

# HOW DID I GET HERE?

## ENHANCING RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION IN THE WATER INDUSTRY

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### ABSTRACT

We all want the silver bullet to the questions; how do we attract people to the water industry, and beyond that, how do we get them to stay? We have a great opportunity in front of us to organise our approach to recruitment and incorporate that into our new water services entities. So what lessons are there to be captured and leveraged?

As water professionals, when we ask each other “how did you get here?”, the answer is usually vague, but also equally accompanied by a deep sense of pride that we somehow are, in fact, here. It is an incredible industry, of critical importance, and it seems you must be in it before you realise that.

So, the hypothesis is that the key to attracting new talent to the infrastructure sector, must lie somewhere in the process itself; and if I can both decipher and demonstrate how I got here, are there elements of that process that are worth capturing?

Rather than a discussion over qualifications, this thought piece is an exploration into the value proposition of a technical career in the industry when it is reverse engineered; by highlighting the lessons learnt in my experience as a Young Water Professional to date, and how those lessons learnt may be valuable for enhancing recruitment and retention outcomes in the water industry.

### KEYWORDS

Youth, recruitment, retention, reform, lessons learnt, team environment, trust.

### PRESENTER PROFILE

My first foray into the field of water infrastructure was with Watercare, and my current role with Morrison Low sees me involved in broader infrastructure management up and down the country. I am a thirty something year old engineer, with fourteen years in the industry to date. I was the chair of the Water NZ (Waiora Aotearoa) Young Water Professionals (YWP) for four years (while I was still a Davidson) and I am passionate about inspiring young people and demonstrating the critical role of infrastructure in our communities.

### INTRODUCTION

My pathway to the water industry was a complete fluke. Worse than a fluke even; I failed high school physics, nearly failed maths, and armed with the firm belief that my clear lack of numeracy skills would not resign me to life as an English teacher. In 2009 I enrolled in the Auckland University Engineering School with no concept of the water industry. I thought I wanted to fly aeroplanes.

Fast forward five years, in a project engineer role with Watercare and in a team charged with delivering the Mangere Biological Nutrient Removal (BNR) Upgrade project (MBNRU) I also found

myself taking the reins as chair for Water NZ's YWP special interest group. We were supposed to run networking events and be coordinated across the regions. We had an intimidatingly long workshop slot at the Water NZ conference every year where the other water professionals (the ones that weren't young) came along to figure out what made us tick. I was constantly asked to find ways to encourage more talent and "bridge the gap".

When the others came to speak to us young ones, and I asked them how they came to know about the water industry and the pathway into it they were equally as bamboozled as I was. As far as I could tell, they had passed physics! I was in a great team, doing great work on an incredible project. My colleagues were passionate, insane or both; but we were all already in the room so to speak, and not one of us could say exactly how we got there.

Now, at present day I am no longer the YWP chair and am treading the uncomfortable twilight zone before becoming an OWP (Old Water Professional). Working in local and central government now throughout the country in infrastructure fields also including solid waste, roading and energy, I can appreciate why those other OWPs were so concerned; the state of our infrastructure is dire, and for the most part we are leaving our recruitment process to chance.

So, pay close attention because I am going to try and figure out how I did get here. Including what the road blocks are for attracting and retaining people to the industry are, and see if I can create a compelling case for how to structure the resourcing of our key infrastructure teams into the future.

## **DISCUSSION**

### **HOW AN EXCHANGE OF RESPONSIBILITY OCCURS**

Mentorship gets a lot of airtime; it is the holy grail of knowledge transfer and attainment, and like any good young undergraduate I went looking for one. I wish someone had told me back then that the OWPs had no training in mentoring. It wasn't that they didn't want to help, more that our collective understanding of how that relationship should work equalled approximately zero.

You can't teach old dogs new tricks, or so the saying goes, but in the infrastructure game we need the new dogs to learn old tricks and we need the tricks to improve, continuously. So, beyond a typical mentorship relationship (which I had unsuccessfully attained), I was curious to understand how I did obtain my deep sense of responsibility and pride in the industry. When I started my career, I was thrown boots and all into the MBNRU project and, as it turns out I was surrounded by mentors I just didn't see it like that at the time.

I will also add here that my employment into Watercare was yet another fluke. I didn't seek out the water industry, first I was turned down by all the construction companies. Then when I fumbled my cell phone in a lecture theatre, hung up on my would be boss in terror, sheepishly returned the unknown number call to be asked "Do you still want the job or what?", that is when my foray to the water industry really began.

