

Local Government faces major Engineering skills shortage

An undersupply of professional engineers is threatening the ability of local government to deliver infrastructure and services that the community expects and demands.

The shortage is starting to delay projects and increase costs as salaries rise by 15 to 20 per cent in some parts of the engineering sector.

The Institute of Public Works Engineering Australia (IPWEA) has released a strategic action plan to address the issue. Warren Roberts, National President of the IPWEA, says that it is only going to get worse before it gets better. "While the present situation is looking difficult, it is estimated that the retirement of the baby boomers will result in losses approaching 50 per cent of people working in the field."

At the same time in 2004, some 1,700 first year University engineering places were not filled. Students now tend to choose other courses which are seen as leading to careers that are more lucrative or attractive than engineering. The shortage is complicated by the need for extensive investment to respond to the deterioration of Australia's post war infrastructure.

IPWEA National Executive Officer, Ross Moody, who is managing the strategy said that the IPWEA strategy is aimed at attracting young people back into the industry and to Local Government.

The strategy looks at the root causes of the problem which includes:

- Cutting back on availability of cadetships by all tiers of government over a sustained period of economic rationalism
- De-professionalisation of the public sector in technical areas; and increased use of technicians to fill in what was previously the role of the professional engineer.
- Outsourcing of traditional public works programs and a single focus on the bottom line.
- A lowering of community awareness of the roles and responsibilities of public works professionals.
- Reduced student intake because of careers of excitement in other areas.

The IPWEA strategy operates on a strategic, industry and local level. One of the key actions is to work with other organisations such as the Australian Local Government Association and the Local Government Managers Association to develop a strategy aimed at attracting young people to a career in Local Government.

Ross Moody said the public sector had not kept up with training and development of new staff. "The focus on the bottom line has been at the expense of cadetships, vacation employment and work experience. It may have produced short term gain but at the expense of long term pain," he said.

"Engineering is not evident to the public let alone public works engineering. The profession does not generally come to the notice of the public until something goes wrong and it causes public inconvenience. So when the profession does become evident it is seen in a negative light. This makes it difficult to sell public works engineering as an attractive industry to work in."

The proposed strategy and action plan seeks an alliance with other bodies such as Engineers Australia, the Association of Professional Engineers Scientists and Managers Australia and the Association of Consulting Engineers Australia to press home the case for more to be done to encourage young people to become engineers.

Recruitment firms are now being compelled to go interstate and overseas to supply Local Governments with engineers. However this is not helping states like Western Australia that are more isolated from the major population centres.

According to the Institute, local government is on a merry go round poaching staff from each other without dealing with the root issue of supply. This might work okay for the wealthy City councils in the short term but it is at the expense of the smaller councils, particularly in rural areas. While immigration has tended to reduce the gap over the past decade, it is only part of the answer. Moody believes there must be a concerted effort to increase supply and at the same time retain older engineers in the workforce for longer even if it is on a part time basis. "Older experienced employees will be crucial for their knowledge and the mentoring role they can provide to young people" explains Warren Roberts.

While IPWEA will focus on making engineering attractive to school leavers, and public works attractive to graduates, local government must dramatically change its image in the eyes of the community. According to Moody while local government might not appear as exciting as other civil engineering employment areas the reality is it provides a wide variety of activities and strong satisfaction working closely with the community. It also offers portability of employment within Australia and internationally and that must be appealing to generation Y.

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