - greater employer involvement in the training process and outcomes – from selection of appropriate trainees, mentoring trainees, ensuring on-job work experience is linked to units, providing RTO access to trainees and equipment, etc.
- The need to ensure that trainer and assessor skills and knowledge are current and abreast of changing technologies
- The need to focus on the business outcomes from training and not allow the funding dollar to determine the training. This link is important in marketing training to senior management.
- The need to clearly illustrate the links between qualifications and skills sets to job roles and career pathways
- The need to align the NSW Office of Water short courses to the national training package and communicate those linkages
- The need to work with the school sector to change perceptions of the water industry
- The need to access funding to address foundation skills in the areas of Language, Literacy and Numeracy (LLN) and maths, science and basic chemistry
- Inconsistencies in skills recognition methodologies and outcomes

- Inconsistencies in the delivery of training in commonly required areas such as “confined spaces”.

All groups identified common objectives for the network. These were:

- To provide a NSW voice for the water industry on training package development and implementation
- To share ideas and resources
- To provide professional development for trainers and assessors
- To provide quality training and assessment in the water industry
- To provide a directory of qualified trainers and assessors
- To identify and promote career pathways in the water industry from school to higher education.

A range of strategies were suggested to help the network meet the above objectives. These included:

- Conduct of regular network meetings
- Use of a website and newsletter to communicate network activities, changes to training packages and supporting resources and RTO programs
- Identification of units of competency or short courses that can be funded through NSW DET (at a regional level)
- Identification of potential projects to establish common skills recognition resources or an agreed course that could be developed for the benefit of the industry state-wide
- The conduct of local training needs analysis to determine skill needs and priorities.

Other issues that arose through the organisation or conduct of the meetings were:

- Confusion over the target audience for the network. Whilst participants agreed industry members should range from HR/Training Managers to Water and Wastewater Managers through to supervisory staff responsible for overseeing trainees, the network was perceived to be for “trainers” and “assessors”, hence those who were not directly involved with this function did not see the network’s relevance.
- The importance of the network having achievable outcomes. For the network to attract larger numbers and be sustainable in the long term, it needs to have benefits for members and achieve some clear goals.
- The importance of WTAN having a purpose that is unique and not duplicative of AWA’s WICD or WEN networks.

5.0 CHALLENGES FOR THE NETWORK

There are a number of challenges to be faced by the network over the remaining 5 months of the funded period and beyond. In the short term, it is critical NSW WTAN achieves some “wins” or tangible success to grow membership and maintain ongoing commitment to the network. Whilst there is a high participation rate amongst the RTOs, including Sydney Water, there is significant potential to increase the involvement of Water and Sewerage Managers and HR/Training Managers of local government.

It is also apparent that the extent of workforce planning and training needs analysis undertaken of water employees in local government and regional water utilities is limited. The need to identify regional training requirements has been raised as a priority in most of the meetings and the next challenge is to identify a cost effective means by which this can

be done. The training capacity of the industry can only be increased if there is knowledge of and commitment to addressing the training gaps identified at an organisational level. The buy-in to the network by senior management, including HR, is dependent on their acknowledgement of a business case for committing to nationally recognised training, particularly in the current absence of mandatory training for certification purposes.

The ongoing resourcing of the network is a considerable challenge to be addressed before the pilot project is completed. The coordination and facilitation of network meetings, production of regular newsletters, maintenance of the web presence and management of network enquiries, takes time and money. Whilst each of the regional groups are still determining their action plans for 2011, central coordination of the network is necessary to ensure each group stays on track and maximises its membership from the target groups.

In the longer term, it is likely the network will be sustained by local “champions” or small committees of dedicated individuals who will drive the agenda and momentum at a regional level. A central co-ordination role will be necessary to consolidate and exchange information between groups via the website and newsletters. A business model for the sustainability of the network will need to be developed to ensure there will be sufficient funds to service this function.

6.0 CONCLUSION

The establishment of a Water Training and Assessment Network has been a positive step towards developing the training and assessment capability of the water industry in NSW. When all elements of the project are completed by mid-2011, we will be able to better assess its impact on the extent and quality of training delivery for the water industry in NSW. However a true measure of the project’s effectiveness will take several years to achieve as time will be needed to build the pool of trainers and assessors and monitor their impact on training and assessment activity.