I will always be grateful for that awkward conversation it catapulted me into a close knit, high trust team environment which I now believe is fundamental to responsibility transfer and one I also believe can be created elsewhere. My formative years as a water professional were spent not only forming, storming, norming and performing but also crawling, falling, stalling, and absorbing. In

those years I had some of the most uncomfortable conversations of my life. I watched as things that could go wrong, did go wrong and how the team of individuals flexed and flowed to keep things on track.

There you go, no rocket science and not trained mentors, just a team of professionals willing to be vulnerable, failing, getting back up and delivering one kick ass piece of infrastructure. So how does that result in responsibility transfer? If a typical mentor role involves one on one open dialogue and deliberate advice, then the team version works on trust.

Trust is built in many ways, and especially by vulnerability. By experiencing a team with a shared vision, tackling big, difficult problems; then without realising, one day you trust yourself to take on some of that responsibility.

Before anyone gets to the point of contemplating passing on responsibility through a high trust team model, we need to get the people in the room, to the table, on the team.

## **GETTING THEM ON THE TEAM**

### **THE MOST IMPORTANT THING**

The next generation of workforce have a laser focus on their impact on the environment; the school strike for climate movement throws this into sharp relief. The rapid evolution of the built environment, our waning connection to the natural world, coupled with fear emboldened by statements like *“you have stolen my dreams and my childhood” - Greta Thunberg* are inadvertently contributing to a recruitment stalemate not only within the water industry, but also across all other infrastructure disciplines.

The new workforce generation, with their lobbying and protest capacity seems to perceive infrastructure systems as intrusive, potentially harmful exploits of nature. This fear of causing harm to our delicate ecosystems has not been fettered with an understanding of how our infrastructure is essential for the protection and health of our whānau and communities.

Young people care deeply, they are demanding careers that offer meaning and purpose, with environmental and social responsibility. However, the fear associated with the uncertainty and doomsday projection of the future of the global environment, is at best confusing and at worst completely crippling.

As for how I got here, an exchange of responsibility occurred through trust and I know that the majority of our three waters workforce hold environmental protection at the core of what we do, however, it goes further than that. I cannot recall the first time I heard the answer to the wise proverb *“what is the most important thing in the world?”* and I do know that at some point it settled in for good.

How then do we arrive back at the answer for our tamariki? An answer that is so uniquely ours:

He tangata, he tangata, he tanagata

It is the people, it is the people, it is the people.

## **KEEP IT LOCAL**

It is understood that the next generation is looking for greater meaning in the work they do. So, I also set out to explore an answer to the question, is it possible that lived experience, connection to our whenua and a sense of pride of place can be used to the advantage of our water industry?

Our situation in New Zealand is unique, we have our main centres, and it gets very regional, very fast from there. The centres and the regions are unique as far as their communities and environment but also the experiences they offer.

As we witness the rise of the digital age and families depart our shores for the promise of a brighter future elsewhere, I wonder what it will take to get people, especially our young people to fall back in love with New Zealand. The kind of love and appreciation for a place that makes you want to stay, enjoy it to its fullest extent, and care for it in the most complete sense of the term stewardship despite the pull of greener grass.

I see an opportunity, in a world increasingly defined by overwhelm and a collapse in mental wellbeing, to bring peace and contentment to our next generations by demonstrating that their back yard is worth caring for. They need to look no further than next door for social accountability, and if that is something they want, there is a role available to them in infrastructure management in a team of like-minded people who work tirelessly to keep each other safe.

As for my perspective, I live on, near in and around the Waitākere Ranges and the Manukau Harbour and I take every opportunity I can get to experience it fully. All flukes aside for how I got here, barely a day goes by that I don't draw the parallel between how the work done before me, the work I have done, and others continue to do, makes my experience in that environment possible.

## **YOU CAN DO IT, AND SO CAN I**

*“Working hard for something we don't care about is called stress: Working hard for something we love is called passion.” – Simon Sinek*

Beyond the community and environment rhetoric there is the very real reality that the infrastructure sector is a high stakes environment. There are big decisions to be made, budgets to balance, and an infinite list of maintenance activities to keep on top of. Those aspects coupled with the heightened understanding that the livelihoods of your community are at stake can certainly send people, young old or otherwise, running.

In a similar vein to how trust leads to responsibility transfer, it also leads to responsibility distribution. Those of us here know how rewarding our careers are, and without a team of people who you can trust to share the load, passion can very quickly turn to stress. Building confidence and the willing to take on difficult tasks in our young people, despite the fear of overwhelming responsibility is something that I believe starts a long time before you enter the workforce.

So, how did I get here? Before I took on the most intimidating degree I could find, I was fortunate to be supported in participating in a series of outdoor education initiatives. Of note is my successful application to participate in The Air Force Challenge, and I still somehow ended up in the water industry, not flying aeroplanes.

