

Group dynamic key to railway success in Ipswich*

Working on the railway often means time spent a long way from home, and when you're out in the field, your mates are all you've got.

The example of a Rail Infrastructure project coordinated by Energy Skills Queensland (ESQ) in 2017-18 demonstrates how steps taken to build a genuine team ethos between participants during training can contribute to sustainable employment outcomes. The practical training embedded in this Community Work Skills program set the wheel in motion for camaraderie to develop that proved the difference when program graduates entered the workforce.

"ESQ's Rail Infrastructure programs are unique in that they include a heavy practical workplace-based learning component, even before participants take to the tracks," said Sebastian Ross-Hagebaum, ESQ's Workforce Skilling Manager.

"The simulated work environment at The Workshops Rail Museum in Ipswich not only allowed participants to develop the skills needed to work on track repairs with concrete or wooden sleepers, competently and safely using the tools of the trade, but also helped build a camaraderie and rapport among them that has transferred to their post-program work environment. They bonded really well together, and by the end of the program, were already working as a team," he said.

Industry linkages and partnerships embedded in the program's delivery model further strengthened participants' commitment to each other and the program since they knew, with perseverance, that a job was there waiting for them.

"The program actively engaged rail construction and infrastructure maintenance company, CR Rail, and labour hire firm, CQ Resources, who serve as major sources of labour to some of the biggest actors in the rail industry. Guest speakers from these companies presented to participants, who were then supported to complete registration and on-boarding processes with them. Through this process, these and other companies knew that they were dealing with skilled and ready applicants who met industry standards and possessed the required qualifications to commence employment upon completion of the program. These real employer connections provided a big confidence boost for participants," Sebastian said.

Importantly, the sense of commitment participants had developed towards each other carried into their employment, and now, almost a year later, sees graduates from this project make up some of CQ Resources' most experienced and reliable long-term labourers.

"Once employed by CQ Resources, graduates would typically have to drive to the depot in Yatala where they would then board a bus destined for work sites across South-East, South-West and Central Queensland. The relationships between graduates that had developed during ESQ's program quickly emerged as a strength in this new context," Sebastian said.

"On the bus, you'd find these same guys bonding again, playing cards, listening to music, talking, singing – turning the travel days into a real social affair. If you have workers in the rail industry that get along really well, they typically share a room together. So when you have examples of people sharing accommodation and then working in the same crew out on the track, it's really good. We've seen these relationships come to the fore within our programs, and our industry partners tell us this is a boon for retention," he said.

“Most of those guys from this program started with CQ Resources in May 2018. They’ve since been out on the track in oppressive conditions – hot, humid and cold. There have been occasional issues and challenges, but because they have that underlying trust and respect for each other, they’ve been able to work through these. Those guys have truly proven themselves. They’re reliable, they turn up, and they’re continuing to make their mark.”

*Note: The MT02350 project had 40 participants, of which 39 completed the Certificate II in Rail Infrastructure and 24 successfully secured employment. Across a total of seven completed Rail Infrastructure Community Work Skills projects, ESQ has to date achieved a full-qualification training completion rate of 96.0% and employment outcomes for 68.8% of participants.