



McLEOD RAIL

Real-life accounts of how the National Workforce Development Fund is benefiting Australian transport and logistics enterprises.



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Rolling railways into the 21st century from 19th century origins is an onerous but necessary undertaking, to keep the essential industry's infrastructure on track.

This was Mary Thompson's challenge when she set up a national standard of training for McLeod Rail, having bought the West Melbourne business in 2009.

"I immediately tried to understand what the training framework was," she recalls of those frustrating early days. "He's a 'special ganger' ... What does that mean he can do? Well, he can certify track. Why? Well, because he's a special ganger..."

"I spent weeks, if not months, trying to work it out. Eventually somebody said, 'You need to go and see the Transport and Logistics Industry Skills Council'."

"TLISC will explain this to you, and will help you find someone who can train your people. I can't remember who I have to thank for that, but it was like – hallelujah! It was hugely beneficial and an extraordinarily simple process."

With guidance from TLISC, McLeod assembled a comprehensive program of induction and qualification, co-funded by the National Workforce Development Fund (NWDF).

"It's great that TLISC got Rae Fossard on board as the rail specialist, because without Rae you wouldn't have a national training package," Thompson says.

The Training Package includes Certificates II and III in Rail Infrastructure and has 100 units of competency, including several for the elusive special ganger.

McLeod's inspection and compliance supervisor, Hollee Hibberson, had dug a little deeper to find special ganger qualifications hadn't been issued for 20 years.

"And that suited some people, because these old railway guys liked being the last native left alive in the last patch of the Amazonian rainforest," Thompson laughs. Hibberson says any McLeod worker who's completed the Certificate III "can now go and certify (approve) the track. Instead of getting the client or another contractor in, we're fully capable now of completing a whole job," she says.

Registered Training Organisation (RTO) Rail Futures delivers the NWDF training. The co-funding has afforded McLeod to simplify and economise on what had previously been a complex and costly induction process.

"You need a wallet this big with tickets," Hibberson says, gesturing a slab between her hands, "just to get on the track: a construction induction ticket, a track safety awareness ticket, a medical... you can spend up to \$20,000 to be a fully qualified track worker."

But moreover, the investment has delivered training tailored to the industry's needs. "Construction induction delivered by a rail trainer is more relevant than anything delivered by someone in the construction industry," Thompson says.

"And it has reduced injuries and (worker health and safety) occurrences."

For Thompson, the training is both an attractor to and incentive in the business, and responds to external pressures creating a skills shortage in the industry.

A Victorian Government-commissioned 2010 report into the rail industry's skill shortage predicted 40 percent of its workforce would leave within two years, half due to natural attrition through retirement, and half to other job prospects.

It's a scenario compounded by the high cost to small enterprises like Thompson's to mobilise infrastructure projects across state lines, the cost of "compliance differences, gauge differences, plant differences, ticketing differences," she says. "There's no productivity benefit in that, and it reduces competitiveness."

McLeod has 35 workers: 30 have completed the program, including inductees. A few inductees have already been promoted for their new skills, Hibberson says.

McLeod has also led the way in training women to go on track as a supervisor: a competitor poached one for her Certificate II 'skill set' within a year, Hibberson says.

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Thompson is philosophical: "I've been party to discussions where people will say, 'If you up-skill people, they're a higher flight risk', and that's certainly true."

"But it shouldn't stop us doing that. We have lost a couple of guys to fly in, fly out jobs. But our view is that, with the good employees, we stay in touch with them, send them our newsletter, invite them to drop in for tea or coffee, sort of like an alumni approach, really. We will get them back and they will have better skills."

A side benefit of the NWDF has been how it's helped improve McLeod's business culture.

"I'm not into offices," Thompson says.

"No one has an allocated desk."

"There is a constant discussion vibe going on ... fantastic people around me who are saying what they need to deliver a safe, quality job - an information loop."

"So I've got a lot of trust in my team to deal with things effectively, and I don't get nervous when my phone doesn't ring. Empowering staff (through training and development) pays off when it gives them the confidence to go and do the job."

McLeod Rail is a specialised rail contractor, providing rail maintenance solutions to corporate and government clients. Core services include scheduled and emergency track and infrastructure repairs, maintenance and construction works, rail welding services and supply of hi-rail equipment and operators.



Team building

Around 85% of McLeod's workforce has undertaken training through the National Workforce Development Fund.



Further afield

In addition to its permanent workforce of about 35, McLeod Rail projects provide work for hundreds of contractors and personnel each year.



NWDF value

Total value of NWDF program to date:
\$63,750.



Where they are

With its head-office in West Melbourne, McLeod Rail provides services throughout Victoria and NSW, including major works in the Hunter Valley.

For more information about how TLISC can assist your enterprise in accessing the National Workforce Development Fund, please contact our Workforce Development team:

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