

CONFESSIONS OF A TEENAGE WATER OPERATOR



Paper Presented by:

Maddison McCarthy

Author:

Maddison McCarthy, Trainee Water Operator,

Toowoomba Regional Council



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Maddison McCarthy, *Trainee Water Operator*, Toowoomba Regional Council

ABSTRACT

This paper is written with playful intensions and I hope it is taken with a light hearted spirit that has been intended. I will discuss my journey of becoming a qualified Water Treatment Operator throughout a 2 year Traineeship with the Toowoomba Regional Council as well as the ups and downs and everything in-between. This paper is a reflection on a new job or career, and I would ask you to recall your first time in a new industry and entering unfamiliar waters – pun intended.

DISCLAIMER

All names have been omitted (bar a few) due to confidentiality and references made have no bearing on their identity.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

My name is Maddison McCarthy and I applied for a two year Traineeship in Certificate III in Water Operations with Toowoomba Regional Council in January 2014.

Fresh out of school as of November 2013, I was most fortunate to secure an interview for the position after being forced into submitting a résumé by whom other than my loving, caring mother who thought I should just ‘give it a go, you never know’. Lucky for me, I also all on the same day I was offered full-time work at Amart Sports in Clothing Sales where I had previously worked for the past 3 years AND accepted into the University of the Sunshine Coast to pursue in a bachelor of Sports and Exercise Science. So I had the fun decision on what path way I wanted to take for at least the next two years of my life, whilst I felt like mum just threw me into the deep-end! As usual mum was giving me the, ‘It’s totally your decision as to what you do... but just know I would choose the traineeship’, talk so that helped and did not once make me feel like she would be disappointed if I didn’t choose to attend the interview -NOT - she did not stop breathing down my neck until I made my decision. So I hit the books for the most technical way I thought would help me with my decision. Okay - so I actually just found a piece of paper one lunch break during a boring shift at Amart and wrote up a Pros and Cons list. Don’t judge me they are a very efficient method.

I began writing up my Con’s for Amart, because of course that was the easy part, and If I remember correctly that column was full of: Boring, boring, boring, my legs always ache, there is only so many time I can fold t-shirts and enjoy it and I spend too much money on clothes and sneakers! Then it came to my Pro’s column and it was a lot shorter then my Con’s and it really just was me expressing my love for everyone who worked there because of the great friendships I had made over the years. But to me that wasn’t a career unless you wanted to get into the management side of things but I could tell you no one was leaving management and there was about 7 other people above me that would become management before I did. Then it was time to do my University list and believe me that was easy because all I did was log onto my bank account and check that I only had \$3.65 in my account which ruled out about everything about University. I had no money to move, buy textbooks, rent or food...

I would have been living on the streets but at least I wouldn't be a two hour drive to the beach!

So that night I sat down with Mum and Dad and we discussed what I would even do at a Water Treatment Plant? I mean do I just stare at the water or do I have to get into big pipes and clean them out? I don't even know how a pump works. While my head was exploding with questions! Mum informed me whilst she used to work for the Council in a completely different section teaching people to use the computer programs, she had come across quite a few of the workers from Mt Kynoch and said they are an awesome bunch of blokes and she always enjoyed teaching them. So with that, I accepted the interview and hoped for the best.

2.0 THE MOMENT OF TRUTH

The time had come of the interview; I arrived at the Mt Kynoch Water Treatment Plant and made my way to the reception. The receptionist directed me down to a big room, where I was greeted with 3 men at the opposite end of the table - Nerves were kicking in, so I think I held my own hands so I wasn't caught shaking too much.

Finally, I completed the interview process, and with high hopes - meaning I totally just fluked that big time - I was directed out of the building. As I walked towards the reception for one last time, I was addressed by two men standing at one end of the room, giggling and laughing with one another, and then one of them said, "You're Leigh's daughter aren't you". In my mind all I could think about was the pep talk my mum gave me during breakfast about how not to say that we are related. Ops, too late, cats out of the bag - I thought to myself, I don't really know if that's a good or bad thing, knowing my mum its bad so say goodbye to the job and hello to folding clothes.

3.0 GREAT NEWS

It started off like a normal Monday morning working my regular shift at Amart, until I received a phone call informing me I was to go in for a medical! Much to my excitement I called pretty much every one of my contacts - just Mum, Dad and the boyfriend and informed them of the good news!. They were also very excited and shocked! Saying things like, "You must have impressed them in your interview!", but really I didn't think I had any confidence after leaving the Treatment Plant that day - especially after they knew I was a McCarthy.