In my conversations with colleagues over the years I have found participation in structured outdoor development to be a common theme, including for example experiential learning programmes offered by Outward Bound. It is likely there are elements of situational bias in my observation, but it seems to me that the skills acquired are those required in our professional teams that rely on trust in each other and ourselves.

## **CREATING THE FUTURE**

*“If I had asked them what they wanted, they would have said - a faster horse” – Henry Ford*

It is up to us, those of us already in the room, to create the future. If we want high trust teams that inspire responsibility transfer, new people coming through the ranks that understand that the most important thing our infrastructure serves is our people, who are committed to their place in our country, and are willing to work in a high stakes team, we need to make that framework.

Regardless of the final outcomes in three waters reform, we have an opportunity in front of us to establish geographically focused teams centred around specific, local, social, and environmental opportunities and constraints. I appreciate that sounds very much like the structure of our local government, which is also in a phase of change, but I am not talking about a faster horse.

## **THE FRAMEWORK**

There are good and bad examples of team structures everywhere, the water industry is no exception. My dream is for a structured team and professional development framework that provides opportunity, ownership, and consistency across the country. Better yet, that this would be front and centre of the outcomes of three waters reform.

Imagine being able to provide a structure to a young person that shows how a job in the water infrastructure industry in New Zealand means they can move around our glorious country, pick up targeted skills, absorb the local experiences on offer, work on critical infrastructure in high trust teams, understand local constraints, and ultimately strike their own balance between the role they want to fill and the place they want to fill it in. It's like an OE (Overseas Experience – popular in the 1990's), except the experience is right here.

I will be honest; I received my understanding of the bigger picture as in, how vastly different our water management occurs throughout our country, only when I departed Watercare. As part of any framework, communicating the nature of the big picture is fundamental.

## **THE INFINITE TEAM**

It is not an understatement that our work will never be done. If there are people, there will be infrastructure. Infrastructure needs to be built, it will break so it needs to be maintained, and eventually it will be so old that it needs to be upgraded or replaced. A cycle that transcends most of our lifespans.

New technology will arise meaning improvements to the outcomes for our communities, environment, and shared experiences. An infinite team means an infinite project, and each new water services entity could become just that. A team, specific to each entity that forms, storms,

norms and performs indefinitely. Where the project is the continuous upkeep and improvement of its infrastructure, supporting and protecting its community and environment.

Recruitment and onboarding of individuals into an infinite team means more than a job description and a line management structure; it means a comprehensive project induction. An infinite team draws its value from the position of its members in the bigger picture, and their understanding of it.

An induction to an infinite project might look like an explanation of what the current customer expects, what the forecast challenges are, the risks the team is balancing, and an overview of where responsibility for the project sits above and below you, and your position as far as taking and passing on the baton. Because it cannot be done alone, and there is no end game it is the long game.

Like I said – not a faster horse.

## **A NEW LONG-TERM PLAN**

We don't leave the planning of infrastructure to chance so why do we take such a gamble with the resourcing of it? Perhaps it is time for a Resourcing Long Term Plan.

Beyond our public education system, there is excellent work being undertaken by education providers on our natural environment and reconnecting children to their place of living. There are careers advisors who point school leavers to science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) careers. And there are universities where you can get the whole way through an engineering degree without realising the full suite of infrastructure career paths available.

But who is explaining to the next generation that potentially the most rewarding career, one full of growth, service and teamwork is right on their back door? Is anyone promoting development of the skills needed to take on the responsibility that is management of our critical infrastructure?

They might not all end up in the water industry, but how much easier would it be if the future decision makers, politicians, and leaders understood the infinite game we are playing?

## **CONCLUSION**

*“A society grows great when old [water professionals] plant trees in whose shade they shall never sit.” – Greek Proverb*

I can tell you that the value proposition for a career in the infrastructure and three waters industry is this: it provides you with the ability to live out your values of accountability, service, and stewardship, to create a legacy that you can be proud to pass on to the next generation.

Based on what we believe our next workforce generation is looking for they should be knocking down the doors, but they are not. We cannot afford to continue leaving our recruitment and resourcing to chance, our infrastructure needs us, and we need it; it is time to make a tangible plan.

There is an opportunity in front of us to build teams with the long-term game in mind; teams that foster trust, responsibility transfer, and hold the outcomes for both their community and place at the centre of what they do. There are definite touch points for priming our young people for a career in the infrastructure industry, and for demonstrating that the reward is worth the effort. Putting a plan into action may not be easy, and as I am sure you realise, anything worth doing very rarely is.