4.0 GETTING TO KNOW THE PLACE

The time had come of my Introduction day. 5.20am wake up -not happy Jan! - Deckerd out in my steel cap boots that felt like 100kg and my new favourite colours navy and fluoro yellow (eeeww). I made my way up to Mt Kynoch for my 6.30am start. Still half asleep sitting in the car park trying scull some red bull mum brought for me and pep talk myself into it, I finally made my way inside to the introductions and plant tour.

Introductions done - lots of males - lots on M's - Marty, Mark, Matt, but can't remember who's who. Then there is the plant, computers with colourful lines and it's called data? Scata? Scada? Then there are all the places where the water comes in and goes, and the other stuff which is the stuff we put in the water that looks like green honey which does that thing to the water. Oh my god. Head spinning. Abort, abort, abort!

This is going to be a long process, which I was assured by everyone saying, ‘You won’t learn everything in a day’. That was probably the only thing I took in after 8 hours – better not admit that to anyone.

5.0 STILL LEARNING

1 week past, and then two weeks past and I was leaning more and more every day. The green honey we put in the water is called Magnasol 589 and we add that to the water to act as a bonding chemical to combine the dirt particles together. Is that right? I think so?

Each day I was getting more and more familiar with the plant and its processes but it didn’t come easy, constantly asking the same questions over and over again. The going rate of sick days was getting higher and higher and most of them being due to something like headaches – oh gosh – I know I ask the same questions over and over but at least I only ask once a day and I wait until tomorrow to ask the same one again.

I came up with different ways of learning. I started with a notepad, which was filled up quickly which was upgraded to a bigger note pad and then to a book which if you flipped it to the back was also a mini map of the place just so I didn’t get lost. I also came up with a genius way of remember how to do which samples with the correct instruments – colour coding – booya! Yellow means Turbidity and Colour and Pink means PH and Fluoride.

6.0 HEADING OUT PAST THE GATES

Another day at the plant, making observations and asking questions, I was feeling pretty confident and very familiar with the plant. I knew it almost back to front; I knew all my jobs – without even having a look in my cheat diary – well almost! I also had gave a little feminine touch on the Plants offices – I maybe did a little spring cleaning (a lot) and just made it a little prettier. Everything was labelled, put in its corrects boxes, and you could actually start to see the bottom of the draws which I never thought I would see the day – but it did come with its downfalls – the only thing I head for the next month was, “Maddison, where’s the” ... “Top left shelf” .

The traineeship continued, no two days the same. I started going out past the front gates of Mt Kynoch to the dams - Cooby, Cressbrook and Perserverance and leaning the works of the Dam Operators. And on Town Run to the Pumping Stations, Bore Sites, Reservoirs and sample points. Such a big wide world out here, I couldn’t remember where half the places where but boy did I learn the street names quick! ‘Oh so that’s Long Street’ – (only one of Toowoomba main streets!)

It was tough learning the different places, out came the trusty cheat dairy with a little map and comments stating, ‘tap behind toilet block’ to help me along the way. This didn’t go without the cheat phone call or two or eight. Never the less – I was learning and I was doing nothing but improving.

7.0 CAR PROBLEMS

As you know, a 3 month probationary period has to be passed, so with that date in mind I was I was sitting in the lunch room having my morning tea when one of the guys said, “Well Maddison it’s official, we will be needing our *startin carton* now”.

Much to my delight, that in boy language means I passed and I'm staying for 2 years and they also want me to buy them a carton of beer for helping me along the way! Hooray! I'm finally locked in for the two years now, that means better worker harder on my boy slang and better get used to walking into the rooms smelling like smelly farts.

After a few months down the track and everything was running smoothly, I had been upgraded to going out to the Dams and on Town Run all by myself – no assistance required here - I'm a big girl now! Then one day started out like any other, I gathered my eskies and my bottles and heading out for a day on Town Run. All going well, I decided to get one last sample before heading back to Kynoch for the 9am morning tea. The sample point is down a street which is shaped a bit like a hair pin so a very sharp turn with the tap being in the centre island of this little street with not much parking around. I decided to pull up on the gutter.

Collecting my sample in quick smart time, even though I did have to battle a huge man-eating spider about the size of my thumb to get to the sample point, I finished collecting the water and loaded them into the eskies. I jumped into the car ready for the drive back –seat belt on – mirrors checked –into gear – CRASH! Oh my god. I had frozen on the spot, I couldn't move. What have I done! I got out checking the front of the car. There was a huge dint in the passenger side guard. I can't believe it. I had gone too close to a little fence bollard and run into it. My heart sank, what do I do? I did what every girl knows best – I called my dad.

Sobbing and sniffing, I somewhat told dad what I did. He freaked of course thinking I had done the damage to my own car which was about 4 weeks old at the time, but after reassuring him it was Councils car, he just laughed and said not worry they are covered by insurance just take it back and tell them what happened.

How could I face everyone after what I had just done I was going to be the laughing stock of the plant. I had never let my guards down until this. I didn't want to go back and be laughed at for the next year and a half. I can't deal with my new nickname being 'smashy' or something! I thought of all different ways I could make up an excuse as I drove back to Kynoch. A kangaroo jumped out in front of my car – even though I am in the middle of suburbia. A tree fell down and I had to swerve off the road. Oh no I just have to tell them the truth here I go.

I entered reception, heart pounding, eyes full of tears, bottom lip wobbling. Then one of the guys got my attention and asked me what was wrong. I tried to speak but the tears just came out so I just hand gestured him out to the car park to show him the car. He managed to piece together that I had hit something but much to his delight just started laughing. "Is this all your worried about, this is a poor effort. We have written off about two cars already!" Well that's a relief –I think! Much to my comfort, I received a good old pat on the back and a 'cheer up, have fun telling the guys'. I tried to hide it for as long as I could but the bad news was out by lunchtime. Someone had let the word slip and everyone knew. The teasing only lasted a few months until the next person makes a boo boo and then all the heat was on them –suckers!



Figure 1: *Damaged Vehicle.*

8.0 ON CALL

Throughout months and months of learning and studying, completing work book after work book and completing a 2 week theory and practical block at the Southbank TAFE in Brisbane, I had officially come to the end of my study work books and completed all the necessary courses such as; Fluoridation processes, 4WD Off-Road and Recovery course, Forklift truck license, Working safely in the Construction (Blue Card), Confined Spaces Entry course, Breathing Apparatus course, Safe work with Liquefied Chlorine Gas, Spills Training (Water and Chemical), Environmental Awareness Training, First Aid and CPR. I was ready for the submission and completion of my Certificate III. I've done it! I'm done being a little girl I'm finally growing up and throwing in the L (learner) plates.

Upon completion, everyone got together and decided it was time for little me to go on call for a few nights – with supervision of course. It was a huge moment for me. I was assured to get as much sleep as I could before going on call because I better get used to no sleep and the beautiful sound of the pager alarm going off at 3am. Much to my excitement I didn't let that get me down. I attended all alarms and used my extensive knowledge to guide me all the way. P plates are out now!

This continued - baby steps, one at a time. I was eventually upgraded to my Opens. No more baby-sitting for me! A few weeks into the on call rotation and it was about the third time on call for me, when around 10pm I received a page – 'chemical room flooded' – what the? How does that happen? Do I have to go up to the plant at this hour? I whipped out of bed and stripped off the pyjamas into something a bit more professional and made my way up to the plant to discover the paging system was not lying! The whole floor of the chemical room, about 10m x 5m, was knee deep full of Polymer. Oh my god! Off I went, rolled up the pants and into the Poly I go.

3 hours down -2 pumps –4 bulky bins of 1000L full and the help from the trusty on call Systems Control Operator the room was emptied. Turns out a bleed valve was turned on and left on over a period of time and that little accident caused a big problem for me overnight. Never the less, I went in and did the job that needed to be done. I didn't panic and no hairs turned grey (thank god) I remained calm and found the problem and fixed what needed to be fixed. It wasn't until about 1:30am before we packed everything up and headed home for a nice warm shower to wash the poly off.

With about 3 hours sleep, I had to get up the next morning and front for work. Let's just say the hair was messy and I had the wipe the dried up saliva on the side of my face. But boy did I get a welcoming! The word had spread and emails were sent out and I was pretty much famous! I received so many 'great works' and everyone was so pleased with the way I handled the situation and of course everyone was trying to claim that they were the one that taught me that but really I think it was just my extensive knowledge of the plant that I had learnt throughout TAFE workbooks – there was no way I was giving them the satisfaction!

9.0 CONCLUSION

The past 2 years at Mt Kynoch Water Treatment Plant have been not only the most memorable, but rewarding times in my life. Never did I even imagine I would start to take foot steps into the direction of the Water Industry and I can say I have never looked back. I have made mistakes, learnt from them and improved from them. I have had all my ups and downs, but I wouldn't have wanted it any other way. I am so grateful for being given the opportunity to have been selected into a Traineeship in Water Operator back in 2014.

I would urge everyone, young or old, male or female to always try something different. That may be for anything like new career or pathway, you will never know if you like it or not until you give it a go. I went from being lost in what I wanted to do to jumping into the deep end with a completely unfamiliar territory and I haven't looked back since.

I have now completed my Certificate III in Water Operators and I was lucky enough to become full-time as a qualified Assistant Water Operator with Toowoomba Regional Council as of March 2016. The next step now is a Certificate IV – sorry boys but you will be stuck with me for a while now!

10.0 ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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